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Nazra for Feminist Studies

Position Paper on Sexual Violence Against Women and the Increasing Frequency of Gang Rape in Tahrir Square and its Environs

With this paper, Nazra for Feminist Studies offers a feminist theoretical attempt to understand the rise of sexual violence against women over the past few months. We believe that it is important to raise this issue so that different political actors, even well intentioned ones, do not exploit women's concerns. We also wish to contribute to a debate that is currently underway on this sensitive issue based on our past experiences in combating violence against women. We welcome such a discussion, having long been advocates of the importance of a feminist debate on violence against women in general. This had always been our position whether through our advocacy efforts in combating violence against women, or supporting women human rights defenders all over Egypt, or through our attempts to link feminist issues to politics by supporting female candidates for office of various political leanings who believe in women's issues, and place them at the top of their agendas.

On the positive side, new stirrings of a feminist consciousness is emerging and taking shape day after day, constituting an integral part of the current political ferment in Egypt. This is best demonstrated by the fierce counterattack on the social and political gains made by Egyptian women—but we are also witnessing a comprehensive assault on women, one that is most clearly manifested in violence against them, particularly sexual violence.

I. Introduction

The painful experience of the past few months has highlighted several new facts that we wish to raise, as part of a larger dialogue on these horrendous crimes and what they mean to us as women, human rights defenders, who are also part various revolutionary movements that describe themselves as supportive of women's issues. Nazra has chosen to present these opinions and preliminary recommendations in a position paper that is based on the experience of the Nazra field teams and working groups. This paper adopts a feminist perspective that believes women's issues are, first and foremost, political issues in the broadest sense, which includes, in addition to political institutions, agents, and roles, the general social framework within which political actors operate, and that in turn, sets the boundaries of this framework with their actions.

This perspective is based on the division of social roles on a class and gender basis. Political actors, both men and women, do not operate in a vacuum, but in the shadow of a patriarchal, classist social reality that both limits and determines their political actions, and creates opportunities and risks for all actors, not only women. Since the revolution, women have worked tirelessly to break several barriers limiting their ability to participate in the public sphere. They have demonstrated high levels of participation in all the movements and political forums that emerged after the uprising, but they also paid a high price for such participation, specifically when it comes to their freedom of movement and the safety and integrity of their bodies. These heroic acts have

endowed women's voices a new, stronger dimension, made our cause visible and tangible, and has made our organization necessary. We reject claims that women's issues are only a concern of a well-off segment of middle-class women. We also reject the rhetoric that women's rights are the monopoly of a specific set of women, whether those working in institutional frameworks (e.g., the National Council for Women) or in rights groups that are active in only some spheres. We also reject claims that women's issues can be reduced to women's representation in parties or political life.

These developments require an honest discussion that among all of us. Such a discussion cannot be limited to a discussion on how the lack of security affects the ability of men and women to act in the public sphere, and how certain actors attempt to terrorize women and break them both psychologically and physically.

II. What Happened?

Over the last few months, Tahrir Square and the surrounding areas has been the locus of terrifying rapes of unprecedented violence and brutality. These crimes began to become increasingly ferocious during the demonstrations in late November 2012. Several confirmed and documented gang rapes took place in the square and streets surrounding it in the period from November 21 to 25, amid very weak condemnations, and the disregard of most official and unofficial parties. As a result of the general state of denial and collusion, the scope of the crimes expanded during the demonstrations that marked the second anniversary of the revolution, which began on January 25, 2013. Several cases of brutal gang rape were documented, all following a similar pattern and style, and women were targeted regardless of their political affiliations. Most of the women assaulted were demonstrators, volunteers with anti-sexual harassment teams in the square, or women who happened to pass by. Over 19 cases of rape and sexual assault were confirmed. A preliminary assessment of those horrific crimes and the methods employed in them indicates a recurring pattern of assault and suggests that unidentified individuals and groups committing these crimes approach demonstrations and political events as an opportunity to assault women.

Assaults became more frequent and expanded to different areas. On the nights of January 27 and 28, 2013, attempts were made to abduct women at the exits to the October Bridge at the heart of Cairo, while a meeting of anti-sexual harassment activists came under assault after one of the participants was harassed, which led to clashes and attempts to storm the office where the meeting took place.

III. A Feminist Perspective on These Crimes and How to Confront Them

As feminist activists, we approach our cause as it is in reality: a public issue that affects all Egyptian women at, both in the context of their daily movement and bodily freedom, as well as their ability to benefit from their skills and capacities as free citizens in a patriarchal society that limits their roles and contributions.

We view sexual violence as a crime of violence targeting women as women, which we believe cannot be separated from the general societal view of women and their bodies as inferior to men. We also view sexual violence as violent crime first and foremost, directed against women as women. For us, the issue transcends the isolated incident (rape) and the location (Tahrir Square and demonstrations) to comprise sexual violence as a crime faced by women from all wakes of life every day, whether in the street, at work, or in any public capacity.

We believe that this social climate, which has begun to resemble a daily psychological war on women, has directly fostered these crimes and led to their present brutal incarnation. Sexual harassment is a constant in the life of any Egyptian woman regardless of her social status or class. In turn, we cannot view these reprehensible acts separately from the general climate in which women fight daily simply for the right to be present on the street without threats, harassment, or verbal or physical harm.

Women took part in the revolution and were publicly active throughout the past decades, but the price of this participation was continuous attempts to exclude them from the public space by reactionary political movements or social forces. The recent increase in the frequency and vehemence of crimes confirms our view, and threatens the rise of a wave of rampant sexual violence against women in Egypt's streets if the silence and disregard continues.

While we recognize the political nature of the crimes in the Tahrir area, we cannot separate this from the general harassment women face in Egypt in the public sphere. The most recent incidents are simply a repugnant expression of what can happen once women's issues are ignored and not discussed as part of a larger public debate. In our view, those recent events are a brutal escalation of the widespread social pathology that is sexual violence. Societal collusion in sexual harassment and violence has made it easier for these crimes to reach such an extreme, which is now difficult to treat with direct intervention. The discounting of harassment and sexual assault has only encouraged the emergence of brutal gang rape at political events. This development, then, must be recognized by all, and addressed with the utmost seriousness. Although we realize that the issue of sexual harassment and sexual crimes are complex and require long-term interventions and solutions, among them changing the patriarchal social culture, we also believe that awareness and recognition of the increasing frequency of these crimes, in and out of the square and in demonstrations and Egyptian streets, should be part of the discourse of any force or group that seeks to confront this phenomenon. No genuine discourse that seeks to effectively intervene can be created without putting the issue of sexual violence in its comprehensive social framework.

From this perspective, we wish to discuss the reactions of all political and revolutionary forces that have engaged with this issue over the past two years. Assaults against women have increased

gradually amid the silence and disregard of various movements, forces, and individuals calling for sit-ins and demonstrations. Incidents of sexual harassment long ago began to become more organized and collective, and they have been observed since Mubarak's ouster in February 2011, to the extent that sexual harassment has now become an unfortunate, but expected element at any political event or activity. Now routine, such incidents occasion no more than a brief lament or rote condemnation, not followed by any recognition on the part of civil parties, forces, and groups that these incidents have officially become a phenomenon, let alone any serious attempts to address the problem.

While sexual harassment and violence against women has been increasing since February 2011, movements and groups formed in an attempted to address the phenomenon have sought to draw attention to the danger of what is happening and its mounting frequency and ferocity. These groups have made efforts to stage direct interventions to rescue victims and offer material, medical, and psychological support to victims of violent abuses. Yet these serious efforts have been met with either disregard, fleeting interest, or veiled warnings against discussing the issue widely, in fear that some may interpret this as a call for women to withdraw or abstain from demonstrations and political events.

Given our feminist view of the phenomenon, we would like to stress on the fact that we will not allow our efforts to raise this issue to be exploited by any party to that seeks to marginalize women, their role, or their right to be present at any public event. At the same time, we reject any rhetoric of protection that seeks to exclude women. We insist that both women and men, must take responsibility for atrocities that will have consequences for everyone and for the future of political life in Egypt.

We believe that two common discourses are simply two sides of the same coin: a discourse of protection that encourages fear among women, and thus indirectly makes them responsible for what happens to them, and a discourse that ignores the truth of what is happening by praising the bravery of women in standing against sexual violence without proposing any collective solutions that make everyone responsible for what is happening. Though steadfast, Egyptian women will not bear the burden alone, and they will not retreat from the political sphere to appease the desire of some to ignore the entire problem. Nor will they stop talking about their own agonies, and the hardship and pain of being seen as bodies up for grabs in the public sphere or the suffering they experience as a result of crimes against women in the public sphere.

IV. Who is Responsible?

Here we must discuss responsibility: who is responsible and what do we think can be done? Given the frequency and brutality of the most recent incidents, no single feminist, advocacy, or political group can confront the problem alone. Such a grave issue requires a serious, collective political debate on how the phenomenon should be faced. This discussion must leave behind the tendency to blame certain parties as everyone, men and women, in political parties and revolutionary movements assumes the burden of both understanding what is happening and, secondly, confronting it from all its different angles. We stress that all political groups and parties have a responsibility to effectively participate, raise these issues, and take necessary action to address this

alarming phenomenon and what lies behind it.

Our view of political responsibility includes a reaction that supports the efforts of the intervention groups currently bravely working to confront these incidents despite meager resources and numbers. This support, while important, must be accompanied by strong efforts on the part of political forces concerned with issues of freedom and equality to adopt a pro-woman discourse while discussing ways to confront crimes of sexual violence. We view responsibility here from a feminist perspective that includes two indivisible parts: responsibility prior to the incident and responsibility subsequent to it.

Prior responsibility involves contributing to the evolution of a discourse advanced by all politically and socially relevant parties on women's political participation; and what they face as a result of that participation which goes beyond the dichotomy of protecting women or blaming them for their predicament. This can be done only through developing a rhetoric of collective responsibility that recognizes the social and gender dimensions of sexual violence as a tool of political intimidation. Thus far, the discourse of all political and revolutionary forces remains unable to engage with feminist issues, and still refrains from addressing women's issues in all their complexity, though it is a principal role of any revolutionary or political movement to grapple with issues of liberty and equality. Part of prior responsibility means taking action to secure demonstrations, marches, and political events to confront sexual violence. This must be a permanent item on the agenda of political forces and a basic part of the preparations for any demonstration or political event.

Subsequent responsibility entails a recognition that such reprehensible crimes do in fact take place and involves exerting pressure for investigations into these crimes to identify the offenders and hold them accountable and shouldering political responsibility for the security of demonstrations and events sponsored by revolutionary movements and bodies. In addition, subsequent responsibility means addressing the issue of the official media and the shameful way it covers these crimes. The media either ignores those crimes entirely or adopt a sensationalist coverage that does not respect the privacy of those assaulted. Political parties and movements share with us the burden of confronting these unprofessional media practices, which often entails additional violations. This is true not only for women who have been attacked, but for groups that seek to offer aid to them amid difficult conditions, meager resources, and the lack of any support whatsoever from Egyptian parties and movements.

Finally, we cannot ignore the responsibility of the state and its institutions to confront growing sexual violence and guarantee female citizens' safety and freedom of movement. While recognizing that the state apparatus targeted women activists and human rights defenders both before and after the revolution, and that it has taken no just action to prosecute those responsible for these crimes, the state still does have a responsibility to investigate these crimes, identify the perpetrators, and hold them to account. The rape and abuse of women is an inevitable consequence of the deterioration of the security situation and the security apparatus, and women are paying a much greater social price for this than the rest of society.

V. What We Advocate

The events of the past months require everyone to assume responsibility for thinking about and discussing these issues before matters deteriorate further. . What we advocate requires an honest, open discussion of the entire issue of women's participation in public life from a gendered perspective, which must be an item on the agenda of all political forces. The issue must be addressed as part of the basic responsibility of political forces, which cannot simply promote a rhetoric that depends on the strength of women to confront these crimes and places responsibility for overcoming various forms of sexual violence on their shoulders alone. Political forces must take action to create an appropriate environment for women's political participation. Nazra believes that raising the issue of sexual violence should not only recognize its particularity and brutality, but also must be a part of the more general question of women's political participation. It is neither politically nor ethically appropriate that everyone should value women's participation—in political or party work or as candidates on party lists—or view women as an active voting constituency without engaging with issues of violence against women from a feminist perspective.

We stress the need to conduct a serious, honest discussion of what women face in the public sphere, and what can be done to prevent those horrendous crimes. . We understand that this discussion depends first and foremost on a brave refusal to bury our heads in the sand and a believe in the need to stand up to voices insisting that the issue is trivial or those that seek to frighten and intimidate women to curtail their participation. At the same time, this discussion must respect the privacy of those who have been assaulted, focusing instead on the identity of the perpetrators, their objectives, and everyone's responsibility to confront these horrific crimes. We stress the need to confront all attempts to use this discussion as a means to "protect" women that may lead to their exclusion or infringe on their right to demonstrate or take part in various political activities. It is important to conduct the discussion with recognition that Egypt's women have and still do wage daily battles in defense of their space and scope of political action. They also fight constant battles in and out of demonstrations to participate in all spheres of life amid countless daily abuses and in a patriarchal society that still has a long way to go to respect women's right to be present and active in both the public and private spheres. We stress that everyone must assume responsibility for violence that will have an impact on us all, both men and women.

We urge all political and revolutionary forces to realize that women's issues are not a fleeting cause or simply a bargaining chip to be used against religiously minded political opponents or others. Rather, they are a principal part of the revolution, of the current political ferment, and of the struggle for freedom in which women have played such a vital role and for which they have sacrificed much. Such atrocious crimes of sexual violence cannot be separated from women's declining social status. We must all assume responsibility for this with our words and actions, and we must listen to women rather than disregard them out of political or tactical considerations. If not, our struggle for liberty will lose all meaning by losing Egyptian women.

Long live Egypt's women.