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# Violence against women in Egypt

Prospects for improving police response



June 2015



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# Introduction

**DURING A WEEK OF CELEBRATIONS** for Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's victory in the presidential race in June 2014, at least nine women were violently sexually assaulted by mobs of men in Cairo's Tahrir Square.<sup>1</sup> While such reports have become depressingly familiar in Egypt, the president's response was unexpected.<sup>2</sup> The newly appointed Sisi made a statement shortly after, in which he instructed the minister of interior to "vigorously enforce the law and take all necessary measures to combat sexual harassment".<sup>3</sup> Although his use of the downplayed term 'sexual harassment' is problematic in reference to crimes that were violent sexual assault, the president's public statement and decision to order action to combat a crime of sexual violence is a notable change of direction after decades of Egyptian governments' downplaying the problem of widespread violence against women (VAW).

Within days of the president's statement, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) announced plans to expand nationally the Violence Against Women Unit, composed of ten officers, that had been established in the Ministry in mid-2013.<sup>4</sup> This announcement appeared to be a positive step towards improving the criminal justice response to VAW in Egypt, and towards achieving the equal rights women were guaranteed in Egypt's 2014 constitution.<sup>5</sup>

In light of this announcement and the increasing demands being made by Egyptian civil society to improve police response to VAW, section 1 of this paper discusses the context – including the scale of the problem and the failure of criminal justice responses – and the political events that led to the establishment of the VAW unit.

Section 2 examines the work of the unit since 2013, presenting the perspectives of civil society activists who work to prevent and respond to VAW, and examining the key challenges that face the unit. Section 3 looks at the deeper institutional changes that are needed, concluding that ensuring accountability for police abuses and establishing civilian oversight and democratic governance as part of a broader reform process are necessary alongside improvements in training and practices across the police force.

The paper concludes with recommendations to the MOI for ways to improve Egypt's policing response to VAW. Key recommendations include committing to ongoing

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- 1 Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (2014), 'At Least 9 Cases of Mob-Sexual Assault and Gang Rapes with Sharp Objects and Fingers this Week', 9 June (<http://ejpr.org/en/pressrelease/2014/06/09/2144>); Marroushi N (2014), 'Tahrir sexual assault survivors recount their ordeals', *Mada Masr*, 16 July ([www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/tahrir-sexual-assault-survivors-recount-their-ordeals](http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/tahrir-sexual-assault-survivors-recount-their-ordeals))
  - 2 Marroushi N (2014), 'El Sisi orders crackdown on sexual harrassment following Tahrir Square assaults', *The National*, 10 June ([www.thenational.ae/world/middle-eas/el-sisi-orders-crackdown-on-sexual-harrassment-following-tahrir-square-assaults](http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-eas/el-sisi-orders-crackdown-on-sexual-harrassment-following-tahrir-square-assaults))
  - 3 Statement sent to journalists via the presidential spokesman's office on 10 June 2014.
  - 4 Ali Ayad S (2013), 'New Unit in the Interior Ministry to Combat Crimes of Violence Against Women', *Al-Ahram*, 24 May; Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (2013), 'ECWR has welcomed the decision of the Ministry of Interior to establish a special unit in police stations to combat the violence against women', 12 May (<http://ecwronline.org/?p=1816>)
  - 5 See Article 11 of the Constitution: [www.sis.gov.eg/Newwrr/Dustor-en001.pdf](http://www.sis.gov.eg/Newwrr/Dustor-en001.pdf)

high-level government support to the VAW unit; ensuring all police officers are trained to deal appropriately with VAW cases; increasing the representation of women in the police force; and adopting a wider set of reforms to ensure accountability and democratic governance in the security sector.

The research for this paper was conducted in May, June and July 2014, and its recommendations were also informed by an expert discussion convened in Cairo in March 2015 with policing experts and civil society organisations (CSOs) working on police reform issues and on combating VAW.

### Note on definitions and terminology

There is some confusion in Egypt with the use of the term '*taharrush*' (usually translated as 'sexual harassment') in public discourse and what this means. For example, after incidents of violent sexual assault in Tahrir Square in June 2014, during which women were stripped naked, cut with knives, scalded with boiling water, and beaten by mobs of men, President Sisi ordered the Interior Ministry to combat 'sexual harassment'. These crimes are much more serious than sexual harassment and would normally be referred to as sexual assault. Also, during a recent trial against the perpetrators of these crimes the proceedings were commonly referred to in the media as 'the sexual harassment case'.<sup>6</sup>

The Egyptian penal code does not include the term 'sexual assault', but rather refers to 'indecent assault' (or *hitk ird* in Arabic). However, it does not define indecent assault. The use of the downplayed term sexual harassment also reflects society's conservative views about discussing crimes of sexual violence, where even the term 'sexual harassment' has only recently come into mainstream use.

<sup>6</sup> *Reuters Arabic* (2014), 'Life in Prison for Two Men in the Sexual Harassment Case in Egypt', 7 August (<http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKBN0G70RU20140807>)

## 1

# Violence against women in Egypt

**WHILE OFFICIAL STATISTICS ARE LACKING,** research suggests that a very high number of girls and women in Egypt (up to 99.3 per cent according to one survey) have been subjected to one form or another of sexual harassment or violence, from having their bodies touched, being subjected to verbal abuse or dirty looks, to being raped.<sup>7</sup> Domestic violence is endemic: nearly half of married women aged between 15 and 49 reported that they had been hit, slapped, kicked, or subjected to some other form of physical violence at some point after their fifteenth birthday, according to the 2005 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey.<sup>8</sup>

Women and men have said that sexual harassment is on the rise,<sup>9</sup> with research participants citing possible causes such as the worsening economic situation and youth unemployment, a lack of awareness of religious values, accessibility of pornography, and poor upbringing.<sup>10</sup>

A growing public awareness of the problem of sexual harassment and assault has been key in pushing the Egyptian government to respond to VAW, including the establishment of the VAW unit in the MOI in 2013. The phenomenon of mob sexual assaults and widespread outrage over several high-profile incidents have contributed to raising public awareness.

## Mob sexual assaults: Putting a spotlight on VAW in Egypt

Under former president Hosni Mubarak's regime in the 2000s, the phenomenon of mobs of youths sexually harassing women during the Eid public holiday in downtown Cairo was documented by citizen journalists for the first time. These incidents would often take place as policemen stood by and watched.<sup>11</sup> An increasing number of violent mob assaults on women were documented after the '25 January Revolution' in 2011. The first widely reported case was on the night Mubarak stepped down on 11 February 2011. Lara Logan, a journalist reporting from Tahrir Square for an American television channel, was beaten and sexually assaulted by a mob of more than 40 men, who

<sup>7</sup> El-Deeb B (2013), 'Study on Ways and Methods to Eliminate Sexual Harassment in Egypt', February ([http://harassmap.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/287\\_Summaryreport\\_eng\\_low-1.pdf](http://harassmap.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/287_Summaryreport_eng_low-1.pdf))

<sup>8</sup> El-Zanaty F, Way A (2006), 'Egypt Demographic and Health Survey', March (<http://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR176/FR176.pdf>)

<sup>9</sup> Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (2008), 'Clouds in Egypt's Sky' ([http://egypt.unfpa.org/Images/Publication/2010\\_03/6eeeb05a-3040-42d2-9e1c-2bd2e1ac8cac.pdf](http://egypt.unfpa.org/Images/Publication/2010_03/6eeeb05a-3040-42d2-9e1c-2bd2e1ac8cac.pdf))

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> BBC News (2008), 'Egyptian sexual harasser jailed', 21 October (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/7682951.stm>)

accused her of being an Israeli spy.<sup>12</sup> Xenophobic accusations, propagated by some state officials and media, ran high at a time when the nation state was seen to be under threat by the uprising.

Since 2011, women protesters have been sexually assaulted and raped on multiple occasions in Tahrir Square by mobs of men. Magda Adly, a medical professional with non-governmental organisation (NGO) the El Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, believes the mob attacks against women in Tahrir Square have been part of an organised attack on women to break their political spirit, because of the repeated patterns in the way women are attacked.<sup>13</sup> According to the NGO Nazra for Feminist Studies, there have been at least 500 survivors of sexual violence crimes between February 2011 and January 2014.<sup>14</sup> Pro-women marches have also been repeatedly attacked since the uprising. For example, on International Women's Day, 8 March 2011, a small demonstration of about 200 people, mostly women and some men, gathered in Tahrir Square. The protesters were immediately outnumbered and beset by men, some of whom were from the protesters' encampment in the middle of the square.<sup>15</sup>

### An inadequate criminal justice response

While the political context since 2011 has likely led to an increase in this specific type of VAW in public spaces, the increased attention drawn by these cases – which have been widely reported – has also put a spotlight on the need for a better criminal justice response to VAW more broadly in Egypt.

There appears to have been limited investigation and no prosecutions carried out against the perpetrators of the mob attacks until very recently. For example, in March 2013, seven women filed a joint complaint about their attacks in Tahrir Square at the Kasr El Nil prosecution office in Cairo. Three filed complaints as survivors, and four as witnesses. Prosecutors opened an investigation; however, no progress was made on the case for more than a year.

The failure to properly investigate or prosecute these attacks is reflective of the inadequacy of the criminal justice system's response to all types of VAW. Attempts by women's rights activists to force the acknowledgement of mob assaults during Eid holidays were met with complete denial by government officials.<sup>16</sup> In many cases witnesses and survivors reported police officers failing to intervene to stop harassment or assaults even when they were on the scene.<sup>17</sup> Very few domestic violence survivors report abuse to the police, and anecdotal reports suggest those who do report them find the response inadequate; police officers frequently attempt to reconcile survivors with their abuser, and only file reports when violence has resulted in grave and visible physical injuries.<sup>18</sup>

Laws to address VAW remain inadequate: in 2012, the El Nadeem Center published a draft law to criminalise domestic violence for the first time.<sup>19</sup> No progress, however,

<sup>12</sup> Kennedy H (2011), 'CBS' Lara Logan reveals she was stripped, nearly scalped in Egypt sexual assault; women 'saved' her', *NY Daily News*, 1 May ([www.nydailynews.com/news/national/cbs-lara-logan-reveals-stripped-scalped-egypt-sexual-assault-article-1.145447](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/cbs-lara-logan-reveals-stripped-scalped-egypt-sexual-assault-article-1.145447))

<sup>13</sup> Interview by the author, Nadine Marroushi, May 2013. See Wardany S and Marroushi N (2013), 'Raped Egypt Women Wish Death Over Life as Crimes Ignored', *Bloomberg*, 7 March ([www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-03-07/raped-egypt-women-wish-death-over-life-as-crimes-ignored](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-03-07/raped-egypt-women-wish-death-over-life-as-crimes-ignored))

<sup>14</sup> Nazra for Feminist Studies (2014). 'The Mob-sexual Assaults and Gang Rapes in Tahrir Square During the Celebrations of the Inauguration of the New Egyptian President is Sufficient Proof for the Inefficiency of the Recent Legal Amendments to Combat these Crimes', 9 June (<http://nazra.org/en/2014/06/mob-sexual-assaults-and-gang-rapes-tahrir-square-during-celebrations-inauguration-new>)

<sup>15</sup> Chick K (2011), 'In Egypt's Tahrir Square, women attacked at rally on International Women's Day', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 8 March ([www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0308/In-Egypt-s-Tahrir-Square-women-attacked-at-rally-on-International-Women-s-Day](http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0308/In-Egypt-s-Tahrir-Square-women-attacked-at-rally-on-International-Women-s-Day))

<sup>16</sup> Ahmad Zaki H, Abd Alhamid D (2014), 'Women As Fair Game in the Public Sphere: A Critical Introduction for Understanding Sexual Violence and Methods of Resistance', *Jadaliyya*, 9 July ([www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18455/women-as-fair-game-in-the-public-sphere\\_a-criticaln](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18455/women-as-fair-game-in-the-public-sphere_a-criticaln))

<sup>17</sup> *BBC News* (2008), 'Egyptian sexual harasser jailed', 21 October (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/7682951.stm>)

<sup>18</sup> Amnesty International (2015), "'Circles of Hell": Domestic, Public and State Violence Against Women in Egypt', January, p 34.

<sup>19</sup> While many countries do not have specific domestic violence related offences, criminalising domestic violence can be an important tool for combating it. Additionally, in countries such as the UK which do not have specific legislation, the police are obliged to ensure that they fully utilise laws against assault, harassment and rape (and other offences) in domestic violence cases.

was made by parliament on the law. The legal definition of rape is limited to the penetration of a woman's vagina by a man's penis without her consent, not covering oral and anal rape against women and men.<sup>20</sup> The penal code does not include the words 'sexual assault' but rather refers to 'indecent assault' (*hitk ird*), which is not defined. Rights groups have been calling for a clear definition of sexual assault to be included in the penal code.<sup>21</sup>

The lack of government response – and the impunity it has allowed perpetrators of such violence – has a number of causes. Social norms and the views of those in authority are an important part of this: women are blamed, rather than being seen as the victims, even by enforcers of the law. After the attacks against women in Tahrir Square on 25 January 2013, some male members of the Shura Council, Egypt's then legislative authority, blamed women. One Council member, General Adel Afifi, said, "Women contribute 100 per cent in their rape, because they put themselves in such circumstances."<sup>22</sup> Others said it should teach women to avoid dangerous places, and suggested segregation during political gatherings. Their remarks came after a popular preacher known as Abu Islam said in an online video that female protesters want to be raped. "Those women have no shame, no fear and not even femininity", he said. "They are devils."<sup>23</sup>

These attitudes may have been starting to change in recent years, and in a few cases women have had some legal victories against perpetrators of sexual violence. For example, in October 2008 a young Cairene filmmaker took a man who groped her in public to a police station and insisted on following the case through to court, despite passers-by initially blaming her for provoking the attack, and telling her not to go to the police. Policemen also initially refused to open an investigation.<sup>24</sup> The court sentenced the man to a three-year jail sentence with hard labour, and ordered him to pay a sum of money as compensation to the survivor. It was considered a landmark case at the time.

However, currently very few women go ahead with legal complaints against their attackers or report attacks to the police. The problems of social stigma and lack of trust in the security forces mean that sexual violence in particular is unlikely to be reported to the police (including to the new VAW unit – see section 2). According to a 2013 study, 93.4 per cent of respondent survivors of sexual harassment said they did not request help from security forces at the scene of the incident. The most common reasons cited by survivors included: "I feared for my reputation", "I thought there was no text in the law to penalise harassment", and "I was also scared from harassment by policemen."<sup>25</sup>

Research conducted by Saferworld in 2014 asked women whether they would report to the police if they were to be a victim of sexual harassment. Only 52 per cent of respondents said they would report it to the police compared with 82 per cent who said they would report being a victim of other types of crime to the police, such as mugging, (non-sexual) assault, or theft.<sup>26</sup> However, it is likely that in practice reporting rates are much lower than 52 per cent, as indicated by the 2013 study and other research.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, 83 per cent of women said that they would be more likely to report a crime by going alone to the police station if there were a women's unit in their nearest police station. There are no official figures available for the overall number of women

20 Article 267 of the Penal Code refers to rape as an act committed by "whosoever has sexual intercourse with a female without her consent". Source: Begum R (2014), 'How Egypt can turn the tide on sexual assault', *Mada Masr*, 15 June ([www.madamasr.com/opinion/politics/how-egypt-can-turn-tide-sexual-assault](http://www.madamasr.com/opinion/politics/how-egypt-can-turn-tide-sexual-assault))

21 Nazra for Feminist Studies joint statement on mob sexual assaults in Tahrir Square on 9 June 2014: <http://nazra.org/en/2014/06/mob-sexual-assaults-and-gang-rapes-tahrir-square-during-celebrations-inauguration-new>

22 Human Rights Watch (2013), 'Egypt: Epidemic of Sexual Violence', 3 July.

23 Marroushi and Wardany, 'Raped Egypt Women'.

24 *BBC News* (2008), 'Egyptian sexual harasser jailed', 21 October (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/7682951.stm>)

25 El-Deeb B, 'Study on Ways and Methods to Eliminate Sexual Harassment in Egypt', p 13.

26 National representative survey conducted in October 2014 for Saferworld; publication forthcoming.

27 See for example, USAID (2009), 'Egypt violence against women study: Literature review of violence against women', April, p 26.

police officers currently in the Egyptian police force, but it is low, with the majority working in administrative roles rather than frontline policing roles.<sup>28</sup>

### A new era?

On the day Sisi's presidential victory was announced on 3 June 2014, and on the night of his inauguration ceremony on 8 June, at least nine women were violently sexually assaulted by a mob or mobs in Tahrir Square, where they were celebrating Sisi's victory.<sup>29</sup> For the first time, a very public and high-level response occurred: Sisi ordered the MOI to take all necessary measures to combat 'sexual harassment'.<sup>30</sup> An investigation and trial were launched and some of the perpetrators were prosecuted, receiving between 20 years to life in prison just over a month after the incidents occurred.<sup>31</sup> On 18 June 2014, the MOI also announced a national expansion of the VAW unit.

Why did Sisi's government offer such a public acknowledgement of the problem? Firstly, graphic video footage of one of the June assaults was circulated widely on social media, and made its way onto pro-government television programmes and newspapers. Given the narrative that the June 30 movement and the governments of Adly Mansour and Sisi had established on women and their participation in helping to bring the country forward in the post-Morsi period, these attacks on women who were there to celebrate Sisi's victory could not be ignored. There is clearly a political interest for Sisi in being seen as more progressive on women's rights than Morsi's Islamist government. Women were key supporters of both the post-June 30 constitution, which enshrined women's equal rights, and Sisi's election.<sup>32</sup> Sisi may also have had an interest in shedding his image as the man who justified virginity testing.<sup>33</sup>

Is the Egyptian government committed to addressing VAW? The next sections of this paper will examine the VAW unit of the MOI in depth, and consider what steps Egypt needs to take in order to reform the criminal justice response to VAW.

### Who has been filling the gap? Grassroots initiatives to address sexual violence in public spaces

Civil society has been filling the gap left by the lack of police response to assaults and harassment of women in public spaces. A number of volunteer groups have been created since the 2011 revolution to safeguard women at public events, such as the Eid holidays and political protests. Their presence has been especially felt in downtown Cairo, where Tahrir Square is located.

**Opantish** was one of the most successful and organised groups in Tahrir Square and its documentation of assault cases contributed to reports by human rights groups on sexual violence, such as Human Rights Watch's *Egypt: Epidemic of Sexual Violence*.<sup>34</sup> The initiative was formed in November 2012 after incidents of mob sexual assaults and rape were reported in Tahrir Square. Volunteers made up of men and women got together and divided themselves into teams: intervention, safety kits, on-the-ground awareness raising, operation room and safe house.

**Tahrir Bodyguards** is a similar initiative of men and women who would be stationed in the Square to report and document incidents of sexual violence. Their volunteers are noticeable by their fluorescent yellow hard hats and jackets. The **Shoft Ta7rosh** and **Imprint Movement** have volunteer patrol units that are present in downtown Cairo during the Eid holidays to document and report incidents of sexual harassment. The **Imprint Movement** has also done these patrols in the Cairo metro.

<sup>28</sup> Saferworld workshop on gender and policing, Cairo, March 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (2014), 'At Least 9 Cases of Mob-Sexual Assault and Gang Rapes with Sharp Objects and Fingers this Week', 9 June (<http://eipr.org/en/pressrelease/2014/06/09/2144>); Marroushi N (2014), 'Tahrir sexual assault survivors recount their ordeals', *Mada Masr*, 16 July ([www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/tahrir-sexual-assault-survivors-recount-their-ordeals](http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/tahrir-sexual-assault-survivors-recount-their-ordeals)).

<sup>30</sup> Marroushi N, 'El Sisi Orders Crackdown'.

<sup>31</sup> Marroushi N (2014), 'Nine defendants given 20 years to life in prison for Tahrir mob sexual assaults', *Mada Masr*, 16 July ([www.madamasr.com/news/nine-defendants-given-20-years-life-prison-tahrir-mob-sexual-assaults](http://www.madamasr.com/news/nine-defendants-given-20-years-life-prison-tahrir-mob-sexual-assaults)). Although increasing prosecutions for VAW crimes is necessary, in this case the short timeframe of one month between the assaults and conviction is not indicative of a thorough investigation and fair trial being carried out.

<sup>32</sup> Abu Chehab A (2014), 'Women reassert political role in Egypt', *Al-Monitor*, 24 January ([www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/01/women-political-role-egypt-constitution.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/01/women-political-role-egypt-constitution.html)).

<sup>33</sup> Amnesty International (2011), 'Egypt: Military's pledge to end 'virginity tests' on protestors welcomed', 27 June ([www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/egypt-militarys-pledge-end-virginity-tests-protestors-welcomed](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/egypt-militarys-pledge-end-virginity-tests-protestors-welcomed)).

<sup>34</sup> Human Rights Watch (2013), 'Egypt: Epidemic of Sexual Violence', 3 July ([www.hrw.org/news/2013/07/03/egypt-epidemic-sexual-violence](http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/07/03/egypt-epidemic-sexual-violence)).

## 2

# A new initiative: The Violence Against Women (VAW) Unit

**WHILE PRESIDENT SISI'S GOVERNMENT** has taken a more public stance on addressing VAW in Egypt, during the presidency of Mohamed Morsi Egypt's MOI announced the creation of a small VAW unit (in May 2013), under its recently created human rights department.<sup>35</sup>

The establishment of the unit was partly a result of concerns about rising crime: figures released by the MOI showed that homicides had tripled and armed robberies had increased twelve-fold in Egypt between 2011 and 2012,<sup>36</sup> and rising crime and targeted VAW were also particular concerns for women.<sup>37</sup>

The unit's creation also resulted from pressure from the National Council for Women (NCW) and civil society groups for a specialised police department to meet the needs of women.<sup>38</sup> Egyptian women activists and civil society groups had been pressuring the NCW to amend the law on sexual harassment and to do something about mob sexual assaults taking place in Tahrir Square.<sup>39</sup> Isis Mohamed, a member of the NCW's VAW law drafting committee, said:

*"In 2013, a group of female activists were exposed to violent harassment in Tahrir Square after Morsi's Constitutional Declaration in November 2012. They went to Tahrir to protest the Declaration and were exposed to mob sexual harassment ... they came to the NCW*

<sup>35</sup> The MOI's human rights department was created in November 2012, and is headed by the deputy interior minister for human rights, Major General Abu Bakr Abdel Kareem.

<sup>36</sup> In Egypt, MOI data is not publicly available, unless selectively quoted by Ministry officials themselves. This raises major questions about its reliability and numbers can be easily fabricated and used for political ends. For this figure, see Daragahi B (2013), 'Egyptians become victims of soaring crime rate'. Initial evidence from surveys after February 2011 seemed to suggest that while fear of crime increased, experienced instances of crime had not; see Hellyer H A (2012), 'Fewer feel safe in several Arab Spring countries'. Evidence from focus groups, the Egyptian MOI, and more recent anecdotal evidence suggests that since that poll was conducted, actual crime has also markedly increased.

<sup>37</sup> Saferworld (2013), 'It's dangerous to be the first', October ([www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/768-its-dangerous-to-be-the-first](http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/768-its-dangerous-to-be-the-first))

<sup>38</sup> Ayad A, 'New Unit in the Interior Ministry'; Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, 'ECWR has welcomed the decision of the Ministry of Interior'. According to Al-Ahram, harassment incidents had risen in 2012 to 9,468 cases (though it does not provide a figure as to what this had risen from), sexual assault crimes that had been reported were 329 cases, and 112 reported cases of rape. These figures are low for a country of more than 85 million people, and suggest low reporting rates by women for reasons given in section 1 including feelings of shame and low levels of trust in the security services.

<sup>39</sup> A number of women were mob sexually assaulted in Tahrir Square in November 2012, including Yasmine El Baramawy, who went on television to speak about what happened. On 25 January 2013, at least 25 women were mob sexually assaulted and raped in Tahrir Square, some with the use of sharp objects. Trew B (2013), 'Egypt's sexual assault epidemic', *Al Jazeera*, 14 August ([www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/08/201381494941573782.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/08/201381494941573782.html)); Kingsley P (2013), 'Tahrir Square sexual assaults reported during anniversary clashes', *The Guardian*, 28 January ([www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/27/tahrir-square-sexual-assaults-reported](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/27/tahrir-square-sexual-assaults-reported))

*to present a complaint so that the council could take steps to combat violence against women. Mervat Tallawy, head of the NCW, invited them to meet with Hisham Qandil, who was Prime Minister at the time. She also met with both ministers of interior ... We asked the MOI to create a unit in every police station for women's protection. Over a year ago, they created such a department within the human rights division of the MOI. It follows up with complaints that are brought forward directly to them or through police stations and the NCW. Any complaints the NCW gets on violence against women, we forward to this MOI division."*<sup>40</sup>

### Composition of the VAW unit

The unit was initially formed with ten officers, of which four were women.<sup>41</sup> The women officers included two psychologists; a long-serving colonel who had worked in divisions including providing aftercare for female ex-convicts, working as a female guard at universities, and at large events where women would be present, such as sports or political events; and a long-serving colonel who used to work in the MOI's public administration for the protection of public morals division.<sup>42</sup> The unit's mandate was not to combat crimes, but to act as a complement to other administrations in the MOI and follow up with women who report violent crimes against them, and offer social and psychological support.<sup>43</sup>

On 18 June 2014, after incidents earlier that month of at least nine women being mob sexually assaulted in Tahrir Square (see section 1), Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim announced the decision to expand the unit's operations and establish specialised police stations for combating VAW in security directorates across the country.<sup>44</sup> These new police stations with an expanded mandate will be responsible for:

- dealing with complaints of violence and taking the necessary legal actions
- combating VAW in the security directorate's geographic area of responsibility
- being present in areas that are crowded and areas where there is public transportation, as well as during celebrations and sporting events
- and coordinating with the public morals department in each security directorate

At the time of publication, VAW units had been established across all of Egypt's directorates but are not yet fully operational, and officers belonging to the units have not yet been trained.

### The VAW unit in practice

Unsurprisingly, given the small size of the VAW unit and its relatively recent creation, the unit's impact in its first year of operation appears to have been limited. The unit's contact details are advertised through the various media and awareness-raising campaigns they conduct. Seventy to eighty per cent of the complaints they receive and deal with are cases of domestic violence, with few complaints of rape and sexual assault reaching them.<sup>45</sup>

Examples of cases the unit has dealt with include a woman reporting that her husband wanted to circumcise their five-year-old daughter, in which officers engaged in a dialogue with the husband to persuade him that it was a criminal act and not condoned by religious texts; and persuading a woman to file a complaint against a man who had harassed her on the street and who had been arrested by the police.<sup>46</sup> While well

<sup>40</sup> Author interview, Cairo, 21 June 2014.

<sup>41</sup> El Shafaei H (2014), 'Interior Ministry Forms Administration to Follow-Up on Crimes of Violence Against Women', *El Youm El Sabe3*, 22 May ([www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=1078262#.U9njAVZmfwl](http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=1078262#.U9njAVZmfwl))

<sup>42</sup> The administration for the protection of public morals deals with cases of prostitution, incitement to debauchery, indecent exposure, obscene acts, and others. It has two branches for internal and external activities, and these are sometimes interlinked such as in cases of international prostitution rings in Egypt.

<sup>43</sup> Author interviews, Cairo, June 2014.

<sup>44</sup> MOI Facebook page, 18 June 2014: [www.facebook.com/MoiEgy/photos/a.181676241876047.36036.181662475210757/735246949852304/?type=1](https://www.facebook.com/MoiEgy/photos/a.181676241876047.36036.181662475210757/735246949852304/?type=1)

<sup>45</sup> Author interviews, Cairo, June 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Author interviews, Cairo, June 2014.

intentioned, these cases suggest the unit's approach is not in line with best practices. Forcing a survivor to report when she does not want to is unethical and contrary to a survivor-centred approach.<sup>47</sup>

The women survivors of violent mob sexual assaults in Tahrir Square in June 2014 said that although the VAW unit had contacted them, they did not find them helpful in practical ways, or did not trust them enough to use their services. Hala said a female officer did come to visit her at home with a box of chocolates, but that did not meet her financial needs for surgery abroad to fix damage to her left eye after the mob assault. Sara said she had not heard from anyone in the government, and needed help getting a new ID card after her bag was stolen during the mob assault. Nermeen said she had also been contacted by the VAW unit but did not use their services, or even a lawyer, because she did not trust them.<sup>48</sup>

### Civil society cooperation with the VAW unit

Civil society groups working on responding to the problem of sexual harassment and assault (see box 'Who has been filling the gap?' on p 6) gave mixed reports of their experience with the VAW unit since its creation.

During Eid in July 2014, 29 cases of sexual harassment and assault, some involving mobs, were documented by the Shoft Ta7rosh volunteer group.<sup>49</sup> Shoft Ta7rosh acknowledged a 'positive' role played by security forces tasked specifically with combating sexual violence. The group noted police forces wearing signs indicating the directorate they work under and badges saying 'Police force for combating violence against women'.<sup>50</sup> However, it did not stop incidents of harassment occurring, including by male police officers.

Shoft Ta7rosh spokesman Fathi Farid described the facilitation role the VAW unit has played for its activities:

*"Last year, there was a meeting between Azza Kamel, the founder of Shoft Ta7rosh, and Major General Abu Bakr Abdel Kareem [the deputy interior minister for human rights] and the female officers of the VAW unit. We talked about violence against women and our work. It was a meeting of getting to know each other. After that, when we went down to do street patrols in downtown Cairo during the Eid of 2013, at the very least, the police didn't arrest us. In 2012, police officers detained three of our volunteers for two to three hours. That was an important indicator of change for us."<sup>51</sup>*

Nihal Saad Zaghloul, co-founder of the Imprint Movement, a volunteer group that does security patrols in downtown Cairo to monitor incidents of sexual harassment during the Eid holidays, described the cooperation they have had with the VAW unit since its inception in May 2013. The Imprint Movement has established a dialogue with the unit to create better understanding about what they do:

*"With street patrols, if you catch somebody and you take him to the police, he could charge you with kidnapping and assault. So, you need to tell the police, we're going to be there, and we're going to get you to file a report against them, so they said: 'Okay'. They would send us a few officers, and we would help them take the kids who were harassing women to the police. At the beginning, they would send us three to five male officers, who were cooperative but they're also like the rest of the community who believe it is the girl's fault. So, we try to correct that view. We want to assist them do their job and in the course of all of that you hear their problems. It has been a cooperation ever since. They inform*

<sup>47</sup> A survivor-centred criminal justice response must be focused on the needs of the survivor and empower individual women who are survivors of violence. European Parliament (2013), 'Overview of the Worldwide Best Practices for Rape Prevention and for Assisting Women Victims of Rape', 10 October, p 88.

<sup>48</sup> Author interviews, Cairo, 25 June–8 July 2014. Names have been changed.

<sup>49</sup> *Mada Masr* (2014), 'Rampant sexual violence continues on second day of Eid', 30 July ([www.madamasr.com/news/rampant-sexual-violence-continues-second-day-eid](http://www.madamasr.com/news/rampant-sexual-violence-continues-second-day-eid)); *Mada Masr* (2014), 'Sexual harassment reported downtown on first day of Eid', 29 July ([www.madamasr.com/news/sexual-harassment-reported-downtown-first-day-eid](http://www.madamasr.com/news/sexual-harassment-reported-downtown-first-day-eid))

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Author interview, Cairo, 22 June 2014.

*the nearest police station about what we're doing. They also let us set up a booth in Talaat Harb square and do an awareness campaign in the street.”<sup>52</sup>*

Zaghloul highlighted the willingness of the VAW unit's officers to help, but noted their lack of experience:

*“With the female officers in the VAW unit, it feels like they want to help and they want to be there, and therefore this is what encourages us to cooperate with them. They're open to discussion. We're all still learning. They don't have the same experience on the field, as we do, because they're mostly doing desk jobs. We're trying to transfer that experience to them somehow.”<sup>53</sup>*

However, despite instances of successful cooperation with the VAW unit, CSOs continue to be critical of the MOI as a whole. Zaghloul shares these concerns, and is also critical of the NCW (which is closely linked to the government, although an independent institution).

*“The system in which the MOI and NCW work is very patriarchal as most governmental institutions are.”*

Others have refrained from cooperating with the VAW unit because of scepticism of the unit's capacities and the need for wider reform of the MOI. Dalia Abdel Hameed, the gender rights officer at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, said:

*“They [the VAW unit] didn't have a clear mandate. The MOI wasn't transparent about its role and the kind of training they have had ... In the past period, it wasn't really relevant to cooperate with the police, especially if there isn't a political will to restructure the MOI. There are many testimonies of the police as perpetrators of sexual violence.”<sup>54</sup>*

## Challenges for the VAW unit

The VAW unit's openness to cooperation with groups such as the Imprint Movement and Shoft Ta7rosh is one of its most significant successes. Experience from other contexts such as Northern Ireland has shown that working in close cooperation with CSOs – including in reporting and dealing with survivors – can be an important way to build trust with women and increase reporting levels, which is one of the key long-term challenges the unit needs to address.

While the MOI has now begun to implement a national expansion of the VAW unit with units being established in each security directorate, these officers will nevertheless represent a small force for addressing crimes which affect such a large proportion of Egyptians. Dealing with VAW must be the responsibility of the whole police force, and a high standard of police response to VAW achieved through establishing strong policy, clear operational guidelines, appropriate training, and holding officers to account for their performance. Specialist units such as the VAW unit can play an important role through developing expertise and skills that are then mainstreamed into the wider force,<sup>55</sup> and multiply their impact by undertaking education and awareness raising, but must sit within a broader strategy to improve the overall police force response. However, specially trained officers may be the best way to address certain offences such as rape and sexual abuse of children.<sup>56</sup>

According to Saferworld's interviews with survivors, CSOs and the VAW unit, the unit's officers lack training and relevant experience. As the unit is expanded and it broadens its mandate (from its initial focus on offering social or psychological support and coordinating with other departments in the MOI) to include taking legal actions

<sup>52</sup> Author interview, Cairo, 18 June 2014.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Dalia Abdel Hameed, gender rights officer at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. Interview with the author, 13 May 2014.

<sup>55</sup> *Op. cit.* European Parliament.

<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the dynamics of offences such as domestic violence and a sexual offence committed by a stranger are very different and therefore require different prevention and investigative strategies.

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based on survivor complaints, significant investment in high quality training based on best practice models is required.

Finally, although dealing with VAW is the responsibility of the entire force, giving survivors the option to speak to a female officer can help them feel more comfortable in discussing their experiences. This means addressing the broader gender balance of the police force, recruiting and training more women officers, and ensuring their placement in frontline policing roles: a significant culture shift and a long-term challenge.

## 3

# Tackling violence against women in Egypt: Beyond the VAW unit

**WHILE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE VAW UNIT** sends positive signals that the government, including the MOI, is being responsive to the demands of the NCW and civil society groups to combat VAW, the steps it has taken so far are small compared to the magnitude of the crimes being committed. This specialist unit, if empowered and adequately trained and resourced, can begin to improve the Egyptian police force's response in this area. However, institutions across the Egyptian criminal justice system are currently responding inadequately to the problem. And beyond the need for technical reforms to these institutions, the legacy of past abuses committed by state actors against women must be acknowledged and perpetrators held accountable, to end what has long been a culture of impunity.

Criminal justice institutions that remain inadequate in responding to VAW include the courts and judiciary, criminal investigations and prosecution services, and the medical forensic authority. These institutions are often politicised, despite claims of independence, and suffer from a lack of adequate training and resources.<sup>57</sup>

Women's rights groups complain of the unprofessionalism of the medical forensic system to adequately and sensitively deal with rape survivors. Mozn Hassan, director of Nazra for Feminist Studies, describes how, "You have doctors that don't have any idea about preserving rape evidence, they don't even have rape kits."<sup>58</sup> Women's groups also complain about the attitudes of doctors, some of whom have been known to ask women to strip naked and proceed to conduct medical examinations while leaving the door open. Survivors also report health professionals blaming them for their attacks.<sup>59</sup> One lawyer said this experience left one rape survivor so traumatised she was unable to go through with the medical check.<sup>60</sup> The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights has been working with the UN and the Health Ministry to develop a protocol of procedures that need to be followed to adequately deal with sexual violence survivors.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Nathan Brown, nonresident senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has extensively analysed the Egyptian judiciary: <http://carnegieendowment.org/experts/?fa=238>

<sup>58</sup> Mozn Hassan, executive director of Nazra for Feminist Studies. Interview with the author, June 2013. A rape kit is a sexual assault evidence collection kit used after women file a complaint, and is used to help establish a case.

<sup>59</sup> Interviews with women survivors and activists conducted by the author.

<sup>60</sup> Ahmed Hishmat, lawyer at Nazra for Feminist Studies. Interview with the author, June 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Dalia Abdel Hameed, gender rights officer. Interview with the author, 13 May 2014.

### The state's role in perpetrating violence against women

Furthermore, as discussed in section 1, civil rights groups are campaigning for legal changes, demanding a change to the rape law so that it is broader and more comprehensive, demanding the crime of sexual assault to be clearly defined, and asking for a specific law on domestic violence to be introduced. Some progress has been made on a legal level: one of interim president Adly Mansour's last acts before handing over the presidency to Sisi in June 2014 was to introduce a law on sexual harassment for the first time. Nevertheless, this does not address all the legal gaps, and in a July 2014 interview with *Al-Shorouk* newspaper, Omar El-Sherif, the head of legislation at the Ministry of Justice, said that current laws are sufficient to punish cases of rape, sexual assault and harassment.<sup>62</sup> He said there is "no intention to make any legislative changes" beyond the changes to the sexual harassment law, and defined rape as occurring between a man and a woman, which fails male survivors of rape and sexual assault.<sup>63</sup>

While social norms are a major factor in the prevalence of VAW, the state's own role in perpetrating VAW – and especially sexual violence – has contributed to a general sense of impunity for, in particular, sexual harassment and VAW in the public sphere, thereby fuelling it.

Egyptian regimes past and present, through institutions including the police and the military, have committed VAW in order to intimidate, silence and repress women as members of the opposition (or suspected opposition). These acts diminish women's trust in Egypt's police and the law, and therefore weaken and undermine the country's ability to genuinely combat its problem of VAW.

While such tactics are not a new phenomenon, they were well documented during Mubarak's presidency, especially from the 1990s onwards. The 1990s and 2000s were a period of increased Islamist militant attacks, which were accompanied by a wide crackdown in which Mubarak's security forces jailed at least 20,000 suspected Islamists. Sexual violence was one component of this broad crackdown, and was often used to force women to reveal the whereabouts of their male relatives and husbands, or against suspected female members of both the Islamist and secular opposition in order to repress and silence them.<sup>64</sup>

Sexual violence was also used against women in protests, such as on 25 May 2005, a day referred to as Black Wednesday, when officers and state-hired thugs sexually assaulted women at protests against Mubarak's proposed amendments to the constitution.<sup>65</sup> Continuing the pattern established throughout Mubarak's 30-year rule, the police used sexual violence to intimidate female protesters during the '18 days' of the 2011 revolution. For example, Mona Prince, an Egyptian writer and university professor, described how she was beaten and sexually assaulted by police officers on the first day of the uprising.<sup>66</sup>

As protests continued in the turbulent period since 2011 under successive governments, sexual violence has been used against protesters. Notably, on 9 March 2011, several young Egyptian women were arrested as part of a crackdown by the army on a sit-in

<sup>62</sup> Eid M (2014), 'Interview with Omar El Sherif, the head of legislation at the Ministry of Justice', *Al-Shorouk*, 30 July.

<sup>63</sup> Human rights groups have documented numerous instances of male rape, including those conducted in prison and by security officers.

<sup>64</sup> Cases have been extensively documented by human rights groups including the El Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights. See for example: El Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, 'Torture in Egypt 2003–2006' ([http://alnadeem.org/files/Torture\\_in\\_Egypt\\_2003-2006\\_english.pdf](http://alnadeem.org/files/Torture_in_Egypt_2003-2006_english.pdf)); El Nadeem Center, 'Activities of the Nadeem Center from August 1993 to August 1997' (in Arabic), p 34 ([http://alnadeem.org/files/elnadeem\\_book\\_1997.pdf](http://alnadeem.org/files/elnadeem_book_1997.pdf))

<sup>65</sup> Slackman M (2005), 'Assault on Women at Protest Stirs Anger, Not Fear, in Egypt', *The New York Times*, 10 June ([www.nytimes.com/2005/06/10/world/africa/assault-on-women-at-protest-stirs-anger-not-fear-in-egypt.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/10/world/africa/assault-on-women-at-protest-stirs-anger-not-fear-in-egypt.html)). Four women represented by lawyers from the Cairo-based NGO the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights filed a court case in 2005. Seven months after the investigation was opened by the Public Prosecutor's Office, a decision not to prosecute was taken due to an alleged inability to identify the perpetrators, despite video evidence from the day and testimonies by the survivors and eyewitnesses.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Amar P (2011), 'Turning the Gendered Politics of the Security State Inside Out?', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 12 August ([www.global.ucsb.edu/sites/secure.lsit.ucsb.edu.gisp.d7/files/sitefiles/people/amar/Amar\\_article\\_IFJP\\_SecurityStateSexHarassmentEgypt\\_Aug2011.pdf](http://www.global.ucsb.edu/sites/secure.lsit.ucsb.edu.gisp.d7/files/sitefiles/people/amar/Amar_article_IFJP_SecurityStateSexHarassmentEgypt_Aug2011.pdf))

protest against the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in Tahrir Square. Samira Ibrahim was among a number of other women who were detained and beaten, given electric shocks, strip-searched and subjected to invasive ‘virginity tests’. While such tests had in the past taken place, survivors did not speak out against them for fear of being publicly shamed. However, in a rare move, Ibrahim publicly spoke out about the tests she was subjected to and placed the case in front of a civilian court. (At the time Sisi, now president, was head of Egypt’s military intelligence and told Amnesty International the tests had had been carried out on female detainees to ‘protect’ the army against possible allegations of rape.)<sup>67</sup>

Subsequently reports of violence against female detainees continued to be documented, during the period of Morsi’s presidency<sup>68</sup> and more recently since the election of Sisi as president in June 2014.<sup>69</sup> The continued documentation of sexual violence against women committed by the security forces under the current government (alongside widespread reports of other types of torture and excessive use of force) raises serious questions about the government’s commitment to addressing all forms of VAW in Egypt.

## Conclusion

Beyond technical reforms around the police’s VAW response, a broader process of security sector reform (SSR) is needed to address the structures and practices of the police that have led to abuses and to the police’s failure to address the security needs of Egyptian citizens, including establishing strong accountability and oversight mechanisms.<sup>70</sup> Gender issues should be integrated into this broader reform process, which policymakers and practitioners increasingly recognise contributes to operational effectiveness of security sector institutions.<sup>71</sup>

As part of this, it is necessary to take steps to listen to women’s concerns and address wider issues that women identify as drivers of insecurity.<sup>72</sup> In focus group discussions conducted by Saferworld in Egypt in 2013, women criticised a lack of police response to crime, and reported being harassed, mocked and ignored by policemen when they attempted to report an incident at a police station.<sup>73</sup> Survivors interviewed for this paper who had been contacted by the VAW unit also noted their lack of trust in the police, which made some reluctant to accept the unit’s services (see section 2).

Crime prevention and response strategies must take account of the threats that people in the communities identify, as opposed to threats identified by the state, the police, or any other top-down approach. Failure to address people’s concerns affects the trust that people feel towards the police, and as a consequence, the police’s ability to operate. Community-based policing focuses on empowering communities, solving problems in partnership with the community and upholding human rights, which make dealing with VAW a core part of the police’s role.

Increasing numbers of women police officers will also make the police a more representative and trusted institution. In Saferworld’s 2013 study, many women identified more women police officers as important for improving security provision.<sup>74</sup> This was

<sup>67</sup> Amnesty International (2011), ‘Egypt: Military pledges to stop forced ‘virginity tests’’, 27 June ([www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2011/06/egypt-military-pledges-stop-forced-virginity-tests/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2011/06/egypt-military-pledges-stop-forced-virginity-tests/))

<sup>68</sup> El Nadeem Center (2013), ‘Torture in Egypt During a Year in Muslim Brotherhood Rule’, 26 June ([https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B1qqm\\_EjPpz8dGZZeWVVVUE5TGs/edit](https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B1qqm_EjPpz8dGZZeWVVVUE5TGs/edit))

<sup>69</sup> *Mada Masr* (2014), ‘NCHR denies allegations of rape, torture in Qanater women’s prison’, 10 July ([www.madamasr.com/news/nchr-denies-allegations-rape-torture-qanater-womens-prison](http://www.madamasr.com/news/nchr-denies-allegations-rape-torture-qanater-womens-prison))

<sup>70</sup> This need was reaffirmed by the recent interview of the head of legislation at the Ministry of Justice Omar el-Sherif with Al Shorouk, in which he suggested that the way to combat mob sexual assaults in Tahrir Square is to have more undercover security agents in crowds. He asserted that responses to incidents of sexual violence would be faster and that people would behave better because they know there are undercover agents in the area. This underlines the problematic attitudes and practices in the Egyptian security sector, which need to be changed in order to offer a truly effective response to violence against women. Eid M (2014), ‘Interview with Omar El Sherif, the head of legislation at the Ministry of Justice’, *Al-Shorouk*, 30 July.

<sup>71</sup> DCAF (2009), ‘Gender and Security Sector Reform’ ([www.dcaf.ch/Publications/Gender-and-Security-Sector-Reform](http://www.dcaf.ch/Publications/Gender-and-Security-Sector-Reform))

<sup>72</sup> A Saferworld report identifies security concerns of women in Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Saferworld (2013), ‘It’s dangerous to be the first’, October ([www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/768-its-dangerous-to-be-the-first](http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/768-its-dangerous-to-be-the-first))

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, p 14.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, p 30.

corroborated by findings of a 2014 survey that asked women if they would be more likely to report a crime alone if there was a women's unit at the nearest police station (83 per cent said yes).<sup>75</sup> Additionally, organisations that are composed of more women are less likely to have problems with sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination internally.<sup>76</sup>

However, investigating and responding to crimes of VAW should not primarily be the responsibility of specialist units or women officers: addressing VAW effectively is the responsibility of all police officers, and having specialist units should not allow the rest of the force to fail to discharge its responsibilities in this area. Specialist units in the police force can act as advocates within the system, to develop and share expertise, and ensure that VAW is addressed as a priority issue across the organisation and raise awareness externally to change social norms that contribute to the problem.

Finally, deeper cooperation with women's rights organisations and civil society groups would also make for a healthier security sector given that these groups have been filling in the gaps when the state and police have been absent, and have worked constructively with the VAW unit (see box on p 6). For example, in Northern Ireland, the police force accepted the need to work with women's groups such as Women's Aid, and began taking third-party reports from these groups to help identify issues of concern to women, and thus address them.<sup>77</sup> However, recent attempts by the government in Egypt to restrict the work of NGOs and give veto powers to security agencies in their activities have severely restricted the space for civil society to operate, with a number of organisations shutting down or reducing their activities.<sup>78</sup>

Police abuses were one of the main drivers of popular mobilisation in the Egyptian revolution in 2011, yet police reform has been a 'missed opportunity' in the tumult of the following years.<sup>79</sup> This is despite the multiple initiatives for SSR proposed since then, by civil society and independent police officers' organisations. Legislative steps taken by the Egyptian government since the removal of Mohamed Morsi from the presidency in mid-2013 clearly signal a step back from intentions for reform, including the revised constitution approved in January 2014, which reaffirms the exemption of the security sector from civilian oversight or democratic governance.<sup>80</sup>

Creating a safe environment for all women – and men – in Egypt will only be possible with security forces that have a clear mandate focused on the protection of society, upholding human rights and ensuring the rule of law is observed, rather than serving political purposes.<sup>81</sup> There is a need to acknowledge the history of abuses by the police and other security forces, including crimes committed against women, and to investigate and ensure accountability for those which continue to be committed.

If Egypt is to return to a path of democratisation, SSR will be an essential step, and Egypt's international partners should ensure that they continue to highlight this in their communications with Egypt's government. This is a necessary complement to specific support for the development and implementation of reforms focused on VAW.

75 National representative survey conducted in October 2014 for Saferworld; publication forthcoming.

76 Lonsway K, Moore M, Harrington B, Smeal E, Spillar K (2003), 'Hiring & Retaining More Women: The Advantages to Law Enforcement Agencies', National Center for Women & Policing (<http://womenandpolicing.com/pdf/NewAdvantagesReport.pdf>)

77 Comments by Gary White, former policy lead on domestic violence in the Police Service of Northern Ireland and Saferworld Senior Policing Adviser.

78 Human Rights Watch (2014), 'Egypt: Draft Law Threatens Independent Organizations', 14 July ([www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/14/egypt-draft-law-threatens-independent-organizations](http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/14/egypt-draft-law-threatens-independent-organizations)); Project on Middle East Democracy (2015), 'Under Threat: Egypt's Systematic Campaign against NGOs', March, p 1 (<http://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Under-Threat-Egypt-Systematic-Campaign-against-NGOs.pdf>)

79 Sayigh Y (2015), 'Missed Opportunity: The Politics of Police Reform in Egypt and Tunisia', Carnegie Endowment, March, p 1.

80 *Ibid*, p 15.

81 DCAF (2009), 'Security Sector Governance and Reform', May ([www.dcaf.ch/Publications/Security-Sector-Governance-and-Reform](http://www.dcaf.ch/Publications/Security-Sector-Governance-and-Reform))

# 4

## Recommendations

**AT THE END OF APRIL 2015** the NCW announced its National Strategy to Combat VAW, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime signed an agreement with the Egyptian government to support its implementation across several ministries, including through training the officers of the expanded VAW unit. However, achieving the institutional transformation needed to improve the police response to VAW in Egypt will be a long-term process. The following recommendations to the Egyptian government aim to support this process, and serve as a reference to support ongoing civil society engagement on this issue and monitoring of the implementation of the strategy.

### To the Egyptian government

- Undertake reforms to ensure that the mandate of the police is focused on the protection of society, upholding human rights and ensuring the rule of law is observed; that the police are subject to democratic governance; and robust accountability and oversight mechanisms are in place.
- Adopt a survivor-centred approach, which empowers women who are survivors of violence and puts a woman's safety and her needs first. This should be a holistic inter-agency approach which includes all parts of the criminal justice system.
- Review and revise policies and operational procedures which apply to VAW, to reflect best practice. All police officers must be comprehensively trained to follow these procedures in order to deal appropriately with VAW cases.
- Ensure the expanded VAW unit is adequately resourced, trained and empowered. This can be achieved through appointing a very senior police officer to lead it, and through senior level support in government and the police force.
- Make the most effective use of specialist units by focusing their efforts on awareness raising and developing expertise on dealing with particularly sensitive crimes.
- Work more closely with relevant civil society groups to better understand women's needs and concerns and to improve women's trust in the police force.
- Ensure that the legal and regulatory framework facilitates the work of civil society organisations rather than restricting and criminalising them.
- Increase recruitment of women to the police force in frontline roles, and put policies in place to ensure retention and promotion of women officers within an equal opportunities framework.
- Acknowledge abuses by the police force that have been committed against women in the past, and commit to ensuring accountability for any members of the security forces who commit such crimes.

**Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity.**

**We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Europe.**

**COVER PHOTO:** A policeman stands guard while a woman holds a sign reading “If you’re against sexual harassment beep your horn” at a protest against sexual harassment in Cairo in June 2014. The protest was organised after a woman was sexually assaulted by a mob during the 8 June celebrations marking the new president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s inauguration in Tahrir square.

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