



# Street Harassment in Cairo: A Symptom of Disintegrating Social Structures

Fatima Mareah Peoples\*

## Abstract

This article analyzes the increasing spread of male-to-female harassment on the streets of Cairo. The aim is to first describe, define and contextualize street harassment as a social phenomenon and secondly to suggest some main social factors that provoked the development of the problem in the first place. This analysis takes a particular look at the correlation between street harassment and decades of structural and institutional changes which have had an impact on patriarchy as a defining system for the relationship between men and women.

Historically in Egypt, patriarchy was not only fundamental for spatial and gendered organization within the private family sphere, but also for demarcating movement and participation in the public domain. In recent decades, high unemployment rates among men have undermined the conditions for upholding the patriarchal structure. This article argues that street harassment is symptomatic of high unemployment rates and of a consequentially weakening patriarchal system. It identifies the everyday spectacle of male-to-female street harassment as indicative of the frustration and difficulties in adhering to cultural ideals in a time of immense structural transformations. These transformations have impaired Egyptian males' ability to fulfil their traditional role as economic providers, something which has resulted in their lack of achievement and demasculinization.

**Key Terms:** patriarchal connectivity, public space, relational selving, street harassment, traditional family.

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\* Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), Hausmannsgate 7, NO-0186, Oslo, Norway. Email: marpeo@prio.no; mareahpeoples@yahoo.com

## Résumé

Cet article fait une analyse de la montée des cas d'harcèlement des femmes dans les rues du Caire. L'objectif est tout d'abord de décrire, de définir et de contextualiser le phénomène social de l'harcèlement dans les rues, et ensuite de suggérer les facteurs sociaux principaux qui ont provoqué le développement de ce phénomène. Une attention particulière est donnée à la corrélation entre cet harcèlement et les décennies des changements structurels et institutionnels qui ont impacté la patriarchie en tant que système qui définit la relation entre homme et femme.

La patriarchie en Egypte n'était pas seulement fondamentale pour l'organisation spatiale et celle du genre au sein de l'espace privé de la famille, mais aussi pour démarquer le mouvement et la participation dans le domaine public. La crise de l'emploi qui sévit ces dernières décennies chez les hommes ont rendu difficile la préservation de la structure patriarcale. Ce qui me pousse à défendre le fait que l'harcèlement dans les rues est symptomatique de la frustration et des difficultés des hommes à répondre aux idéaux culturels dans un contexte d'immenses transformations structurelles. Ces transformations ont mitigé la capacité des hommes à assurer leur rôle traditionnel de pourvoyeurs économiques, ce qui a entraîné leur inadéquation et démasculinisation.

**Mots clés:** connectivité patriarcale, espace public, harcèlement dans les rues, famille traditionnelle.

## Introduction

In Cairo during the day, the streets are filled with a multitude of males, including elementary and high school boys, university students, middle-age family men walking to work or taking care of daily errands, older men relaxing in cafes or on street corners, and a great number of military and police officials carrying out their national duties for the state. Together, these males coalesce to give Cairo's streets its reputation among residents, students, and foreign workers for projecting a culture of machismo, wherein male-to-female street harassment is a common activity. It is easy for an outsider to be blinded to the pervasiveness of the street harassment in Cairo experienced by Egyptian women every day. This is because many foreign women and men do not speak Arabic and are unfamiliar with the verbal and physical gestures on the streets of Cairo. Taking centre stage instead are Egypt's more immediate and glaring problems such as poverty, intense urban pressure, as well as military repression. Nevertheless, Cairo has an internal reputation as a city

where the harassment of women is limitless and exerted regardless of the woman's age, nationality, class, race, or religious affiliation.

What follows here is an examination of male-to-female street harassment in Cairo. The objective is first to define, describe, and contextualize street harassment as a social problem, and secondly, to discuss two main social conditions that have led to the exacerbation and normalization of this phenomenon, namely the structural rise of unemployment among males and the breakdown of the culturally specific patriarchal system in the Egyptian family. I argue that street harassment in Cairo can be seen as a result of rising unemployment among men and changes in traditional family structures. These two trends threaten traditional conceptions of masculinity, and men who are particularly threatened can regain their sense of masculinity by harassing women in the view of other men. Street harassment is seen here as an activity that Egyptian males engage in to symbolically reclaim their masculinity in public, following decades of structural and institutional changes which have been problematic for the Egyptian society.

Street harassment has also been identified as a pertinent problem in other societies undergoing transformation, particularly in India, where political and economic reforms have distorted the structural conditions for upholding patriarchy as a uniform system of gendered social and spatial organization. 'Sexual harassment of women in public places is named and culturally constructed in India as 'Eve-teasing', a specifically 'Indian-English' term. The semantic roots of the term "'Eves" as temptresses being "teased" normalizes and trivializes the issue' (Gangoli 2007:63). The literal meaning of the term does not hint at what the female experience of harassment is; instead it carries connotations of harmless and innocent male behaviour. 'Nevertheless, as both social behaviour and phenomenon, it is viewed more seriously in a context where women's chastity and (their) men's honor are major values' (Rajan 2000:149).

The development of street harassment as a social phenomenon in Cairo shares some social characteristics with the problem of Eve-teasing in large and densely populated Indian cities such as Bombay. For example, Eve-teasing in India and street harassment in Egypt can be seen as linked to modernizing impulses and, more recently, to globalizing tendencies and the restructuring of the public sphere. Both in Egypt and in India, the public harassment of women was a fairly uncommon phenomenon until the 1970s. It was not until the late 1980s and the 1990s, when women became more visible in public with their mass entry into colleges and their mass entry into various arenas of employment, that street harassment became a common activity among males in public

space (Natarajan 2008:54). Most cases of Eve-teasing go unreported and unsanctioned, primarily because the culprits of Eve-teasing are difficult to identify and persecute (Mohan and Priyadarshini 1995). Similarly, in Egypt the streets are congested with people to the extent that the culprits often escape apprehension, by denying involvement when remarks or hisses are traced to the likely source. Yet, the phenomenon of street harassment in Cairo developed within an endemic cultural setting framed by a particular historical context.

To approach the study of street harassment in Cairo, I contextualize the findings from a survey of 1,010 men and 1,010 women on harassment conducted by the Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights (ECWR)<sup>1</sup>, combining it with a content analysis of existing material on the correlation between structural transformations, urban modernizing impulses, and changing practices in the Egyptian family. Furthermore, in order to probe the social relevance and feasibility of street harassment as a research topic, an extensive set of preliminary interviews was carried out in various areas of Cairo. Through these interviews I was made further aware of how the topic of street harassment is integrated into daily discourses, both in universities and the wider contemporary urban space. In order to situate the larger debates taking place in these arenas, and to understand the complex implications of this phenomenon on daily life in Cairo, this study also draws on field observations, notes, and a series of in-depth interviews conducted between 2006 and 2009 with 10 subjects. Pseudonyms are used to protect the confidentiality and identity of the interviewees.

## **Defining Street Harassment**

Like most analytical categories, street harassment tends to have more than one meaning, and a working definition must first be developed for the purpose of this study. Street harassment is defined here as a highly symbolic form of violence which is 'experienced by women from all walks of life in the form of heckling, being whistled at, rated, propositioned, leered at, fondled, and in other ways assaulted and humiliated by men as they go about their daily lives in public spaces' (Lara 2007). In Cairo, street harassment falls into three main categories: gestures, verbal remarks, and physical harassment. Specific incidents of harassment may of course include any combination of these categories. In 2008, the ECWR carried out the first in-depth study on harassment in Cairo, involving a survey of 1,010 men and 1,010 women. According to the ECWR, 62.4 per cent of Egyptian men living or working in Cairo practice one or all of

these types of harassment towards women in public (Hassan, Komsan, Shoukry 2008:11).

According to the ECWR survey, 13.4 per cent of Egyptian men admitted having participated in physical harassment, the least prevalent, but most antagonistic form of harassment. (Hassan, Komsan, Shoukry 2008). Physical harassment can be aggressive and violent, and may include sexual forms such as touching, grabbing, and caressing a woman's private areas. In the streets of Cairo, physical harassment also takes on non-sexual forms where pushing, spitting, deliberately tapping, and throwing of rocks are the most common manifestations. Verbal harassment is the second most used form of street harassment, with 43.6 per cent of the men surveyed by ECWR confessing having verbally antagonized women in public (Hassan, Komsan, Shoukry 2008:11). Suggestive noises, such as whistling, hissing and kissing sounds, singing, and sexually explicit comments, are recurrent types of verbal harassment performed daily. Gestures are the most commonly practiced forms of street harassment in Cairo, with 49.8 per cent of men admitting to winking, and making other evocative expressions to women in public places (Hassan, Komsan, Shoukry, 2008:11).

Street harassment can be seen as a subcategory of the universal problem of sexual harassment, as it is undoubtedly linked to what the ECWR describes as unwanted sexual acts 'deliberately perpetrated by the harasser resulting in sexual, physical, or psychological abuse of the victim' (Hassan, Komsan, Shoukry, 2008:2). However, there are several important distinctions. First, sexual harassment often takes place in the absence of an audience, such as in the work place, educational institutions, and in homes, while street harassment, for example, is named so because it often takes place on the streets and on public transportation. Second, street harassment does not necessarily include physical contact or verbal remarks but is often exerted as suggestive stares which trigger feelings of being violated. Third, sexual harassment is not easy to conceal since the perpetrators of such acts usually target a particular person, while the perpetrators of street harassment easily blend into the anonymous masses, thus confessions or proof are difficult to produce. Fourth, there are clear laws in Egypt as well as in most other countries that sanction public and private acts of sexual harassment which include verbal remarks and physical contact. In Egypt, touching women in public may carry the same punishment as sodomy (Kenyon 2009). An Egyptian court, for example, convicted a man in 2009 of sexual harassment for grabbing a woman's chest and was sentenced to three years in jail and a fine of US\$900 (Kinoti 2009). Another man was sentenced to one year in

prison for his involvement in physically harassing women in the 2008 mob attacks on women in Mohandeseen, one of Cairo's most bustling districts, during the Fitr festivities which conclude the month of Ramadan, with a grand celebration during which women and men assemble in the streets (Hassan 2009).

Particularly, when discussions of criminalizing street harassment come into focus, the distinction between street harassment and sexual harassment is increasingly blurred. As the law is written in Egypt today, there is no clear legal creed sanctioning the most common form of street harassment, namely gestures. The perpetrators of street harassment – whether through gestures or physical contact – are often treated alike, as hardened criminals, and they receive punishments that some would see as disproportionate to the severity of the actual acts. There is a tendency to overlook the more covert, intentionally subdued and subtle acts of harassment, largely because the non-physical male obscenity is intangible in legal terms and because the most violent acts take centre stage. This is partly due to the fact that there are no clearly defining distinctions between street and sexual harassment as seen through the definition of sexual harassment given by ECWR which, for example, does not distinguish between gestures and physical contact.

## **Describing the Problem**

In 2005, the issue of street harassment was publicized in Cairo when a group of women were targets of street harassment by what is popularly believed to have been 'un-uniformed police men' (Amar 2009:7). In the September 2005 election, university students, journalists, the Muslim Brotherhood, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), individual city aristocrats, as well as women and men from the countryside united at public rallies to put external and internal pressure on President Hosni Mubarak and his administration to allow opposition parties to run against him. These demonstrations marked a new progressive political era in Egypt, which unintentionally brought the problem of street harassment to the foreground of public debate. During some of these demonstrations, many women were targets of physical and verbal harassment by mobs of men on the streets of Cairo. Tariq, a graduate student at American University Cairo in 2006, stated that many Egyptians believe that 'most of the harassers during these demonstrations were actually not fellahs (farmers), but were police and public guards who were dressed like civilians but were actually carrying out instructions from their superiors'.<sup>2</sup> Supporting evidence from women's groups in Egypt suggest that over 100 women were attacked by mobs of men during their participation in political protests. These Egyptian women organized a 'day

of black', which was to be known as 'Black Wednesday', in order to protest against public assaults and degrading gestures by men in public.

The summer of 2005 marked the first of several occurrences which brought the issue of street harassment to the forefront of Egyptian public debate. Several other incidents were reported from 2005 to 2009. During the Eid al-Fitr celebration of 2006, a mob of men attacked women and girls in front of a movie theatre in downtown Cairo, pulling at their clothes, and making sexual gestures and comments to them. As this particular incident was caught on film by individual observers and posted on the internet, male-to-female harassment in Cairo gained national, regional, and international attention. Following these assaults, street harassment was openly discussed as a national problem and the 'Black Wednesday' movement became widespread through blogs, conferences, university seminars, newspapers and magazines, as well as national television. Another mob outburst of street harassment took place over the Fitr holidays of 2008. Some 150 men were arrested for going on a 'harassing spree' in Mohandeseen. Again, mobs of men and boys pulled at women's clothes, made sexual comments, and in some cases physically attacked women in the streets (Hassan 2009). The most recent incidents took place over the Eid al Adha celebration marking the end of the Hajj pilgrimage season in November 2009 when over 300 cases of street harassment against Egyptian women were reported (Hassan 2009). These incidents, which were widely reported in the media, spurred many discussions in Cairo, as many Egyptian men and women spoke out publicly for the first time about their experiences and demanded a response from the national government. Many Egyptians pointed out that the problem was not exclusively one of adolescent behaviour, since the majority of adult men as well as police and military officers in Cairo actively participate in street harassment.

The concerns and responses of Egyptian women and men as well as foreigners concerning the street harassment phenomenon was well documented in a comprehensive national survey carried out by the ECWR in 2008, which found that 88 per cent of those sampled attested to observing men harassing women daily (Hassan, Komsan, Shoukry 2008:11). The study also reported that 83 per cent of Egyptian women and 98 per cent of foreign women were exposed to sexual harassment on a daily basis (Hassan, Komsan, Shoukry 2008:8). The real crime was not the harassment, which is not a new activity in Cairo, but 'mob-related incidents that seem to explode at random' (Kenyon 2009:2). As mob attacks on women have increased since 2005, street harassment in Cairo has been described as a persistent phenomenon which has had a negative

impact on the general economic development of Egypt and on the tourist industry in particular (Fayed 2008). The media coverage of mob attacks, together with the ECWR study, raised awareness of street harassment and led to an explicit recognition of harassment as a growing social problem which most females in Cairo regularly experience. Due to the heightened attention garnered by the issue, the numbers of reported incidents of harassment in Cairo have increased. According to Rebecca Stephenson at the British Embassy, the 'number of sexual harassment cases reported to the embassy has tripled over the past three years, with 14 sexual assaults reported to the embassy in a 17-day period in July 2008' (Fayed 2008).

Worth noting is the non-sexualized nature of some of Cairo's harassment. Nermin, an undergraduate student at the American University, Cairo School of Social Science (2006) suggests that street harassment in Cairo is not always 'sexualized from male to female, but takes on different gendered dynamics including groups of young school girls persistently hassling other local school girls, adolescent boys teasing other boys, and even teenagers and kids harassing adults'.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, public figures indicate that the majority of the harassment is male-to-female with perpetrators and victims ranging between the ages of 19-24. The fact that harassment is not always a sexualized male-to-female act indicates that the problem is not limited to the ECWR's description of street harassment in Cairo as an act that displays 'masculine values and culture, found in and supported by societies where the male sex exercises harassment only to prove dominance over a female "weaker" sex' (Hassan, Komsan, Shoukry 2008:3).

## **Contextualizing Street Harassment**

In her study of street harassment among Pakistani men in Bradford, England, Marie Macey argues that Islam is a 'key factor in Pakistani male violence in Bradford and it is used by young men as a power resource to control women and justify violence [...] whether public or private' (2009:846). Macey does not distinguish between domestic violence and street harassment, nor does she define her central variable of analysis, 'harassing group behaviour' (Macey 2009:849). However, street harassment deserves to be examined separately from other forms of violence, such as domestic violence or sexual assault. As the following interviewee, Iman stated, 'men that harass women in public are [most likely] not the same ones guilty of domestic violence, and men who beat their wives at home are [most likely] not the same men standing on street corners harassing women.'



Macey's essentialist framework identifies Islam as the main variable for harassing group behaviour among Pakistani men in Bradford. This approach brings attention to the question of whether street harassment reflects inherent cultural beliefs about women's inferiority within Muslim communities. Or is Macey falling into the trap of using Islam as a reduction of the problem, since her category of analysis was in fact Muslim men? According to Macey, 'Material deprivation, poor educational provision, police brutality, and institutional racism are in themselves inadequate explanations for the violence perpetrated by young Pakistani men' (2009:846). Macey's underlying assumption is that those men who harass in public carry out an activity that is transmitted between generations according to cultural beliefs, rather than produced through broader social fabrics. Such an approach isolates the perpetrators of harassment from macro-level processes in the larger society.

A common approach in anthropology is to study a particular social problem by placing it in context with national and international forces and structures, which although invisible, influence the development of a local phenomenon (El-Kholy 2002:32-33). Kareema, a 56-year-old Egyptian mother of three girls explains, 'fathers as the head of the 'traditional' Arab family did not transmit this behaviour to their sons, but what the young guys are displaying these days on the streets is connected to socioeconomic problems which (have) been developing since the 1970s, and (have) increasingly gotten worse in the past 10 years.<sup>4</sup> An argument like Kareema's does not suggest that religion has no impact on people's actions, but rather that a contextual approach should evaluate the structural conditions in the state political and economic system that may have contributed to the rise of street harassment as normalized local behaviour. Lila Abu-Lughod (1998) argues that an analysis of the relationship between women and men in the Middle East should describe the various nations' relationship to colonialism, the domestic contract between the nation and state, the various economic policies, and other major historical events or processes. The following discussion will contextualize these processes as they have worked to inadvertently modify Egyptian cultural norms.

## **Spatial Transformations in Egyptian Tradition**

In the following sections I explore some major structural transformations and their impact on the Egyptian cultural landscape under a succession of political leaders. Focusing on macro transformations helps illustrate that street harassment is symptomatic of decades of structural

and institutional changes which have resulted in a lack of masculine achievement. Here, I shall highlight the link between various coercive modernizing reforms in Egypt, beginning as early as the 19th century, challenges to the traditional Egyptian family in the 20th century leading to women's entry into the public sphere, and the development of the street harassment phenomena in the 21st century.

In 19th century Egypt, the streets constituted a part of the public space where women's and children's movements were monitored and restricted by male members of the family, neighbourhood elders (men and women), as well as religious chiefs. Designed to keep privacy a main concern, the streets in Cairo were narrow with many dead ends, preventing excessive movement within and between neighbourhoods. This is still evident today, especially in Old Cairo with all its winding roads. While the main city streets were public areas where men gathered, the neighbourhood roads and back allies were part of the private domain, as women and children moved around these areas daily. One of my interviewees, Ahmed, a self-proclaimed 'feminist,' explained the traditional neighbourhood dynamics in Egypt, suggesting that 'outsiders and strange men could not enter private spaces, except for particular reasons or when they were accompanied by their wives or children. Continuities between private and public space tended to be demarcated as male or female but were also fluid and dynamic'.<sup>5</sup> In the context of Egypt, privacy does not imply the 'personal, the secret, or the individual space,' it rather connotes two core concerns, mainly the family and women (El Guindi 1999:82). For example, while the bazaars were considered a worldly place where women and men mingled and could escape the communal gaze, it nevertheless had a private character for women who were encouraged to behave modestly and protect their sanctity at all times. This improved the movement of people between public areas, including the mosques, bazaars, markets, and it also allowed for 'individuals, families, or other social groups, to separate themselves from others at various times' (El Guindi 1999:81).<sup>6</sup> In this sense, as long as women were acting in a private manner, protecting their sanctity and modesty at all times, they could be seen moving around in public areas.

During the Tazimate era, from 1839 to 1876, the Ottoman Empire adopted a set of reforms which promoted the practical introduction of some European economic principles to the Middle East. Secular ideas of citizenship, land ownership, and institutional and bureaucratic state development were central to the reforms. Such policies resulted in intensified contact and socio-political relationships between Europe, the Middle East and North Africa (Petrov 2004). As these relationships escalated

to a full colonial project during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a European understanding of space based on symmetry and order was introduced to the physical landscape of major cities in the region.

In Cairo, between 1882 and 1936, the British Empire tended to focus on transforming the physical layout of the city by reorganizing roads, building new city districts, administrative areas, large public squares, open gardens, and new Western-style neighbourhoods. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, English department stores and shopping districts were developed in the European districts of Cairo and new tramways were built, connecting Cairo to outer districts such as Giza. Much emphasis was put on increasing the role of the military as a means of maintaining order and organization in public space (Mitchell 1988). Many of the old streets were widened to enable troops to move through the city and reinforce regulations, organization, and the rule of law (Mitchell 1988). The military became the new way of maintaining order in the streets, which meant that there was less reliance on the traditional way of maintaining order through the delineation of space as essentially public or private, for men or for women. These transformations enabled people to have increasingly more contact, to move frequently in and between public areas, and provided the necessary physical apparatuses to bring social life outside the homes and neighbourhoods and into public areas. As the following pages explain, while there was an increase in contact between men and women on the streets and in other public areas during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such institutions as the family were still working in traditional terms.

### **Traditional Egyptian Family Life**

In most Arab families, a particular type of patriarchy systematized the way women and men organized themselves domestically and publicly. This patriarchal system relied on constant 'bargaining' between men and women about aspects of the gender ideology. The term ideology, here, means 'an unquestioningly accepted set of ideas that takes material shape and social actions' (Spivak 1987:111). The gender ideology was one in which women were acculturated to domestic life. Most of the decisions regarding the family's internal social and financial affairs were directed and controlled by the senior matriarch of the family. The men, on the other hand, were socialized to exert authority over public affairs. This system was not premised on an innate impulse of Egyptian men to dominate women, but on a rationalized internal logic between men and women who 'resisted, accommodated, adapted, and conflicted with each other over their private and public positions, rights and responsibilities'

(Kandiyoti 1988:285). The patriarchal system balanced out the power relationship between men and women in several ways. It offset the authority of men by the respect that women gained as matriarchs in their older age, so that both women and men experienced the power to direct the behaviour of others during their life span (Kandiyoti 1988:279). Women did not have much authority when they entered their husbands' houses as young girls but it was accepted that their influence could increase over time (Kandiyoti 1988). The patriarchal system also worked to the benefit of women, securing economic stability in their old age while men's economic protection of women further legitimized their masculine role as the head of the household.

The (inter)dependent relationship of men and women in the Middle East has been termed by Suad Joseph as 'patriarchal connectivity', a system wherein gender boundaries are fluid and dynamic rather than fixed and static (1993:452-453; 1994; 1999). Joseph argues that the process of patriarchal connectivity is an integral aspect of 'relational selving' in Arab families, where gender roles are continuously negotiated throughout one's lifetime (Suad Joseph 1994). In this sense, the 'self' emerges as a dependent actor rather than an autonomous agent. Gender roles in the Arab world are in this way transmitted both publicly and privately through familial dependence, extended kinship ties, adhering obligations, and through relational influences.

### **Challenges to Patriarchal Connectivity**

During Gamal Abdul Nasser's presidency from 1952 to 1970, gender relations in Egypt were forced into a state of extreme transition.<sup>7</sup> In 1952, Nasser implemented a large-scale socialist project which was generally based on corporatism and centred on market intercessions through the state (Goldberg 1992). Mervat Hatem (1987) argues that significant progress in social attitudes was made under Nasser. The 1956 Constitution, for example, granted suffrage to women and, 'declared all Egyptians equal under the law and forbade discrimination on the basis of gender, racial origin, language, religion or belief' (Hatem 1987:232). The law gave women the right to vote, guaranteed jobs for all people with education irrespective of gender, granted 50 days of maternity leave, and made it illegal to fire women while on maternity leave (Hatem 1987).

Nasser's new constitutional creed sought to incorporate women and peasants into the urban districts of Cairo through education and their employment in a massive public sector. During the 1950s and 1960s, a new class of experts in fields ranging from agriculture to engineering emerged, making Cairo the 'quintessential site of rational state planning

and the development of modern forms of power' (El Shakry 2006:75). Women were to actively and equally participate in these new processes through training as state technocrats in areas such as primary and vocational schooling, childcare, and hygiene. The 'women question' was addressed publicly as an element in the development of a thriving modern nation, which demanded the labour of women as well as of men. According to Hatem (1987), Nasser's new policies indicated that women's role in society was to be a concern of the state rather than exclusively a family issue. This was primarily because Nasser's vision of modernity was contingent upon the economic emancipation of women.

In the 1960s, women were introduced into the work force in great numbers, something which was meant to be an expression of Egypt's commitment to progress. While the state's constitutional creed adopted secular ideals, including protecting women's right to waged labour, Shari'a laws in the area of family legislation were preserved (Kandiyoti 1991:10). The special Shari'a courts, where civil and family jurisdiction predominated during the Ottoman and colonial periods, were abolished in 1955 'when personal status matters were transferred to the jurisdiction of normal courts' (Zubaida 2005:147). However, the courts still ruled according to codes derived from the Shari'a,' especially concerning family issues. These social reforms provided women with some liberties, an indication of the state's commitment to formally moving the nation away from or beyond the customary gender liaison inside the family unit (Zubaida 2005). The state, nevertheless, refrained from changing the status quo, with respect to the pattern of male authority in public and of female power in private, by maintaining a number of traditional rules on marriage and family matters. Women were, for example, limited in their ability to initiate divorce and men were favoured for child custody in these cases (Zubaida 2005).

The general trend of the government was to increasingly counteract the traditional with the prevailing modern, while at the same time keeping the appropriate conventional symbols and rhetoric so as to legitimize the state's authority as the 'head of the national family' and 'senior patriarch' (Joseph 2000:459). For example, while Nasser made women's participation in public possible through their waged employment, he limited women's ability to mobilize in public by making feminist organizations illegal, labelling their activities as 'deviance' (Kandiyoti 1991:12). The state adopted an ambiguous approach to the 'women question' as women's entry into the public sphere was encouraged in a contradictory conjunction with the continued working of traditional patriarchal system in the private domain of the family. Consequently, with

the introduction of women into the work force, men and women were forced to interact and communicate with strangers outside their dynamic web of kindred connections while the patriarchal system was in contradiction with this move.

### **The Structural Rise of Unemployment**

In one of my interviews with Ramy, a 42-year-old taxi driver in Cairo, he explained that, 'to be a man is to be successful at getting a wife and to take care of her and the family. Even if I am 35-years-old, if I don't have these things in place, I am still not a man'.<sup>8</sup> Ramy's understanding of manhood is closely related to financial success. The following section discusses how economic transitions, beginning in the 1970, have interfered with traditional understandings of manhood and masculinity in Egypt, and further elucidates how these changes have altered Cairo street culture, particularly with respect to street harassment.

In 1970, Anwar Sadat became Egypt's president. In 1974, he formally adopted his liberal economic policy, the *infitah*, and Nasser's socialist policy was officially dissolved in an attempt to diversify the Egyptian economy and increase foreign trade. The *infitah* was a public policy which meant the 'opening up' of Egypt's economy to global markets, encouragement of foreign investments, liberalization, and privatization of public sectors (Owen 1983). Sadat was committed to decreasing government subsidies on housing and food which had been a supporting structure under Nasser's socialist contract between the nation and state. In 1977, while not officially decreasing government subsidies on food and rent, the government raised the minimum wage from LE 12 to LE 18, declaring that all subsidies would be phased out within two to three years, except the subsidies on food essentials such as bread (Tucker 1978:4). A reduction in subsidies was particularly encouraged by bankers, who supported allocating more capital for commercial rather than domestic investment (Middle East Research and Information Project 1976). Imports grew from \$3.94 billion in 1975 to \$5.7 billion in 1976 (Tucker 1978:4). Most of the imported products were luxury goods such as cars, electrical appliances, and packaged produce which were mostly consumed by a small fraction of the Egyptian population who benefited from having a stake in the growing private sector.

Jacobsen (2006) argues that unemployment has become a major structural problem in developing countries as a result of the expansion of the world market economy in the 1970s. Beginning in the 1970s, men's economic productivity was being stretched so far that it was becoming

difficult to fulfil traditional masculine roles, often conceptualized as something achieved through economic success. As Salim, an AUC student, candidly articulates, economic hardship could be seen as related to the rise in harassment activities. 'Let's say I make 800 LE a month (about \$150). With this money, if I want to get married, buy a nice car, an apartment, and furniture. On top of this, if I want to be able to buy a woman some gold, pay for the wedding, and give her a nice ring then this money is not enough. There are many men that find themselves in this situation; they are in their 40s and virgins. It is very frustrating for a man in this situation to see women and not be able to have one'.<sup>9</sup> Salim gives the impression that participating in street harassment is not necessarily intended to inflict physical, emotional, or psychological harm on women; rather it can be seen as an enactment of an internalized personal crisis brought about by an inability to get married within a society where marriage is a main initiation into adulthood.

Quinn (2002) defines comments and gestures that men make about women in public as 'a game of play' that men participate in for several reasons: to build masculine identities in relation to other men, to create relationships between men rather than with women, and to confess or display heterosexuality. Quinn argues that such behaviour is not always a 'case of an aggressive sexual appraising of women [...] but a commotion created for the benefit of other men' (2000:393). Ahmed, another AUC student, elucidated to me on more than one occasion, along the same lines, that he does not mean any harm to women, 'but all men do this, especially if we are bored, with nothing to do'.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, many perpetrators of harassment are participating in and rehearsing a public act that shows other men that even if they do not have jobs or are not the sole providers of the family's income (an important part of a man's gender role under the system of patriarchy), they are still men. When Kareema was asked whether she was fearful that her husband participated in harassing women when he met his friends in public areas, such as at a café, she stressed that 'these young boys, I don't think they are seriously trying to talk to the women and bring them home. They do it to show off for their friends'.<sup>11</sup> Quinn suggests, along the same lines to which Ahmed and Kareema have alluded, that it is not enough for men to just be in the company of other men, but they have to publicly participate in activities that symbolically attest to the culturally specific 'capital of masculinity'.

## Masculinity in Crisis

Under the socialist system of the 1960s, the state was supposed to provide jobs for all graduates, but the number of graduates far exceeded the actual level of recruitment (Nazih 1983:432). Faris, an interviewee who graduated in 1975, explains that the public sector was so inflated that he found it increasingly difficult to find employment. Faris was jobless between the ages of 18 and 27 and moved around Cairo tirelessly during day hours searching for 'anything that I could do for cash'.<sup>12</sup> He confessed to having practiced gesturing and verbally harassing women during the years he was unemployed. As Faris explains, 'unemployment and low wages is Egypt's number one problem. We [men] have nothing to do, no work, so we go to the streets and sometimes we try to talk with women'.<sup>13</sup> Faris further elaborated that 'there is a problem with men who cannot get married. Some are 20, 30, sometimes even 40-years-old and they have never had relations with women. They do not have the money for marriage because many of them do not have permanent jobs'.<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding that Nasser's focus on women as equals in labour, together with Sadat's liberalization of the economy, may have empowered some women in terms of their assimilation into the cash economy and in terms of their ability to work, for the majority of both women and men, these structural changes in society were often manifested internally as 'personal crises'.

As Hosni Mubarak ascended to the presidency in 1981, an estimated 25 per cent of the population suffered from unemployment (Tucker 1978:4-5; Middle East Research and Information Project 1976). By the early 1980s, finding affordable housing was a major problem for the majority of Egypt's low-income groups. There was an overlap in the low rent system which prevailed during the Nasserite era and the high rent market of the early 1980s during which Cairo witnessed a 10-15 per cent increase in the price of land (El-Kholy 2002:43). Some researchers argue that as a result of the increase in rents on newly constructed apartments during the 1980s, many low income families spent as much as 30 per cent of their income on rent (El-Kholy 2002:43). The increasing cost of housing contributed to the rising average age of marriage for both women and men, which continues to be a 'source of great anxiety and frustration, particularly in low-income neighbourhoods' (El-Kholy 2002:43). In 1988, about 34.8 per cent of the population in Cairo between the ages of 15 and 64 were officially unemployed and 70 per cent of those unemployed were men (El-Mahdi 2000:4-5). In the face of frustration for men over difficulties in achieving masculinity through work and the difficulty of establishing families, public space then becomes an important arena which allows for alternative forms of masculine affirmation.



An important aspect of masculinity under the system of patriarchy is the total economic protection and maintenance of women. As a result of structural changes in the economy, these have begun to decline and become increasingly unrealistic (Kandiyoti 1988:282). Many men cannot pursue education because they are forced to search for work in order to assist their families. Several interviewees mentioned that Egyptian men may feel forced to join their family business or take up their father's trade instead of pursuing an education. Poor Cairo residents cope with their shifting realities by reorganizing their resources and kin-based relationships. This type of bargain works to preserve aspects of the traditional male role as breadwinner of the family – although within the urban setting, males are experiencing a lack of capital, broadly defined here to include access to work, property, and marriage.

## Conclusion

The modernization processes discussed here have had an impact on the practicality of adhering to traditionalism. However, the necessary supervision and social training needed to cope with the impact of economic and structural reforms remains absent. I have drawn attention to street harassment as a variable in analyzing the development of a modern society in Egypt. Within the context of structural changes, street harassment emerges as a problem which is internalized by an increasing number of Egyptians. Egyptians are facing a dilemma, as the state continues to enforce traditional family norms while simultaneously concentrating on economic reform and the financial emancipation and assimilation of women into the workforce (Hatem 2000). Focusing on such macro changes reveals that street harassment is a phenomenon expressive of social factors such as unemployment, changing family ideals, and economic hardships which have led to difficulties in achieving masculine desires. Despite the fact that street harassment continues to be a source of discomfort for many women in Cairo, the problem is unlikely to be solved through the criminal justice system. Women's groups such as the ECWR have initiated a Cairo-based campaign, advocating criminalization of street harassment. Research on the prevention of social crime suggests that law enforcement is a vital component of crime prevention, though criminalization may moderately deter crime, as characterizing perpetrators as 'criminals' through arrests, prosecutions, and incarcerations, may reproduce rather than avert the behaviour (Bruce and Gould 2009). Moreover, while criminalization and punishment might deter some men from harassing, such incentives do not aim to disintegrate the root of the phenomenon. This article has addressed some of the real social issues giving rise to the problem in the first place. Without addressing these

societal aspects as related to street harassment, it is likely that preventive legal measures aimed at combating street harassment will prove to have minimal effect, and that the phenomenon will continue to be reproduced, escalate, and have a negative impact on Cairo's street culture. Societies such as Egypt and India are particularly vulnerable to the impact of structural transformations as the conditions for upholding patriarchy as a system for social and gendered organization can easily be disrupted by economic limitations and instability. It appears that in patriarchal societies, when male desire for economic success is denied or cannot be realized, the result is an overt expression of male-to-female street harassment in public places.

## Notes

1. Most of the statistical data in this study derives from ECWR's 2008 study "'Clouds in Egypt's Sky" Sexual Harassment: from Verbal Harassment to Rape, a Sociological Study.' The analyses are based on personal observations, notes, and interviews.
2. *Peoples Personal Communication* 18 December 2009.
3. *Peoples Personal Interview* 14 November 2006.
4. *Peoples Personal Interview* 14 November 2006.
5. *Peoples Personal Communication* 18 December 2009.
6. Originally cited in Sciama 1993:87.
7. I intentionally omit a discussion of Nasser's influence on the Middle East in general as the focus of this essay concentrates on circumstances that are endemic to Egypt.
8. *Peoples Personal Communication* 19 December 2009.
9. *Peoples Fieldwork Notes*, December 2009.
10. *Peoples Personal Interview* 22 November 2006.
11. *Peoples Personal Interview* 14 November 2006.
12. *Peoples Fieldwork Notes* 2006.
13. *Peoples Personal Communication* 19 December 2009.
14. *Peoples Personal Communication* 19 December 2009.

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