DISKUSSIONSPAPIERE

Maria Neubert / Anna-Theresa Bachmann

Sidewalk Stories
Women in Cairo's Public Spaces

With a Photo Documentation by Sarah Seliman

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Introduction

Cairo, Egypt's vibrant capital on the Nile River, has witnessed turbulent times over the past decade. When the mobilization of civil society led to the toppling of the Mubarak regime in 2011, it seemed that each and every grain of sand the ancient city was built on had shaken. In spatial terms, the core of this movement manifested itself in Tahrir Square, gaining meaning through the power of the people gathering at this very sight. Soon however, it became clear that the long-dug trenches separating civil society along economic, political, and religious lines could not be backfilled with the red-white-black flags. Instead, the city remained a stage of contestation where different lines of protesters, activists and every-day citizens, along with the recovering government forces voiced their visions for Cairo's (and Egypt's) future by different means of force, art, and abstention. The participation of women throughout this political and societal reshaping came as a surprise to few, while being a matter of course for others, and constituting an unwanted presence for some.

While the more drastic events fill pages in newspapers, academic journals and history books, the everyday negotiations in the aftermath oftentimes remain unnoticed. The following pages try to do both: This publication documents a small project that started off with two workshops in 2015 and later turned into an art installation. At the same time, the publication seeks to embed everyday contestations into an academic framework. Especially now that the glory of 2011 is fading and called into question. Various segments of civil society are frozen, and many every-day citizens are burdened with even more economic hardships. Stories of daily struggle in general, and of women in Cairo's public spaces in particular, bear witness to this suffering, strength, and creativity – all at the same time.

Public Space – A Question of Definition

Being observers to the density of streets, buildings and neighborhoods, the public space of greater Downtown Cairo appears to be highly divided along economic and gendered lines. However, it is not easy to grasp and understand these socio-economic complexities and the daily interactions of the seemingly differentiated communities.

According to the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1991: 74) the *bourgeois public sphere*, as "an organ for the self-articulation of civic society with a state authority corresponding to its needs," fulfils primarily a normative and political function. He further claims that all members (citizens) of a society are equally able to take part in the articulation process (Habermas 1974: 49).

Following his footsteps, Nancy Fraser (1990: 57) defined the public sphere as "a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk [and as] an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction." However, she strongly criticized Habermas' egalitarian notion of the public, arguing that based on gender, race, and class mechanisms in addition to the dominance of specific groups, certain segments of society are generally barred from taking an active part in those processes (ibid.: 63). Accordingly, marginalized and subordinated social groups form so-called *subaltern counterpublics* expressing "oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (ibid.: 68) as well as formulating their own *counterdiscourses*. Once formulated and clustered, *counterdiscourses* are then placed within the dominant discourse. In Fraser's view the public does therefore not only serve the purpose of an arena for discourse formation but more crucially as an arena for identity formation. People's memberships in several *counterpublics* often overlap (e.g. by being a worker, a woman and/or a person with disabilities) which causes a constant and fluid exchange of interests among various segments of society. These dynamics strengthen democratic processes and eventually lead to the articulation of diversified claims based on multiple identities within a broader, more general discourse (ibid.: 61-70).

The emergence of Egypt's modern women's rights movement in the early 20th century can be seen as an illustration of the intersection between different *counterpublics*: under the leadership of prominent figures such as Hoda Sha'arawy, Nabawiyah Musa, and Malak Hifni Nasif, upper and middle class Egyptian women formed associations and published manifestos aspiring education, suffrage and the end of polygamy. Sometimes their positions would differ regarding the role of religion or the influence of Western feminism. But as history unfolded, they situated their call for emancipation within the broader discourse of liberation from British occupation, working side by side with the male dominated anti-colonial *subaltern counterpublic* and the newly founded Wafd Party (Badran 1995). The anti-colonial protests sparked the 1918 revolution which marked the official end of the British colonial rule and the Wafd Party became the strongest party in the parliament of the constitutional monarchy that followed. However, the inclusion of female suffrage into the 1923 constitution that had been demanded by the women participating in those social and political transformations was rejected.

Today, such as in the past, it is impossible to speak of a singular, united women's rights movement in contemporary Egypt. For various reasons such as the 'NGO-zation' of civil society during the 1990s or the self-identifications of different actors, social issues like sexual harassment, affecting society as a whole and women in particular, are addressed and brought up repeatedly within different communities and with different approaches. The amount of initiatives might be the reason why the topic found its way back into the public discourse in recent years.

Gender and Social Space in Greater Downtown Cairo

After looking at Fraser's and Habermas' theoretical framework of how interests of different social groups become part of the public discourse, the following remarks focus on the formation of the public as a social space. Drawing from spatial thinkers like Henri Lefebvre (1991) and Martina Löw (2008), social space does not only manifest itself in physical/material and therefore symbolic objects (Löw calls them 'social goods') but is rather created in the process of constant social interaction of and between actors (Löw 2008: 35). In Löw's understanding, space-making consists of two simultaneous processes: the first being *spacing*, which is the arrangement and situation of social goods and people within spaces. As a result of the second process, the so-called *synthesis*, those spaces are given meaning through the process of perception of every-day actions: "Spaces are created in performative action by synthesizing and relationally ordering objects and people." (ibid.: 43) The production of space is not detached but rather embedded in societal structures which shape our understandings and perceptions of space while reproducing them in a recursive process (ibid.: 39).

Bringing together Löw's and Fraser's arguments, space and identity as part of public discourse formation are thereby understood as social practices which manifest and articulate themselves in everyday encounters. This connecting element can be complemented by a third dimension: one of gender, or to be exact, gender performance. As Judith Butler (1990: 140) points out, gender is regarded as a central element of one's social identity which constructs itself by the repetitive performance (not exclusively but foremost) within the public space: "the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all."

Illustration 1: Female Section in the Metro
Source: Anna-Theresa Bachmann, 2018.

Gender as performance takes on already established social codes inscribed in acts, clothing, body language, and gestures and thereby creates and reproduces social realities. An example of the Cairene public shall illustrate these theoretical terms: a large part of the population depends on the metro (underground) as a means of public transportation to make their daily errands or go to work. Every underground train station consists of a section, marked by signs with a dress-wearing icon as the 'women's section'. Two cabins of each metro-train correspond to this section and are marked in the same way, reserving them for women only. These physical symbolic goods are placed within spatial structures and only by the process of perception, as described by Löw, are people able to interpret and act accordingly as a form of synthesis. Thereby gender-segregated and thus 'gendered' areas are not only created but at the same time recreated by the acts of people. What is crucial here, is that the female-marked section is clearly smaller in terms of its physical dimension and even limited to time,[1] which underlines the subordination of women forming subaltern *counterpublics* in a patriarchal society. As in such a society, men are considered to be the norm, women are only perceived as being 'the other': signs referring to the male section are considered to be unnecessary. Hence, "power structures become [clearly] operative in different ways within the construction of space," as Löw (2001: 141, translated by the authors) claims, drawing on Michel Foucault. Even though women are not restricted to the use of 'female-marked' cabins only, most of them do so as part of the synthesizing process. However, this process may be based on different reasoning such as, for example, religious or cultural motivation in 'doing their gender right' or simply because they hope to avoid sexual harassment (by men) – which according to the UN happens to 81.8% of women in Egypt's public transportation. Through the every-day usage of the 'women's section' or the avoidance of certain 'male-dominated' public spaces such as the traditional street-cafés (*ahwa*), women

hence inevitably reproduce gender as part of the space-making processes (the same of course goes the other way around for men): "Gendering of space and place both reflects *and has effect back on* the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live in." (Massey 2000: 129, original emphasis)

Albeit gendered space production may be explained in this way theoretically, generalized assumptions about women's perceptions on space should not be formulated too hastily: social (and public) spaces can be experienced very differently by women as intersectional mechanisms can have severe influences on their positive and/ or negative experiences with and within spaces. Once having rejected the idea that space in itself only carries a physical meaning, it becomes possible to imagine the "construction of more than one space at the same place" (Löw 2001: 131, translated by the authors), which may explain why spaces can be perceived in different ways.

The Phenomena of Sexual Harassment in Cairo
The Discourse of Sexual Harassment Prior to the January 2011 Revolution

It is often assumed that sexual harassment in Cairo is a relatively new development. However, works such as those by Arlene Elowe MacLeod (1992) on the phenomena of the *new veiling* in Egypt, already observed forms of male behavior which today are generally classified as *el-taharrush el-ginsy* (sexual harassment):

> "Men walking down the streets or sitting in the sidewalk coffee shops can complement and comment. They attempt 'accidental' encounters; they touch and pinch. Women are constantly harassed in this manner as they walk the crowded sidewalks and squeezed over enthusiastically on the overloaded trams or buses. Learning to deal appropriately and effectively with these situations without the help of family members is crucial for maintaining one's reputation and avoiding annoying situations." (ibid.: 63)

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1   While both metro-cars are acknowledged as the 'women-section', it is interesting to note that after 9 pm one of them is also open for men.

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The stigmatization of those being harassed as a form of victim blaming, a world-wide phenomenon, also becomes clear in MacLeod's observations during her field work in Egypt. For the first time in recent Egyptian history, the cycle of tabooing was broken when in 1992 the case of the so-called 'Attaba Girl' became the subject of a heated public debate (Hundley 1992): at the busy Attaba bus station in Downtown Cairo, a young woman had been pulled to the ground, partly stripped of her clothes and sexually molested by a group of men. No one from the by-standing crowd interfered. Contrary to the silence before, the incident sparked many discussions and speculations on the perpetrators and the course of events in both the local and international press. It however took more than ten years until similar assaults of women in the public space became part of the public debate again.

Illustration 2: Two Teenage Girls in Front of Qasr El-Nil Bridge, Downtown Cairo
Source: Sabry Khaled, 2017.

When in the early 2000s waves of mass protests filled the streets of Cairo and other Egyptian cities in the wake of the second Intifada, the invasion of Iraq, and workers' protests against low wages and harsh working conditions, the Egyptian women's rights movement and feminist grassroots' initiatives gained new momentum. During a demonstration organized by the newly founded *Kifaya* movement in 2005 to protest against the constitutional referendum,[2] several

female demonstrators were being harassed and assaulted by *baltageyya* forces (thugs hired by the government). A number of online blog entries that had reported the events were picked up by domestic oppositional forces as well as international media (Jayyusi & Roald 2016: 18). In addition to the news coverage at the time, the *Egyptian Center for Women Rights (ECWR)*, an NGO founded in 1996, initiated '*a safe street for all*'-campaign to tackle the problem (ECWR 2005). The topic of violence against women in public spaces gained even more attention when in 2006 a number of assaults on women by groups of men had been committed during the occasion of the *Eid El-Fitr* (End of Ramadan) festivities in Downtown Cairo (Abdelhadi 2006). Even though these assaults sparked a new discourse about sexual harassment, the question of definition remains a challenge: while the term *muʿaksa* (flirtation) is commonly used in daily life, actors such as *ECWR* or the NGO *Harassmap* (founded 2005) as well as other activists try to establish the term *el-taharrush el-ginsy* (sexual harassment), which carries an explicit negative connotation. On the other hand, various NGOs and initiatives base their work on diverse perspectives on sexual harassment, trying to combat the problem from different angles: some (e.g. *ECWR* and *Harassmap*) understand sexual harassment as inherent to society while others – as in the case of the *Al Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture* – explicitly call out the state apparatus and its usage of sexual violence as a form of torture and oppression of its citizens.

The 2010 released film *Cairo 678*, starring well known Egyptian actors and actresses, gained broad attention also from outside activist circles. The film was screened in movie theaters all over the country, receiving an award at the 2010 Dubai International Film Festival. While the movie gives mainly a voice to women of different social backgrounds and their experience with

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2   Since the early 2000s, rumors had been circulated in media and society, stating that President Mubarak was planning to pass on his power to his son Gamal. In the summer of 2004, activists formed the Kifaya ('Enough') movement which opposed this action and demanded direct multi-candidate presidential elec-

tion. Domestic and external pressure pushed Mubarak to initiate a referendum which took place on May 25, 2005. However, activists like Kifaya called for its boycott since the requirements for a possible candidacy remained challenging for both independent candidates as well as opposition and newly-formed parties.

sexual harassment and male dominance, popular discourse often focuses on sexual harassment being an outlet of (male) sexual frustration. The film portrays the phenomenon as a consequence of a 'crisis of masculinity' being rooted in (neo-liberal) economic misery: rising costs and high unemployment rates along with a delay in marriage for youth, especially but not only for lower middle-class men, sets back sexual experience and self-determination (Ghannam 2013). Once they do get married, many men must face the reality of no longer being guaranteed the role of sole breadwinner for the family which conflicts with expectations based on gender roles.

Another way related to this strain of argument depicts sexual harassment and violence against women in the public sphere as part of a top-down process: Constant humiliation, abuse and despotism towards men by state authorities, social and political control, and economic neglect are seen to cause a psychological loss of masculinity which manifests itself in acts of re-gaining power through taking possession of women's bodies (Abdalla 2014).

Sexual Violence against Women in the Public Sphere since the January 2011 Revolution

In the wake of the January 2011 revolution, a new scale of sexual harassment and violence against women in the public space became visible, which reached a wide publicity. What might have added to Western media coverage of individual assaults and mass rapes was the attack on Australian-American journalist Laura Logan while live-broadcasting from Tahrir Square. Even more well-known is the case of the 'blue bra girl' who was harshly kicked on her almost naked chest by a security official while being dragged along the street by another. Although her identity remains secret until today for reasons of personal protection, her story found its way into the revolution's depiction through street-art.

Illustration 3: The Blue Bra Girl
The violent act by security forces on December 17th, 2011 (right) was widely depicted in various street-art. Here (left), Bahia Shehab combined a part of her "A Thousand Times No" project (black stencil above) reading "no to stripping the people" with the blue bra (underneath), to "remind us of our shame" (Bahia Shehab: 2012).
Source: https://www.pinterest.de/pin/197314027401585161/, last access March 6, 2018.

Together, *Nazra for Feminist Studies*, *Al Nadeem,* and the *New Women Foundation* published reports of targeted women – a painful collection of incidents between 2011 and 2013 (Nazra 2013). On the one hand, the report describes the similarity of assaults and rapes, leading the organization to the suggestion that these were state organized crimes. On the other hand, the narrations of the cited women depict the quiet bystander-like behavior of the majority male witnesses:

> "With testimonies that speak of hundreds of hands persistently raping women, with hundreds more watching the brutal attack, some while even smiling, it becomes clear that we are faced with an overwhelming challenge, namely a state and a society that have internalized sexual violence against women as the law of the land." (ibid.: 8)

After the first cases of sexual harassment and violence against women on Tahrir Square had surfaced, a number of young women and men founded new initiatives such as *Tahrir Bodyguards* and *Operation Anti Sexual Harassment* to protect female protesters, and also to fill in for the lack of protection by the state. Whereas single perpetrators were easier to identify as they could not hide in the crowds, those involved in mass assault remained more difficult to detain, especially if they were part of the state apparatus.

The so-called 'virginity tests' are an example of such acts, being excused by an anonymous member of the *Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF)*[3] by stating:

> "The girls who were detained were not like your daughter or mine. These were girls who had camped out in tents with male protesters in Tahrir Square, and we found in the tents Molotov cocktails and [drugs]…We didn't want them to say we had sexually assaulted or raped them, so we wanted to prove that they weren't virgins in the first place." (quoted in Amin 2011)

While these acts were verified and condemned nationally and internationally, today's president and former SCAF member Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi also defended the tests and their strange logic according to which only virgins can be raped (Wilson 2012). These acts were justified by claiming that those women had acted beyond their gender norm when entering the public to protest – a reaction Butler (1990:140) puts in a nutshell: "[I]ndeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right." In contrast, Al-Sisi publically apologized on live TV to a woman who had been publicly assaulted during his inauguration two years later (Kirkpatrick 2014). He however never publicly denounced his opinion on the virginity tests.

Illustration 4: Women during Protest - Violence, Fear and Intimidation of Sexual Assault
Source: https://womanstats.wordpress.com/2013/06/10/feminist-street-art-in-the-egyptian-uprising/, last access March 6, 2018.

3   The SCAF took power after Hosni Mubarak resigned from his position as president on February 11, 2011 until the announcement of the new president, Mohammed Morsi on June 20, 2012.

One of the victims of the practice, Sarah Ibrahim, publicly accused the SCAF of their actions and took the case to court resulting in the abolishment of the practice. On another line, the lobbying efforts of feminist and women's rights groups such as *Nazra* achieved the amendment of Article 306(a) of the Egyptian penal code and its complementation by the new Article 306(b) precisely defining the act of sexual harassment for the first time. Hence, sexual harassment is understood as intrusive words and signals of sexual nature articulated in person or through the help of devices such as phones. Convicted perpetrators face a sentence of at least six months up to five years behind bars, in addition to a fine. The common practice of judges is however, to reduce punishment to the fine only, leaving reality far away from theory. Other criticized points are that words and gestures without a clear sexual connotation are not understood as sexual harassment, such as an invasive and repeated 'good morning'. Additionally, looking at the crime of rape, its definition is extremely limited as understood in articles 267 and 268 of the Egyptian penal code and has yet to be amended. Accordingly, only penetration of genitals by a penis is classified as rape but not the insertion of hands or objects into the vagina or anus (Nazra 2014) as was the case in many of the incidents at Tahrir Square. The enormous repressive nature of the current political state in Egypt which targets initiatives such as *Nazra* and *Al Nadeem* among many other civil society actors, leaves little scope for any sort of activism which could improve the legal status and daily life of women and the society as a whole.

The Workshop "Sidewalk Stories – Women in Cairo's Public Spaces"

The two authors of the present paper spent, along with another fellow student, two semesters in Cairo. During that time we engaged with different civil society actors, getting to know their approaches and perspectives. Putting their important work into the context of our own experiences along with recent developments in Cairo, the idea of organizing a workshop emerged by

the end of 2014. The workshop was to create a small microcosm for different female voices who might not exchange their opinions and stories otherwise. Hence, the intention was to establish a setting that would enable women from different walks of life and different communities to freely discuss and exchange their experiences and strategies facing gender norms and sexual harassment in the city. To get an idea of what women would like to discuss within such a workshop's context, an online survey was set up. The answers of three dozen women indicated gender norms, sexual harassment, identity, and empowerment to be the most demanded topics.

Hence, after a thorough academic research, engagement on the topics as well as several discussions and consultations with different actors and activists, the concept of a workshop with the title 'Sidewalk Stories – Women in Cairo's Public Spaces' was established.[4] The two-day event was held twice, on two weekends in May 2015. Each workshop block was attended by twelve participants. On the one hand, such a small number was necessary to secure a comfortable atmosphere and safe space fostering trust to open and speak up. On the other hand, the workshop's method of discussion-based learning required a smaller group of participants. The co-working space *Mesaha*, centrally situated in Downtown and thus easily accessible for everyone in the city, was chosen as a venue. Inspired by the wide activism momentum of the revolution, this "collectively built space"[5] was founded in 2011, with the vision to create a supportive environment to enhance "youth-led initiatives and groups [...] that contribute actively in their communities' development."[6] Between 2011 and 2014, the Mohammed Mahmoud Street, where *Mesaha* is located, gained historical importance, when the struggle of civil society for its freedom of expression was exemplified by graffiti street

art, picturing, among other issues, gender norms and events of sexual assault. Thus, not only the cooperation with such a space but also its very location was very symbolic for the workshop.

Illustration 5: Mesaha's Community Room
Source: Sarah Seliman, 2015.

The workshops brought together 25 women of different nationalities (namely 19 Egyptian, one Brazilian, two German, one Polish and two US American) as well as of different social and educational background, aging from 19 to 32, to discuss – broadly speaking – how societies shape their (gender) identities and to exchange their experiences and strategies employed in the public sphere. More specifically, the participants first talked about gender roles and norms prevailing in the Egyptian and, if relevant, other societies and how they are being affected by them. Following, they engaged with a theoretical input about sex, gender and performance drawing on *Doing Gender* by Candance West & Robert Zimmerman (1987) and *Gender Performativity* by Butler (1990) and brainstormed about what a public space constitutes. The last section of the first day bridged over to the main topic of the second day – sexual harassment, personal experiences and strategies, and empowerment. Hence, the more practical second day drew on the theoretical foundations of the previous day. An introductory session by a professional Egyptian WenDo teacher completed the workshop as a powerful tool of empowerment for all participants.

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4   The project can be found on Facebook (www.facebook.com/sidewalkstoriesegy), where everyone is welcome to contribute or get in contact with the project's initiators.

5   See mission statement on their Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/pg/MesahaEG/about/?ref=page_internal, last access November 9, 2017.

6   Ibid.

An important aim of the workshop was to embrace the intersectionality of women's experiences and thus, young women from different communities, such as Egyptian and foreign – whether migrants, so-called 'expats'[7] or refugees – were brought together. Intersectionality as a "paradigmatic approach to the study of social issues" (Richardson & Taylor 2009: 249) has been in this regard a theoretical component of crucial importance: it is a way of holistic understanding by viewing categorizations such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, religion, age, physical appearance and their respective power dynamics as overlapping instead of single acting and isolated of each other. For each individual, experiences differ to the various categories that overlap differently thus resulting in diverging power mechanisms. Underlining this fact, the participants were sensitive to their differences and the variety of experiences and feelings, which helped to overcome prejudices and raise awareness. As a result, a safe space characterized by mutual solidarity rather than judgement between the young women from the differing communities was created, laying the foundations of in-depth discussions.

Heavily drawing on the method of discussion-based learning, most sessions of the workshop were kicked off by a small input in form of text, video or verbal introduction by the workshop's organizers which let to vital discussions about real-life experiences of the participants. Since these initial inputs not only fostered informed discussions but at the same time were situated in the experiences of the participating women's lives, it facilitated an interactive, mutual learning process for both participants and organizers. Halil Can (2013: 14) terms this balancing act of organizers acting as participant and also as instructor 'participatory instruction' which provides a dynamic environment conducive to creative inquiry, fruitful discussions, self-reflection, and vivid engagement by all sides.

7   Expatriates, short 'expats', is a contested term which describes generally speaking migrants but most often only addresses citizens of Western origin who mostly have immigrated into 'third-world' countries for their work or studies.

Illustration 6: Silent Discussion – What is Public Space
One of the organizers, bottom left, takes part along with the participants in the silent discussion and mind mapping activity on the question of "What is public space?"
Source: Sarah Seliman, 2015.

The creation and provision of a safe space is key to such a method, as only when everyone involved feels safe and comfortable to open and speak up, will they do so. Therefore, the workshop provided several activities building such a safe space. The 'breaking the ice'-activity at the beginning of the workshop is a point in case: For this exercise everyone, including the organizers of the workshop, sat in front of a partner, portraying the other person simultaneously without looking at the paper. This resulted first of all in intense eye contact and perception of the other and secondly, it most likely produced an embarrassing portrait. However, participants laughed about it, especially when realizing that all other drawings were just as embarrassing, naturally bringing everyone closer to each other.

The safe space as a fundamental element of the participatory concept was also ensured by the constant reflection by the white, foreign organizers on their own roles within the workshop's setting. This crucial practice was meant to overcome what Chandra Mohanty (1984: 351) points out in her article *Under Western Eyes*: when "focusing on the representation of women in the third world [...], it seems evident that Western feminists alone become the true 'subjects' of this counter-history." Valerie Amos & Pratibha Parmar (1984: 7) add: "[Western] Feminist theories which examine our cultural practices as 'feudal residues' or label us 'traditional', also portray

us as politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western feminism." Consequently, the relation between organizers and participants was horizontal rather than vertical and the former did not act nor were they presented as lecturers or authorities who possess absolute knowledge on the topic. Additionally, by approaching the topics from multiple perspectives and angles, the presentation of one normative, 'correct' narrative was avoided.

The Exhibition and the Movie

The project was further developed when one of the workshop's participants, Sarah Seliman, suggested continuing the workshop and translating its content into an art project. As a Cairene visual artist, Seliman had worked in photography, video art and installations discussing feminism among other social issues since 2009. Hence, an open call for participants for a photo project was launched and by the end, 17 women were portrayed. The aim was to take pictures of them at their favorite places in Cairo, illustrating the diversity of public places where women feel safe, comfortable and confident. In a short 'photo-story' they were pictured with an item they use, wear or apply when leaving for the streets in order to feel safer, more self-confident and empowered. In essays, which embed the pictures into a broader context, they narrate their experience with sexual harassment, gender roles and norms, and how they came to use their item.

Seliman took the art project even further and video-taped nine of these women during the photo shoots in July 2015. The recordings resulted in a 40-minute documentary entitled *Bent Bemeet Bent*,[8] which allowed the participants to share their stories in greater detail. The title was developed in conversations between the movie's protagonists and Sarah Seliman and translates to "a woman worth 100 women." It draws on an Egyptian saying which states that "a woman is worth 100 men" when praising an especially 'strong' woman. Seliman asked the women dur-

ing the movie shoot about their opinion on the proverb. Some protagonists suggested that it should rather be "a woman worth 100 women" which later became the documentary's title.

Illustration 7: The Photo Exhibition in Different Locations
Source: Left: Qena, Egypt, Sarah Seliman, 2015; right: Berlin, Germany, Maria Neubert, 2015.

In the beginning, the initiative's projects were entirely self-funded and later financially supported by the Tahrir Lounge, an initiative and project space at the Goethe-Institut in Cairo, to cover the photographs' and movie's production costs. The photographs, partially along with the documentary, were shown as an exhibition to a wide public between 2015 to 2017: In Egypt at the Tahrir Lounge in Cairo; the American University of Cairo; the Goethe-Institut in Alexandria; and a community center in Qena, Upper Egypt. In Germany, it was exhibited in major cities such as at the Werkstatt der Kulturen in Berlin; the University of Hamburg and the Philipps-Universität Marburg,[9] as

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8   The film is in Arabic with English subtitles and as of February 2018 not yet available online.

9   In Marburg the documentary Bent Bemeet Bent kicked off a film series featuring five movies of the region discussing gender norms and social issues related to the topic in the respective countries.

well as the Galerie KUB in Leipzig. Additionally, it was displayed during the 10th Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense, as well as the 7th Congress of the Italian Society of Women Historians at the University of Pisa. To make the voices of these women even more visible, the following section will complement the theoretical outline and document the portraits of 13 of the 17 women.

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Photo Documentation

by Sarah Seliman

In Egypt, being anything other than a stereotypical "Eastern" man is a taboo. Thus, harassment is never about being feminine or being attractive. It is more of a societal punishment for being born female. It is a punishment for carrying myself differently; for seeing life from non-mainstream perspective and for leading an unconventional life.

Being groped, touched, catcalled, stared at, followed around, inspected closely, whistled at and so on is degrading and infuriating. The lack of safety, paranoia and aggression are indescribable, but my worst physiological trauma never came from random, unknown misogynists on the streets of Cairo, but from people who knew me; ones I dealt with me in closed premises like work, college, family or friends.

So I keep to myself, I keep away and keep my distance. I keep my headphones on and my clothes hid under a shawl or a cardigan. I live inside my own bubble with minimal human interaction and personal connections away from judgment, harassment and social torture.

Qawem (Resist)

"What are the words you don't yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?" *Audre Lorde*

Qawem is a big part of our lives, in general including our thoughts, our believes and our dreams we always try to hold on and fight for. That consumes a lot of energy and needs a lot of effort during our daily lives with all its responsibilities and challenges. Not to get lost in between and to be aware of the world you live in and where exactly you want to be.

The street and harassment is one of our daily challenges. The idea of violating anyone's right to walk safely in the street is a terrible idea and the worst is that to give up your right and to remain silent. To give up your right, to ignore what's happening around you is nothing but saying you are not exist.

It's either the easy way or the right way. You choose how you want to live!

You'd be hard pressed to find me without a scarf around my neck in permissible weather. I started with one beloved scarf, picked up on a whim in India. Now I've started a bit of a collection. But before coming to Cairo, I never thought of them as a form of protection. However, now I view it as a diverse tool, which gives me some arbitrary sense of comfort; a dynamic cover when I want to hide myself. I'm not scared of the streets of Cairo. I'm just tired of them.

I have reached a point where I can't live a day without my headphones.

My headphones zone me out of reality and in to my own world. I have lived all my life listing to comments, whether I asked for it or not because I was always the topic of the day due to my different behavior and personality. That made me grow up in to a person that just wants to follow what my mind directs me too, what makes me happy. People interfere in our lives thinking they are doing us good by judging us. I can handle advice but I don't like unasked for opinions and I get that a lot every day in the streets from people I know and don't know. My headphone isolates me from the world. My music is my taste. It empowers me and gives me passion to live each day. I choose the biggest, most obvious looking headphones and most powerful after my research. I didn't just want to isolate myself I also wanted people to see me not caring I will wear this alienated looking headphone every day in the streets and I wouldn't even look nor hear anyone I don't know.

I will wear them when I'm driving my zebra truck.

I will wear them when I'm riding my bicycle.

I will wear them when I'm Jogging.

I will wear them when I'm wearing a short dress.

I will wear them when I'm eating a sandwich while walking in the streets

My message is I will wear this alienated looking headphone every day in the streets and I will not care to listen to anyone I don't know. So no one would have the ability to disturb me or change my mood.
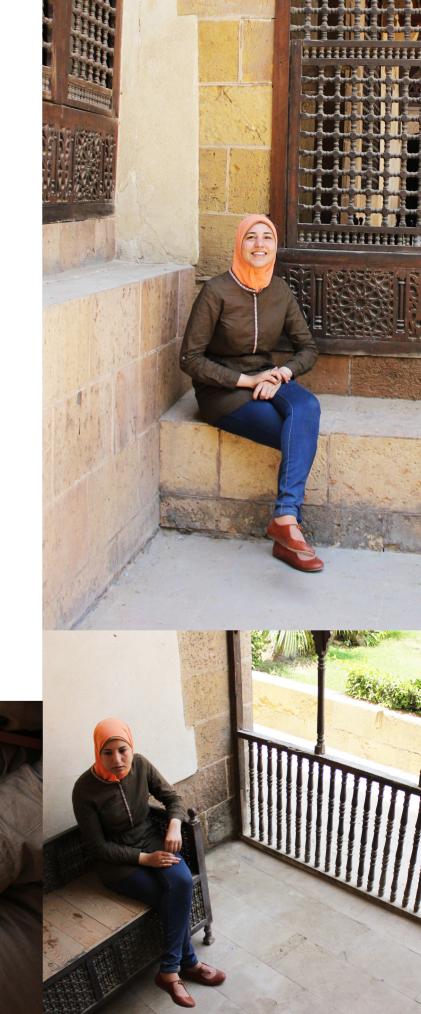
12 years ago, I didn't imagine that there's any sort of life happening outside my small city that is in the middle of the Delta Region of Egypt. I saw the whole world through the conservative and scared eyes of my father. Years before his death, he gave me a golden ring that I never took off ever since.

When I moved alone to the – in my eyes – very big city of Cairo, I kept thinking of the fear of losing my identity. I kept asking myself, whether I'm changing due to the maelstrom of unwanted voices of the busy streets addressing its inhabitants. How would that affect an expatriate woman like me?

I wore my father's ring all these years to feel secure, to remind myself that the only motive to move to Cairo was to find both knowledge and work. Looking deep inside myself, I never doubted my internal believes yet I always doubt and question all social facts that leave me unconvinced.

To a village girl like me living in the big city, it will be very logical to keep the past that formed me in a way or another. Every time I face a crucial situation I compare my past to my present, which is filled with the liberal studies I'm exposed to these days.

I always hold on to whatever gives me enough space and makes me feel safe in public. I hope there will be a time when everyone will feel safe and secure, so to reach their goals in life.

My Bicycle and my backpack are my personal companions that give me strength and confidence in Cairo city, or as I call it the harassment city.

I started my story with cycling when I was 8, but when I was 20 the idea started chasing me again, as sort of challenging my community. Since cycling is not only a different experience but also a way of studying and understanding the city from different perspectives, not only its streets and buildings but also its people through tracing their eyes which watch a girl cycle. As I started this and I will keep going I want to deliver a message especially in popular areas -a7iaa sha3bia-: I'm a girl and I have the right to bike and every girl has this right too.

And another message for every girl that wants to bike, but still has a little fear inside: Do it, you are strong when you challenge your community.

Maybe I didn't grow up here in Egypt, but since my first month here I understood what it means to be violated or defiled by touching. Without even a warning you will be touched! Many people told me that "You always look angry in street, unlike your funny, real character"! My answer is always the same: "This is the street face, I created it." I used to be always ashamed of my clothes as I thought it attracts the harassers, but deep inside my mind I believed it has nothing to do with clothes, it's a random yet methodical attitude against women in my community. I refuse to say I'm used to it as I'll never get used to it. And I refuse to say that I am a victim, because I never used to be, but I was fighting from my heart, from the inside only.

Less than a year ago, I had the most beautiful coincidence in my life; I had the chance to learn "WenDo" and teach it too. That was my starting point here in Egypt. My message for each and every girl is BE STRONG, breathe the freedom, go to the sea, the Nile, or anywhere available to inhale the air. Don't create a face or mask for the street. Just go out to the streets fully aware that yourself that you are the strongest, the most beautiful, and the most resilient against the current! I urge all fellow women to form a wall that is complete against the society which steals identities. Be strong enough to impose your smiling face over the streets of Cairo! Please never forget that you are a woman.

Translated by Khaled Ahmed

Four years ago, I started taking the metro to go to Cairo university in Giza. My strategy was to wear T-shirts all the time so as not to make myself attractive in any way, to use the cabin assigned for ladies only and to get out of the metro station as fast as I can ... every single day. Every single day was a struggle. It was a war. To get out of the metro alive was kind of a miracle. It's either me or them ... It's "The survival of the fittest" game.

I thought that being around women would be much safer than men. However that's not the case in Egypt. Women STARE at women. It's very okay to find a woman touching you or your hair because you know "we are women!".

The shock came to me one day when a guy got into the women's car and I kept looking around, waiting for anybody who would shout at him or get him the station's police or do anything! But there was complete silence as if nothing happened.

I shouted at the guy and told him to go out of the car right away. He said "I am not going out and do whatever you can do." He said it confidently and in his voice was a message of authority or power or rather belittling ... that nobody understood from the other ladies. Then a woman shouted at me and said "He didn't do anything, what's wrong with you?"

At this point, I realised that women are so ignorant of their rights, their worth and value.

Another day I was waiting for the metro in Ramsis station "Al Shohada", the most crowded station ever! I was waiting with the other ladies when a girl who was standing right beside me started crying hysterically.

I kept asking her "what's wrong? what happened? Did anybody touch you?" She kept crying and then nodded to me and then cried again.

She then said "I didn't know he is a man! I felt somebody touching me from behind and I thought she is a woman so I thought she did it

by mistake. I felt it again and looked back and found him running. I didn't know he is a man".

Then she kept crying and crying for not knowing that this was a guy's hand touching her from behind in the middle of a place surrounded by women. I tried to find him but he ran so fast that he disappeared among the crowds of the metro in few seconds. They all do that. They just do what they want and then disappear leaving us with the worst feeling ever ... feeling disabled.

This time I realised how women feel guilty and responsible for every single thing that happens to them or to the people around them. The girl felt guilty for not realising that he was a man as if she was approving of what he was doing.

Women feel guilty when they get harassed. They feel they must have done something wrong or they must have worn the wrong clothes or they must have walked in a provocative way and for that they get harassed or more shockingly deserve the harassment.

When a girl gets harassed, people ask her "What were you wearing? Where were you walking? Why did you go there?" All these questions are translated in our minds as "You should not have worn this shirt. You should not have gone there alone. You should not walk in the street this way. YOU WERE ASKING FOR IT."

This is our sick society that puts the blame and the responsibility on girls who feel sorry every day for just "being women". Being a woman in Egypt means thinking everyday of what people will do if I wear this skirt, what people will say about me if I walk alone in the street and, definitely that I am responsible for men's desires and weaknesses.

I myself having been wearing shirts, jackets and big backpacks to cover me from behind. I even hold my laptop in a way that covers my breasts so that no one would even see it. What does this mean?

One rule I truly believe in is this: The thing

you hide is the thing you are ashamed of. Yes, shame is the right word. Women are ashamed of their bodies and of everything that comes with being a women. Women are ashamed of being Women.

I hold my head up high and say confidently that I am proud of being a woman. I know that we as women are worth so much more than what this society is telling us. We are more than what wear. We are much more than just getting married and having babies. We are capable of being successful and building magnificent careers. We are capable of transforming our society and influencing the people of this nation. We can be artists, teachers, engineers, doctors, cyclers, athletes, managers, judges and so much more than what this society is telling us. And yes, we can be good drivers as well. :)

We should not strive to be perfect or to conform to the standards of this society. We should be whatever we are and want.

We are beautiful, powerful and magnificent.

I see my sunglasses as a tool of adaption here in Cairo's streets. Although I don't like the act of hiding myself behind something, it helps me to cope with moving in the streets, especially on days when I don't feel that confident or strong enough to respond and react through the expression of my eyes. As well I sometimes feel too proud to expose one of the most important parts of my body to the people's looks. But occasionally when I am sick of hiding and adapting I remove my sunglasses and make the craziest face I can.

I have always thought that I was never scared of sexual harassment, it is not so much bravado as much as it is about not thinking that there is always an enemy out there ... yet it seeped in ... this fear ... I usually find myself now almost always carrying a shawl or a scarf to wrap around me as if to shield me ... it caught me by surprise that I would find myself covering myself whenever I approach a group of men on the street ... and then I feel guilty because we have labeled all Egyptian men – actually scratch that – we have labeled all Egyptian men from the working class to be a threat to women's safety – and as a woman I decided to segregate myself by going to spaces where these men whom I identify by how they look like as harassers are not allowed ... and I failed to see the class politics in it that is making my society a sadder place to live ...

Here in our country, love is considered as a crime. If a guy kissed a girl he loves in the street, the people will beat him, but if a guy raped a girl in the same street people will just watch and record the scene! The harassment look doesn't show only on men's faces, but also women's. It might not be sexual harassment, it's more like jealousy because I'm doing something she can't do. Their looks start by jealousy then it turns to be hate towards me, because of their inability to reach my -limited- freedom. If I had surrendered to the people's looks and became afraid all the time from the harassment, I would have had become one of the haters now.

Any girl must have a dream bigger than returning home to cook a chicken, because I'm a free bird who left the cage, this cage might be your family, your job, or your financial conditions, but as long as you have a dream nothing can lock you up in a cage.

Translated by Khaled Ahmed

I have faced the first sexual abuse in the street when I was 13, since then I started wearing clothes that cover my body features; I even wore jackets during the summer just to cover whatever tells or represents me as a young girl. When I grew up things started to be more different for me especially after the revolution, I really wanted to rebel against the "disgrace of the body", I wanted to get out of the frame the society put me within since childhood. Taking shelter of my sunglasses while walking the streets gives me that magical feeling of being alone and unwatched when I smoke, run, laugh in a loud voice or even wear whatever makes me feel me, it gives me a sense of invisibility in a society that doesn't want me the way I am. Dropping the society's identity and starting to adapt my own even if it is through my sunglasses which empowers me against all the stereotypes and the society's judgmental looks. Eventually I come to understand that my real battle isn't in fighting against the society's judgments but in keeping the identity that I've chosen by myself despite all the society's efforts to change this fact.

KAFEIN كافيين

Let your beautiful soul fly, impose your aesthetic standard on the world, whether you are chubby or skinny, tall or short, coarse or soft haired, black or white skinned, nothing of this matters because you put your own aesthetic measurements and you impose it on the society, challenge the world and prove yourself freely. Racism is not only about skin color, or body type or shape, the beauty was never a rigid definition. The real principle is that: everybody must believe in humanity's wide range of beauty, don't keep in shape according to the society standards but keep in shape according to your body standards. Each and every one is beautiful but you have to believe in this deep in your heart and soul and force the others to see your inner beauty. And don't even care about the opinion of those who don't believe ... Love yourself and live the freedom that keeps you happy as long as you don't hurt anybody, the life is much more beautiful than people's complications.

Translated by Khaled Ahmed

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