Sexual Harassment

Arab States

Nature of the data

Most of the data currently available on the topic of sexual harassment are women's testimonies that are made public through internet blogs; women's experiences that are collectively shared through a web-page; partial field studies by women's groups; national newspaper reports of cases of sexual harassment abuse, the state of national laws, or the improvements of the legal system concerning sexual harassment; and the United Nations reports of salient cases of sexual harassment abuse. In other words, there are currently neither scholarly studies nor academic publications on the issue of sexual harassment in the Arab states. Furthermore, as various women's groups note, since issues related to sexuality are still culturally viewed as taboo, there are relatively very little data on the topic.

Definition

The Arabic term for sexual harassment, *al-taḥarrush al-jinsī*, has been used by women in the Arab world, both as individuals and as organized groups, probably since the mid-1990s. In December 1995, Moroccan women's groups began using the term in describing a strike by some female factory workers in protest at sexual harassment. In the following years, women's groups in various Arab countries, for example Tunisia, used the same term to report cases of sexual harassment. Consequently, a general definition of sexual harassment emerges through these reports: it seems to consist of unwanted sexual behaviors in the public space, specifically streets, public transportation, and workplaces, in the forms of inappropriate verbal comments, obscene gestures, offensive touching, demands for sexual favors, sexual assault, and rape.

According to the available data, factors of class and educational level tend to influence women's definition of sexual harassment. Thus, the majority of women with a low educational level, such as factory workers and secretaries, tend to define sexual harassment in accordance with Islam. In so doing, they condemn sexual harassment as a behavior that has a sexual intent outside the licit norms of marriage. In contrast, the majority of women with a college education, such as women in managerial positions, tend to define sexual harassment as a violation of the victim's dignity. Moreover, according to the majority of women with a low educational level, only offensive touching usually counts as street harassment or public transportation harassment, while verbal comments and excessive staring are dismissed, because these behaviors are perceived as men acting according to their biological nature. With the lack of scholarly studies of the phenomenon, further field research may reveal other definitional differences according to factors of class and educational level.

Features of the victims, the harasser, and the sexual harassment dynamic

Women's testimonies show that women from diverse educational backgrounds, and from all social strata, experience sexual harassment. These testimonies, along with data gathered by women's groups, tend to show that, while no woman is immune from sexual harassment in the streets and in public transportation, women who usually occupy either typical women's jobs or low paid jobs are more exposed to sexual harassment than others. Here, factors of class and the nature of the workplace seem to be at play. According to the scant data available on the topic, secretaries, domestic servants, workers in field factories, and unskilled factory workers are among the women who are the most exposed to sexual harassment. Although women occupying managerial positions represent a significant ratio of women who are victims of sexual harassment, the factor of class seems nevertheless to have an impact on the extent of exposure to a sexual harassment dynamic. Similarly, the workplace tends to be another significant factor in sexual harassment. Thus, sexual harassment is significantly higher in the private sector of the economy where the employer has total power over his employees' career. Furthermore, when the workplace is the employer's home, as in the case of domestic servants, workers tend to be exposed to repetitive sexual abuse. Although some women whose workplace is either a factory or an office report having being raped in the workplace, the cases of the Asian women, especially from the

Philippines, Sri Lanka, and other South Asian countries, who work as domestic servants in Kuwait, seem to show that domestic servants tend to be more exposed to repetitive sexual assault than others. However, further field research and scholarly analysis of the interconnections between factors such as class, nature of the workplace, availability of family support, and access to legal recourse would provide more precise features of the victims.

As far as the harasser is concerned, the available data tend to show that the typical harasser is a man who is either the immediate supervisor or the employer. The data also show that in most cases the harasser has used the same method of sexual harassment with other victims. Finally, the data demonstrate that the harasser's ultimate drive is not the fulfillment of a sexual nature but rather an exercise of power. Thus, sexual harassment is not an issue of sexuality per se, but rather an issue of male domination over women. Sexual harassment is also about putting women in their places, particularly since some fundamentalist movements still dispute the legitimacy of women's participation in the public sphere (Geadah 1996).

Street and Public Transportation Harassment: The Victims' Definition and Responses

It goes without saying that ambivilence about the legitimacy of women's participation in public life, along with factors of class and educational level, as previously indicated, influence women's definition of sexual harassment. Thus, according to the majority of women with a low educational level, only offensive physical contact counts as street or public transportation harassment. Similarly, most women tend first to view this type of sexual harassment as a personal problem rather than a social issue requiring state attention. In so doing, they weigh their own behavior against the socially accepted ideas about sexual harassment, which translates as "sexual harassment should not happen to proper women" or "sexual harassment happens to women who are asking for it." Caught in this dilemma, some women see gender apartheid as a solution to public transportation harassment, or choose to wear a *hijāb* as a means of protection against male sexually intrusive behaviors. Consequently, one of the most significant features of the Arab world social landscapes in the last decades is the increase among women who wear a *hijāb* (Taarji 1990).

Employment Harassment: The Victims' Definition and Responses

As far as institutional settings are concerned, if, according to women's testimonies, verbal comments do not usually count as sexual harassment, they often announce a forthcoming sexual harassment, which is defined as being of a physical nature. Despite the lack of overall studies, it is believed that sexual harassment is a widespread practice in the workplace, which tends to confront working women with a torturous choice: their dignity vs. their financial autonomy.

Various women's groups believe that in response to sexual harassment, the majority of women choose to comply in silence with their supervisors' sexual demands. Moreover, contrary to the preconceived idea that women with higher education stand up for their rights, women's groups assert that these women tend to undergo sexual harassment in silence as well. The victims' silence is explained by the convergence of various factors, including patriarchal social norms, the victims' family status, the fear of losing their reputation, and the legal void within the working institutional policies. Similarly, factory workers tend to undergo sexual harassment in silence. However, their silence is mostly due to their fear of losing their jobs, the high unemployment rate, economic need, and the lack of legal recourse. In contrast, most of the secretaries choose to break the silence, and to complain to a member higher in the hierarchy. Their choice is believed to be due to their frequent interactions with the harasser, which make the sexual harassment experience more revolting.

Finally, in response to sexual harassment, some women choose to unite, and to act collectively. This is how, in 1995, Morocco was the stage of what was described as the first working women's strike in protest at sexual harassment in the workplace (Dunkel 1995). Similarly, in 1997, Pakistan, a Muslim country, witnessed what was described as a historic victory in an employment related sexual harassment case.

Women's Groups' Endeavors

These victories would not have been possible without the support of a network of women's groups who are striving to break the taboo of silence by organizing campaigns, publishing statistical data on the issue, and/or challenging national laws across the Arab world. Thus, in March 2004, Jordanian Queen Rania launched an Amnesty International campaign in the Arab world, aiming

to stop violence against women, including sexual harassment. Similarly, various women's groups in Israel and the Occupied Territories report that in 2003, the number of Arab women who were sexually harassed increased by an appalling 30 percent in relation to the year before. Here, if it is believed that conflict situations, economic crisis, and political upheavals have an impact on the increase of violence against women, and in particular on that of sexual harassment as a form of violence against women, further field research is needed to accurately assess the intersectionality of these factors.

Finally, in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, women's groups have been working to make sexual harassment a criminal offense, since the majority of working women are employed in the informal sector of the economy, and are therefore not protected by labor laws offering workplace protection against sexual harassment. As a result, in mid-2004, these North African countries criminalized sexual harassment. In addition, the women's groups have been striving to break the masculine monopoly of powerful professional positions by requesting that the state set a quota for women in these positions. As a result, in Morocco for instance, women currently occupy 30 seats in the house of representatives.

If North Africa remains an exception as far as the legal recognition of sexual harassment is concerned, there is an increasing awareness of the issue of sexual harassment among the other Arab states.

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OSIRE GLACIER

Iran

Sexual harassment (*muzāhimat-i jinsī*) in Iran has been viewed differently from how it is seen in the West. In Iran, any harassment, harm, or insult to a woman's reputation is considered reprehensible and shameful. This is due to the deep-rooted conceptual fusion of the Iranian Islamic idea of *nāmus* (usually translated as honor) and the traditional and religious ethical values embedded in society. The concept of *nāmus* applies to a wife and all the women considered to belong to a man including mother, sister, daughter, and in general all the females in a man's household. Although this finds its roots in the proprietary sense of the male toward his women relatives, it also has significance in the discussion of sexual harassment. Male honor must be secured and this security, until the act of official unveiling in 1930s, found meaning in women remaining secluded.

After the unveiling decree and the gradual increase in the participation of women in the public sphere, the discussion of sexual harassment began to change shape. Throughout the 1960s, articles in women's publications such as *Ittilā'āt-i bānūvān* deal with issues such as men's tendency to ogle women. Attention is also given to the issue of harassment in the streets and the problems beauty brings for women. In the 1960s and 1970s there were also discussions of tribulations working women face in dealing with bosses who seek sexual favors from their subordinates.

The nature of attention to the harassment of women in society changed again after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In the late 1980s, issues related to the general topic of violence against women gradually surfaced.

After the election of Muḥammad Khātamī to the presidency in 1997, Iran witnessed an increase in information regarding sexual harassment. Social experts began to discuss the issue publicly. Between 1996 and 2002, close to a dozen articles were published regarding harassment in the streets. There was also explicit discussion of sexual harassment in the work environment. Many weekly magazines now regularly publish articles regarding instances of egregious harassment, generally substituting words such as harassment or harm for more sensitive words such as rape and violation.