THESQUARE

GENDER AND REVOLUTIONS IN TAHRIR SQUARE: SHAME AS A POLITICAL TOOL

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Starting from the 25th of January 2011, and throughout the "18 days" in Tahrir Square, men and women were united under the single desire for a new, different national identity. Regardless of their gender, Egyptians demonstrated against torture and police brutality, and protested to outcast the then President Mubarak. By taking part in street protests, women reclaimed for themselves the full citizenship and the right to enter the political sphere.[1] However, the idyllic pluralism and openness of Tahrir Square did not last long. Since the celebratory rally of the 8th of March 2011, in occasion of the International Women's Day, female political presence in public places was actively hindered through verbal, physical, and sexual violence.[2] Verbal harassments, street

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[1] Shereen Abou El-Naga, "Women of Egypt: from Thawrah (revolution) to 'Awrah (shame)", in *The Arab Spring: Revolutions for Deliverance from Authoritarianism, Case Studies*, ed. Hassan Krayem (L'Orient des Livres, 2013).

[2] Margot Badran, "Creating Disobedience: Feminism, Islam, and Revolution in Egypt", in *Women's Movements in Post-"Arab Spring" North Africa: Comparative Feminist Studies*, ed. Fatima Sadiqi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

aggressions, virginity tests and mass rapes became systematic during protests in Tahrir Square, and were only publicly acknowledged after two years, on the second anniversary of the Revolution. The state-sanctioned gender violence became a regular recurrence in street protests, often following the same modus operandi of surrounding one woman and harassing and violating her in mass. This study aims at providing a new analysis of the revolutions in Tahrir Square, by uncovering the values and principles on which the systematic violence was rooted – i.e., the necessity of reinstating the norms regulating female respectability and the need to re-masculinize the political arena. By taking into account the gendered norms regulating Arab women's lives, it is possible to reveal the means through which women were outcasted, among which shame plays a crucial role. Shame, envisioned both as stigmatizing and humiliating, became a political tool through which women's dignity and their rights to be part of the Egyptian community were compromised. By questioning their integrity and their belonging to the Egyptian society through sexual violence, counterrevolutionary forces attempted to shame women out of Tahrir Square.

Gendered Norms and the Politics of Shame

From the very beginning of the development of the Egyptian State, women's bodies and agency in Egypt have been regulated by the hegemonic discourse about female respectability and gendered norms.[3] Women's participation in state-building projects was essential, but it was also strictly limited by gendered hierarchies and dominant notions about what qualities, which spaces, and in which ways women were supposed and allowed to act. Because of this self-reinforcing patriarchal narrative, women's bodies are constantly constrained to meet the expectations that have been built around them. Women are expected to be characterized by

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[3] Maha El Said, Lena Meari & Nicola Pratt, *Rethinking gender in revolutions and resistance: Lessons from the Arab world* (Zed Books Ltd, 2015).

piety, modesty, docility, humility, and shyness.[4] By embodying these values and qualities, women became carriers of Egypt's identity – morally, culturally, and religiously. In no way are they allowed to re-signify or inscribe new meanings about Egyptian womanhood.[5] Defying or modifying those gendered norms would in fact question their worth and dignity, as well as their place in the Egyptian society. Female respectability and shame are therefore intrinsically related: either women obey to the predicaments they have been educated to respect, or the shame that would be imposed on them would question their dignity and confine them outside of social life.

The emotion of shame can be defined both as connected to stigma and to humiliation. The Arabic word used in Egypt to indicate shame is *'ar*, and it is often used together with the word scandal. A scandal is generally understood as an action that does not conform to the normally accepted morals and therefore usually provokes public outrage. Applying this definition to the case of female agency in Egypt, women are shamed whenever they do not follow the established morals about female respectability. As women become the object of shame and are marked with stigma, their bodies and identities are completely re-signified: "shame occurs when people violate social ideals and norms; shame sticks to them (and their bodies) and become their signifier".[6] Physically entering the public and political spheres in ways that are not those provided by the hegemonic discourse, results in their dignity being seriously compromised, to an extent that they are no longer considered as respectable women. Indeed, shame does not only contribute to stigmatizing women and questioning their honour, but it also isolates them and their families, and reinforces the cohesiveness of

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[4] Nicola Pratt, *Embodying Geopolitics: Generations of Women's Activism in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon*, (University of California Press, 2020).

[5] Sherine Hafez, "The Revolution Shall not Pass through Women's Bodies: Egypt, Uprising and Gender Politics", *The Journal of North African Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 177.

[6] Nehal Elmeligy, "Airing Egypt's Dirty Laundry: BuSSy's Storytelling as Feminist Social Change", *Gender and Society* 36, no. 1 (2021): 117.

the Egyptian society, and the dominant gendered narrative. Shame can only be felt when one's behaviour is publicly recognized as shameful, "the power of humiliation lies in a public exposure, and acknowledgement by an audience that humiliation has taken place".[7] Women would feel shame whenever their rebellious acts would be perceived as "wrong," causing "the others" to belittle them. The "others" appear as a united front, whose morals, values, and judgments are homogeneous, and ultimately righteous. The "us vs. them" narrative that distinguishes between the Egyptian society and the disgraced women not only contributes to further isolate them, but also to strengthen the narrative according to which the same women were shamed to begin with.[8] It is a vicious cycle that leads to the exclusion of those who decide not to follow the rules of the community, and to the crystallization of the national identity.

Counterrevolutionary Measures in Tahrir Square: Imposing Shame on Women

In the context of the 2011 Revolution, women were publicly questioning and transgressing those gendered norms that until then regulated their behaviour: simply physically occupying the streets was indeed widening the scope of women's agency.[9] Their presence in Tahrir Square was threatening the gender hierarchies present in the State and the very structures of the Egyptian society. Because of their defiance, counterrevolutionary forces resorted to verbal, physical and sexual violence to impose shame on women and to dishearten them from publicly protesting: their bodies became the battleground for defining the female identity in Egypt. Through violence and shame, women's dignity and honour were

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[7] Khaled Fattah & Karin Marie Fierke, "A Clash of Emotions: The Politics of Humiliation and Political Violence in the Middle East", *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 1 (2009): 72.
[8] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014).
[9] Pratt, *Embodying Geopolitics*, 2020.

seriously questioned, as well as their belonging to their communities.

Since women were defying social norms and male authority, they became the target of systematic harassments and sexual abuses, aimed at stigmatizing those who dared getting ahead of themselves. When men resorted to physical and sexual violence, it was not by chance. Being harassed or sexually assaulted seriously compromises women's dignity: they are no longer seen as pious and pure as they should be, and thus they are disgraced and dishonoured. Counterrevolutionary forces in Tahrir Square were aiming at exploiting the stigma derived from sexual violence to discipline the women that already defied the gendered norms, and to dissuade those who were considering demonstrating and participating in political affairs. Women who endured the assaults were in fact disgraced, "those who know [about the harassments] will be concerned about whether she is a virgin or not and how they can cover her shame."[10] The life of those marked with this stigma would be destroyed, as no dishonoured woman would be able to build a respectable family in the Egyptian society. Once women's bodies get associated with stigma, the resulting shame contributes to isolate them from social life, and the same fate is reserved to their families, as women's honour is directly connected with their families' and their men's one.[11]

In addition to questioning their honour and their dignity, counterrevolutionary forces also established a divisive narrative on the identities of the women protesting in Tahrir Square. As Sheikh Abou Islam said on Al-Hafez, a Salafi television network, "Shame on you, where is your femininity? Where is the femininity that is due by religious law? These women are like ogres with their unruly hair…

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[10] Nazra for Feminist Studies, Sexual Assault and Rape in Tahrir Square and its Vicinity: A Compendium of Sources 2011-2013 (2013): 33.
[11] Martine Heijthuyzen, "Sexual Violence and its Resistance in Post-revolutionary Egypt: at the intersection between authoritarianism and patriarchy", *The Journal of Law, Social Justice & Global Development*, Special Issue 22 (2018): 55.

she-devils called women".[12] Authorities therefore constructed an "us vs. them" discourse, according to which the women that took to the streets could not be representing the Egyptian womanhood, and thus could not belong to the Egyptian society. As an army general stated in a CNN interview, "the arrested women were not like your daughter or mine".[13] By publicly acknowledging the behaviour of those women as shameful, they were humiliating the female protesters into isolation and exclusion from their communities. As a survivor stated: "They stripped me off my nationality and my sense of belonging to that scene".[14] At the same time, through this narrative, it was possible for them to reinforce the gendered norms that were being violated in the streets. By pointing out women's dishonourable behaviours, they were implicitly stating the qualities that respectable women should possess and how they were allowed to act.

Resisting Shame

Despite the countless attempts at silencing and containing women's agency through violence and shame, Egyptian women did not withstand the hegemonic forces. Instead of delegitimizing women and forcing them back into their 'natural' place – i.e., the private and domestic sphere – sexual violence and shame became the object of a counter-narrative which shaped women's resistance. Sharing with the general public the experiences that were meant to dishonour them was a way of resisting the stigmatizing and humiliating endeavours by the authorities: "by not sharing, we each live in the illusion that our personal experience is shameful and that we are alone. […] It's very important to break that silence,

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[12] Mariz Tadros, *Whose Shame Is It? The Politics of Sexual Assault in Morsi's Egypt*, Heinrich Bool Stiftung (2014).
[13] El Said, Meari & Pratt, *Rethinking gender in revolutions and resistance: Lessons from the Arab world,* 44.
[14] Nazra for Feminist Studies, Sexual Assault and Rape in Tahrir Square and its Vicinity: A Compendium of Sources 2011-2013 (2013): 24.

challenge that massage of shame, and give people a space to express and listen to the stories of others".[15]

Following the abuses and harassments, women felt like they had lost their dignity and worth, as was intended by the counterrevolutionary forces: "I am angry because my friends and I were humiliated";[16] "I felt like I had no value".[17] However, women decided not to remain silent in front of the injustices and abuses they have endured, but instead they publicly narrated what happened to them, ultimately defeating the stigma that they were marked with. By denouncing what had happened in Tahrir Square, they challenged those norms according to which women's worth is solely based on their sexuality and modesty: "the shame is not ours; it is yours".[18] Women narrating their experiences on television involved the refusal of the stigma they were supposed to be associated with, and they built for themselves a public and political space in which they continued protesting for their rights.

In fact, by publicly speaking about what they had experienced, they also countered the humiliating and isolating effect of shame. As counterrevolutionary forces tried to isolate them from the Egyptian community, they created for themselves a public space in which they could expose and condemn what was happening in the streets. Not only did the narration of sexual violence help ameliorating the feeling of shame and countering the stigma, but it also contributed to create a new space for women's agency: "counter-memorializing can be a tool of feminist resistance that confronts and engages with the hegemonic patriarchal narrative".[19]

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[15] Fadi Zaghmout, "Untold gender stories in Egypt: Interviewing Mona Al Shimi", *The Arab Observer* (2015).
[16] Nazra for Feminist Studies, Sexual Assault and Rape in Tahrir Square and its Vicinity: A Compendium of Sources 2011-2013 (2013): 12.
[17] Yasmine El Baramawy, "'I Felt Betrayed by the Revolution Itself' – Yasmine El Baramawy about 'Sexual Terrorism' and Revolutionary Inadequacies", *Cairo by Microphone (2013)*.
[18] Nazra for Feminist Studies, Sexual Assault and Rape in Tahrir Square and its Vicinity: A Compendium of Sources 2011-2013 (2013): 33
[19] Elmeligy, "Airing Egypt's Dirty Laundry", 120.

Moreover, women also resisted the forced distinction between those that were representing the Egyptian womanhood – i.e., those who were not protesting in the streets, disobeying gendered norms – and those that should no longer be recognised as Egyptians, but rather as 'others'. In their accounts, they have in fact repeated how someone's mother, sister or daughter could be the one enduring physical and sexual violence: "I decided to write my testimony, so that everyone who is burying their head in the sands will know that what is happening is a terrible crime that may happen to your mother, sister, daughter, friend or girlfriend.[20] By comparing themselves with family members and friends, they have shortened the distance that, through humiliation, the counterrevolutionary forces created to isolate them from society.

Conclusion

In the context of the Revolution in Tahrir Square, counterrevolutionary forces have resorted to sexual violence against women as a way to silence their public and political outcries. Sexual abuses were used as a means to impose shame on women. Shame, conceptualised as both stigma and humiliation, was used as a political tool to delegitimise women's agency. As the Egyptian society is regulated by gendered norms on female respectability, being publicly assaulted means losing one's honour and worth, which, in its turn, results in the isolation of the victim and her family from the Egyptian community itself. Shame and fear of shame were thus the strategy used by authorities to counter revolutionary women in Tahrir Square and prevent others from joining them. However, Egyptian women did not withstand this attempt at limiting their agency. Rather, they used the shame and the abuses they had endured as a way to further resist authoritarian and patriarchal forces. By narrating the violence they have suffered, they both defeated the counterrevolutionary forces' intents, and

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[20] Nazra for Feminist Studies, Sexual Assault and Rape in Tahrir Square and its Vicinity: A Compendium of Sources 2011-2013 (2013): 26.

they widened the scope of their agency. They resisted the stigma and humiliation derived from the abuses, they reclaimed their role within the Egyptian society, and they created for themselves a public space in which they could counter the patriarchal norms regulating their behaviour.

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