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## Gender-Based Sexual-Harassment and the Racialized-Feminized Queering of Tahrir Square: The Radical-Abolitionist Case of Queer-Feminist Egyptians in Egypt

Mohamed Abdou

This article discusses the liberatory aspirations that encompassed my queer-feminist research interviewees' involvement in Egypt's January 2011 uprising and what Joseph A. Massad (2012) refers to as the orientalist-dubbed "Arab Spring/Islamist Winter" that led to Hosni Mubarak's removal and resignation, as well as the revolutionary events of Mohammad Mahmoud street and the June 2013 revolt that ousted the Muslim Brotherhood. Running through my participants' discussions of the creative initiatives they innovated—in both the so-called postcolonial context of Egypt and the conquistador settler-colonial context of the US and Canada (decolonially referred to as Turtle Island)—during and after the Arab Spring/Islamist Winter is the sense that Euro-American LGBTIQ narratives are a poor fit for their experiences. These narratives restrict queer-feminist Egyptians and Muslims to either the role of assimilated subjects, or victims of despotic military dictatorships and conservative religious extremists. Rejecting these false binaries, many of my participants argue that an *indigenous* understanding of queer-feminist Egyptians and Muslims cannot be resolved outside the struggle for broad geopolitical social changes that address structural hierarchies, inequities, and oppressions relating to all forms of social justice, not solely sexual and gender-based oppressions. In this article, I discuss the work of "Group B" (a feminist collective and anti-sexual harassment initiative) that queer-feminist

Egyptians incepted. I have used pseudonyms for these initiatives and the participants due to the heightened state of repression in Egypt since the Muslim Brotherhood's ouster in June 2013.

Thus, their queer-feminist abolitionist activism, discussed in this piece, is not narrowly focused on sexuality but on combatting lateral (non-)state gender-based harassment, violence, and the racist, sexist, ableist, and classist (etc.) discriminations reproduced and enacted by individuals against one another.

Despite their different positions in relation to their goals and strategies for achieving local, regional, and transnational solidarity, my participants all recognize two major challenges, first, discriminatory ostracization: not only within their own queer groups, but from broader liberal, leftist, feminist, and Islamist Egyptian social movements that are queerphobic. The second challenge they identify is the burgeoning disease of Arab and Muslim gender and sexual harassment and abuse in public spaces, as well as domestic violence. My participants' discussions of queer-feminist interventions in revolutionary Egypt challenge dismissals of their work and ideologies as coopted, duped, and colonized pawns of the "Gay Empire" or what Massad (2002) has referred to as the "Gay International," and force a reconsideration of postcolonial/decolonial-abolitionist and queer-feminist politics as a primary basis for determining the shape and course of future revolutionary theory, coalition building, and liberatory praxis.

In *Islam in Liberalism* (2015), Massad clarifies his position on the political stances that inform "Gay Internationalist" views. He notes that "Gay Internationalist" groups are the ones that "miss, neglect, misunderstand or sidestep" the problem of adopting Western ontologies and (re)instantiate a universalist Eurocentricity relating to LGBTIQ identities (pp. 216-217). He also

identifies “Gay Internationalists” as local, regional, and transnational groups and movements that ignore historical specificities and espouse imperial/colonial humanitarian and assimilationist aims tied to the emergence of queer activism in the U.S. Finally, Massad identifies “Gay Internationalists” as individuals and movements that subscribe to Foucault’s repressive hypothesis, which constructs Muslim and Arab sexual experiences and practices as “repressed,” “confined,” and “restricted.” This section shows how the Egyptian alternatives (*bada’il*), exceptionally constructed by my participants and manifested in the form of Group B, offer radical trajectories that transcend their ascription as “Gay Internationalists.” In this sense, they exceed Massad’s astute anti-colonial and anti-imperial analysis that nonetheless minimizes native agency, relies on historical archival research that focuses on elite queer Arab men to the ethnographic exclusion of women and gender dissidents, and re-entrenches the postcolonial Marxist pan-Arab state as the ultimate salvation from neocolonialism/neoimperialism, to the neglect of decolonial non-state, abolitionist trajectories that can be found not only within contemporary radical Black traditions but also within Arab and Muslim pre-modern history. As a “horizon and not an event,” non-statist abolitionist thought is not new (Chua, 2020). Its legacy is neither constrained to an older generation of radical Black critical race and gender thinkers like Fredrick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth nor contemporaries like Angela Davis, Ruth Gilmore Wilson, Fred Moten, and Mariame Kaba. Rather, Black Muslims like Sua’ad Abdul Kabeer and Ubaydullah Evans have noted that there is a spiritual dimension to abolition, since we cannot understand race without understanding religion. Abolition is core to pre-modern Muslim thought and prophetic practice. Blackness, abolition, and Islam are not mutually exclusive, as modern-day community-led initiatives in the U.S. demonstrate. For

example, *Believers Bailout* pays bail fees for Muslims in pre-trial incarceration and conceptualizes this practice as a form of *zakat*. In this sense, while Massad's anti-imperialist analysis is fruitful, it offers no social movement alternatives beyond an outright condemnation of "Gay Internationalism" based on a binary between the West and the "rest". Massad strictly focuses on Euro-American hegemony as "evil" without equally qualifying or assigning sufficient weight to neo-reactionary Islamic hegemonic discourses and movements, or how an Islamic interpretation rooted in social justice could be achieved.

Alternatively, overarching conclusions based on my participants' observations suggest the following abolitionist trajectory: To sharpen our abolitionist analyses is to invoke emancipatory impossibilities as "our only possibility" (Bassichis et al., 2011, p. 42). My participants' experiences of being racialized *and* gendered *and* sexualized demonstrate that if we are to situate queer, feminist, and social justice Islamic interpretations in the present for the purposes of embracing a different future, then it is also necessary to understand historical and current abolitionist thinking within Islam (Abdou, 2021, para. 33).

### **Gender-based violence in Egypt: Disciplining the cis-heteronormative nation-state**

A plethora of scholars, journalists, and activists have documented the chronic scale of gender-based violence/sexual harassment (*al-tahurrosh al-jinsy*) in Egypt. I build on this work through interviews with participants in Group B<sup>1</sup>, which is arguably the first anti-sexual harassment initiative in Egypt.<sup>2</sup> As Sally Toma (2015) writes, sexual harassment in Egypt is a "structural tool manipulatively employed to silence opponents" in a society "where a sex scandal represents a grave social stigma, victim-blaming is the norm, and where, unless incidents are filmed and

virtually and virally uploaded, Egyptian society is hardly forced to confess and acknowledge the persisting and festering existence and influence” of sexual harassment and abuse. Coptic Christian fieldwork participant Michael states, the “Egyptian state nourishes and cultivates patriarchy (*abawiya*) and encourages destructive notions of masculinity (*dhukuriyat*) within schools, households, playgrounds, and factories.” Sudanese-Egyptian fieldwork participant Malik similarly notes that the “explosion of sexual harassment” since the Tahrir 2011 uprising indicates how deeply engrained and systemically entrenched sexism is in Egypt’s misogynistic and militarized culture. In a similar vein, queer-feminist participant Sana states that sexual harassment “is an individual and collective daily occurrence, which all women are exposed to, and though some presume it is just members of the Muslim Brotherhood, it isn’t just them.” Sana notes that sexual harassment and sexism notably exist “within social movements (*al-harakat ijtima’iya*), and across all segments of broader society.” The “military and hired thugs (*baltagiyya*),” she continues, “are not the only parties responsible for, and who engage in sexual harassment and abuse, whether during Eid celebrations, the holy month of Ramadan, or even following a soccer match. Sexual harassment and abuse, Sana continues, occurs in “any gathering where men represent a majority.” Nonetheless, its prevalence has bred audacious, courageous, and innovative responses, despite the mental, physical, emotional, and psychological toll on the activists own lives.

In fact, as Vickie Langohr (2013) writes, sexual violence was part of the public discourse during Mubarak’s reign, “when Nuha Rushdi appeared on Muna al-Shazli’s popular ‘10 PM’ show in 2008 to discuss the three-year prison term—then unprecedented—given the truck driver who had harassed her” (para. 26). The difference between discussions of sexual harassment pre- and

post-2011, Langohr states, is that during Mubarak's reign "it was impossible for survivors to accuse government forces or loyalists of sexual abuse" (para. 26). Post-Mubarak, sensationalized televised interviews with survivors of assault during the uprisings demolished some of the social barriers to the discussion and exposed the connection between silence and internalized shame. Egyptian society tends to deny that sexual harassment, verbal assault, and gender-based violence is normalized. Combatting sexual harassment is further fraught by the conflation of gender and sexuality in the Egyptian psyche. As Langohr (2013) notes, although Egyptian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as "Al Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of the Victims of Violence and Torture have, over the years, produced numerous reports detailing the torture and sexual assault of [both] men and women inside places of detention," these documentations have been generally ignored (para. 14). In one of the most sensational moments in March 2011, following the Tahrir uprisings, Langohr points to how "female protesters arrested in Tahrir Square were stripped and subjected to virginity tests while surrounded by soldiers" (para. 21). Former Director of Intelligence turned Defense Minister and now Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi defended the tests under the pretext of simultaneously protecting women from rape, and military officers and soldiers from accusations of it.

Research participant Sana recounts as well how "when [former Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed] Morsi was removed, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) raped 82 women." Sana recalls that there also was a "brutal mob sexual assault that took place in Tahrir Square on June 8, during celebrations of President El-Sisi's inauguration" in 2014. Sana also discusses the "notorious image [that] came out" in "December 2011 of a female protester" who was "knocked to the ground by army soldiers, who then proceeded to kick and stomp on her

body, on live television.” In this particular incident, “the victim’s coat came open, revealing her [blue] bra” (Carr, 2014). Anti-harassment activists referred to the woman as “*sitt al-banat* (the best of all girls)” in light of the fact that she “was stripped of her abaya and dragged through the street by army officers” (para. 29). But, as Carr notes, instead of being outraged, television commentators questioned “why she was wearing a garment that opened so easily and that there was nothing but a bra underneath” (para. 29). Such comments highlight the foundational role of cis-heteropatriarchy, and show how gender and sexuality are policed as part of a public (im)morality discourse that separates “nationalist” (read: normal and morally honorable) genders/sexualities from anti-national, anti-citizen, and immoral genders/sexualities. In other words, if a woman is out protesting and is harassed, she is always to blame because she exceeds the boundaries of this moral-nationalist subject. Cis-heteronormativity is thus used to codify and sanction particular masculinities/femininities as nationalistic while enforcing the persecution of nonheteronormative gender/sexual practices that are regarded as anti-national in Egypt.

In response to *sitt al-banat*’s assault, Carr (2014) notes, “a larger protest [was] scheduled for June 8, and...the Egyptian Institute for Personal Rights (EIPR) issued a statement” regarding the “unprecedented rates of assaults in Egypt.” But neither EIPR’s statement, cosigned by 19 other organizations, nor the protests reduced the frequency of sexual harassment (Carr, 2014).

However, the assault of *sitt al-banat* did galvanize “the first mass response to sexual assault” in which a march of approximately 10,000 Egyptians took place, as protesters raised the slogan “The women of Egypt are a red line” (Carr, 2014).

On November 27, 2012, “Dalia Abd el Hameed, the gender and women's rights program officer at EIPR”, and other EIPR employees—“acting as individuals, not on behalf of the organization”—



began to use “phone lines to serve as hotlines on which assaults could be reported” while “friends and acquaintances met in Tahrir Square” and dispersed “throughout the protests wearing pink armbands” (Langohr, 2013, para. 8). Langohr further notes that despite the new hotline and pink armbands, during a following protest, an anti-sexual harassment “volunteer ended up with five girls who had sought refuge in a field hospital...as men tried to attack the hospital to reach the girls, who were evacuated by ambulance.”

Despite the public attention paid to these assaults during the Brotherhood’s reign, the late president Morsi “remained silent” and, making matters worse, “in February 2013 members of the human rights committee of the upper house of Parliament blamed women protesters for being assaulted” (Langhor, 2013, para. 20). As Rida al-Hifnawi, a Muslim Brotherhood member of the Freedom and Justice Party, said, “Women should not mingle with men during protests...How can the Interior Ministry be tasked with protecting a lady who stands among a group of men?” (Carr, 2012). Muslim Brotherhood members were not the only ones to ignore the violence. Other members, like Adil’ Afifi of the Islamist Salafi al-Asala Party, went further and “suggested that a woman who joins protests among thugs and street inhabitants should protect herself before asking the Interior Ministry to offer her protection” and concluded that “women sometimes bring rape upon themselves” (Langohr, 2013).

However, “while Islamists absolved the Interior Ministry of responsibility for protecting women, Azza Suleiman, Director of the Center for Women’s Rights Legal Aid, raised the possibility that the Ministry might have a hand in the assaults” (2013). Suleiman stated that there were numerous testimonies in which women would report spousal abuse to the police, after an argument with their husbands, upon which the police would say, “let the revolution help you’

(*khalli al-thawra tinfa'ik*)” (Langohr, 2013). During the February 6, 2013, anti-sexual harassment protests that also called for Morsi’s ouster, anti-assault protestors united “around the slogan *irhal!*” or leave, as they carried “huge banners of feminist icons, from Huda Sha’rawi, the first president of the Egyptian Feminist Union in the 1920s, to singer Umm Kulthoum and socialist activist Shahinda Maqlad” (Carr, 2012). The wave of assaults after Morsi’s ouster, according to Langohr (2013), “resemble[d] attacks on May 25, 2005—known as Black Wednesday—when protesters demonstrated at the Journalists’ Syndicate against a referendum on constitutional amendments.” During the 2005 events, “one protester said that the police opened a path for thugs to come to her and other protesters” as “men penetrated her with their fingers, saying ‘the dirtiest of words...like, ‘You want to demonstrate against [Hosni] Mubarak. This is what Mubarak’s doing to you. He’s screwing you. See, whore, that’s Mubarak that you’re chanting against. He’s now screwing you’” (Langohr, 2013, para. 16). Wael Abbas, a well-known Egyptian blogger that works on exposing police abuse in Egypt, “interviewed an attacker who ‘confessed that he had been paid and, that he and others had been brought by bus from the slums specifically to disrupt the peaceful demonstrations’” (Langhor, 2013). Abbas’s exposure, as Langohr notes, resonates with Paul Amar’s (2011) work, which has noted how “the infamous *baltagiyya* [thugs] began as networks of extortion rackets who were treated as enemies of the state in the 1990s, but in the 2000s the Interior Ministry deployed them to participate in demonstrations, either to delegitimize the protests with extremist slogans or attack protesters and ‘wreak havoc’” (cited in Langhor, 2013).

These reports and testimonies indicate the use of sexual harassment as a weapon of war. In December 2012, the BBC produced a program on sexual harassment in Egypt in which “journalist

Ramita Navai interviewed two men—on camera but with faces obscured—who claimed they were paid to attack women protesting the Mubarak regime and its successors” (Langhor, 2013). During the BBC interview, Langhor highlights how one man “claimed that, during the anti-Mubarak 2011 Tahrir uprising, he was paid to ‘go out and sexually harass girls, go out and hassle them, and try to touch them, to the point that they’d leave the demonstration’,” and he “had agreed because ‘money is tight now’” (para. 17). Similarly, “on December 5, 2012, Socialist Popular Alliance Party activist Ola Shahba” was assaulted at protests against Morsi’s constitutional declaration that were “held at the presidential palace, *al-Ittihadiyya*.” Langhor indicates how the attackers “included not only *salafis* and Muslim Brothers but also others who believed the anti-Morsi protesters were *fuloul* (supporters of the old regime) or against religion” (para. 18). In this instance, attackers yelled at Shahba, “‘You hate God this much?’ as they beat her.”<sup>3</sup>

Incidents of sexual harassment are not constrained to women. For instance, “male protesters such as Hamada Sabir [were] stripped and beaten” and subjected to public sexualized shaming and “abuse by the police” (Langhor, 2013). The fact that both women and men are harassed led to a revision of the initial chant used in the December 2011 protests against the beating of *sitt al-banat*—“‘Egypt’s women are not to be stripped!’—to “‘Egypt’s men are not to be stripped!’” (Langhor, 2013).

Despite the fact that numerous feminist organizations issued countless joint statements against sexual harassment that contributed to the recent development of anti-sexual harassment laws, manifesting in the form of Article 306, little has changed (Nazra, 2018). In fact, numerous women, including Egyptian human rights activists Menna Gubran and Amal Fathy, have been

charged with spreading “fake news” and, consequently, experienced tremendous backlash, threats, and insults. In Fathy’s case, this led to imprisonment and a fine for criticizing the government’s failure in combatting sexual harassment (Unknown A, 2018; Unknown B, 2018). It is only relatively recently that Al-Azhar issued a fatwā condemning sexual harassment as *ḥaram* (a sin) and strictly resigned itself to campaigns, for example, one entitled *Wa Ashrohn Belmaarouf* (Live Together Kindly) to minimize skyrocketing divorce rates in the absence of broader discussions of social injustice or even domestic violence relating to it (Ahmed, 2018; Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2018).

#### **Group B’s Abolitionist and Anti-Authoritarian Rise and Commitments**

As Sudanese-Egyptian feminist participant Aisha notes, Group B, a “non-hierarchical collective,” predominantly founded by and composed of “anarchists, radical feminists, and queers” was formed to combat the epidemic of sexual harassment and gender-based violence that exploded in the wake of 2011’s Tahrir uprisings. Many of the core activists of Group B “knew each other and came from human rights work.” The initiative began with a Twitter message and hashtag that read: “We set up this account to help keep you safe in #Tahrir. If the government can’t protect us, we can protect ourselves” (Langhor, 2013). After Sisi arose to power in 2014 and with the banning of political protests and gatherings, Group B stopped functioning.

Group B’s aim is to combat sexual harassment at protests and public events, in the form of “serious sexual assault” and “most commonly mob attacks” that occur “in the incestuous anonymity of large crowds,” during political demonstrations, and even sacrilegiously “during Eid

holidays when crowds and throngs of young men, seemingly emboldened by their movement as a pack, attack women” (Langohr, 2013).

Sana shared details of Group B’s organization, and its composition into three sub groups: 1) The *Ishtibak* group, otherwise understood as the “interventionist group,” whose objective is getting women out of sexual harassment situations and circles; 2) The *Amaan/Safety* group that operates out of safe houses after the women are grabbed and are to taken to a safe space, clothed, and to have first-aid applied, given that their clothes are often ripped, and that they’re often beaten and bruised, and they’re in immediate need of safety or just feeling safe and counseling; and finally 3) the *Operation* room where the people who started and founded the group mostly gather and evaluate the moment by moment ongoing circumstances and events, improvising if need be. As Langohr (2013) notes, Group B generally has “more men than women in” their intervention teams [...] but there is no attempt to limit the number of women.”

Group B is unique, not only because it has served as an inspiration to other grassroots sexual harassment initiatives, but also because it is organized as a horizontal collective and is informed by “feminist praxis.” Group B does not adhere to LGBTIQ identity politics. It centers gender concerns, and its founding participants are critical of colonialism, imperialism, international development, and militarized NGO-ization discourses that have appropriated queer-feminist causes, as well as homonationalism and pinkwashing.<sup>4</sup> Examples of projects inspired by Group B include Tahrir Bodyguards; WenDo (self-defense workshops); Against Harassment; SexualHarassMap, a group co-founded by “Ghozlan” that “works to prevent and record instances of street harassment” by placing banners about sexual/gender–harassment in Tahrir; as well as other initiatives like I Saw Harassment and Harassing the Harassers. As Carr (2014) notes, the last

group, Harassing the Harassers, is a community-based project that defines itself as “a citizen-led initiative that works on publicly shaming harassers by writing the word harasser on their t-shirts, during public events, protests, and gatherings.”<sup>5</sup>

Aisha recounts an occasion in which a demonstration began in Tahrir square and Group B was “late to set up” and was “ill-prepared.” Aisha recalls how she instinctively “knew and could feel that there was a bad vibe and energy that day and soon enough all hell broke loose.” In this instance, Aisha states, the safety team still needed to “set up and prepare the safe houses to move harassed women to, when they are pulled out of the harassment circles by different intervention groups.” Tactically, Aisha notes, Group B often attempts “to occupy high-rise apartment buildings” encircling Tahrir to “keep a panoptic eye on Tahrir from the balconies of the safe houses, so they can spot harassment as it begins and immediately contact people on the ground to intervene.” On this specific occasion, the situation “escalated rapidly to the extent that the safety team, in this instance, had to adapt to become an intervention team, which usually is in possession of clothes, medicine, and first-aid kits for the survivors.” Aisha recalls that “there were even guys who were trying to help, but who were also harassing us, and some men were even trying to get into the building that housed the safe house.” Aisha “tried to maintain eye contact with harassed women and even tried to calmly talk to them” as she attempted to extract and “get women out” of the harassment circle. Aisha even attempted to appeal to and negotiate “with the harassers to deescalate the situation as opposed to running away after rescuing woman, which could make matters worse.” Aisha describes how she used softening phrases like, “This is your sister, Aisha,” in an attempt to make an ally of harassers and instill within them a sense of shame and a reminder of a collective shared social fabric and ethic. Aisha

humbly acknowledges that even amidst courageous moments of “rescue” and the catharsis they offer, she could create a situation that “demanded her own rescuing.” Aisha recounts how “she can still feel the exhaustion” in her scarred and jarred memory.

On another occasion, Sana recalls, “the intervention and extraction team was threatened at gun point.” Following the protests, Aisha says that she longs for “anything that could distract” and get her mind off the violence and abuse that often transpires during anti-sexual harassment events. She describes how after these interventions, she and others often experience a “collective breakdown” and an expression of sadness, mourning, rage, and tears of disbelief. Sometimes these experiences lead to activist fatigue, depression, isolation, and a “withdrawal from public view and life for days, if not months.”

### ***More Than “Band-Aid” Solutions: Abolitionist Politics, Reform, and Group B***

Malik became involved with Group B in 2011 because he felt “guilty” that he was absent on January 28, 2011, also known as the Friday of Rage, even though he sensed that “sexual harassment, virginity tests, and gender-based violence would be used against Egyptians.” Unlike others, Malik “wasn’t directly organizationally associated with Group B, in terms of the decision-making processes” but “was always available to be assigned tasks, before a stand or an event.” Group B’s collaboration with other anti-sexual harassment initiatives managed to mobilize Egyptian society and shame orthodox leftists, feminists, and liberal movements into action. Malik notes, “Group B shocked society into action” because those involved in it were “willing to sacrifice their lives for a greater cause than themselves in circumstances of mass sexual gang rapes.” Malik highlights that Group B’s participants often placed their “bodies and lives on the

line,” risking death, assault, and rape to safeguard strangers; strangers who would in all likelihood would publicly shun and shame the participants if they knew they engaged in same-sex practices. Until the emergence of initiatives such as Group B, political parties often “routinely blamed each other” for gender-based violence and sexual harassment during protests, and would allege that the attacks were carried out by one party in order to destabilize or discredit another (Langhor, 2013). For Malik, “the only hope” of anti-sexual harassment campaigns, such as that of Group B’s, is to “delineate heteropatriarchy and gender-based violence.” They can’t hope to “eradicate [sexual violence], because for that eradication to occur, that requires the transformative re-education of wider society, not reactionary “Band-Aid” solutions.” “The only solution” Malik perceives revolutionary Egyptians possess right now is “to intervene and minimize the rape of 100 to at best 10” during public protest gatherings, because initiatives such as Group B are “reacting to consequences” without “the luxury of time to deal with the origins of gender-based harassment and sexual violence given the wider systemic and internalized heteropatriarchal factors its associated with and that permeate both private and public spheres.” Like Malik, Sudanese-Egyptian queer-feminist Mariam took part in Group B, though she “didn’t work in an organized way on [sexual violence],” but did attend “a few of their organized demonstrations” in their demand “for Tahrir to be a safe space, free of sexual harassment.” For Mariam, this “is a central issue because if you’re engaging in sexual harassment...what you’re saying is that women don’t have a place” in Tahrir and during demonstrations. “On the contrary,” Mariam notes, “in sexually harassing you are reinforcing policed barriers or attempting to isolate women such that they don’t become an extension of the revolutionary path.” Mariam states that anti-sexual harassment demonstrations “were quite demoralizing and



deeply saddening” as they “always ended in tragedy, often with physical beatings and mental trauma.” Mariam associates the current anti-sexual harassment initiatives with reactionary “desperate responses” to deeper “symptoms” within Egyptian society. These responses are insufficient in addressing “heteropatriarchy’s roots,” including homonormativity and sexism within queer circles. Mariam argues that what is required is “addressing the root of heteropatriarchy’s” interrelation with poverty, racism, and ethnocentrism that has conjointly disfigured Egyptian societal perceptions of masculinities/femininities. Mariam argues, in spite of their unquestionable contributions and creativity, some of the participants within these anti-sexual harassment initiatives equally “committed mistakes, like for example, that, women would protest against sexual harassment, but then a group of boys would arrive to act as human shields and barriers to protect them, hence reproducing heteropatriarchal ideas.”

Unlike Malik and Mariam, Aisha and Sana have been extensively involved with Group B. Sana emphasizes that she was drawn to Group B on account of it being “a collective that explicitly adopts anarchistic politics in its internal dynamics and organization.” Here anarchism, as with my participant’s conceptualization of queerness, is informed by dynamically-intersecting social justice struggles such as those of ethnicity/race, class, ability, age, faith, and gender, and all the (un)discoverable and infinite features that collectively exceed the sum of our individual parts. Their understanding of anarchism is based on an understanding that there are no such thing as pure identities, never mind ideologies, but only the illusion of coherence and rationality ascribed to both. Sana and Aisha’s non-ideological and non-identitarian emphasis on anarchistic social justice practices and principles exposes the limits of liberal identity politics. In other words, they recognize that there are non-Western forms of anarchism that preceded its European

emergence as a critique of liberalism, while in many ways retaining its individualist dimension. In this sense they identify with anarchist ethico-political practices (*al-usūl w'al-siyasat a'la sultawiya*) as opposed to popular adoptions of the term itself.

“Despite that ample testimonies of harassment have been collected and documented, even presented on television, there’s a reproduction of respectability politics and a politics of piety,” notes Aisha, where a “veiled women’s testimony is seen as more legitimate and worthy, in terms of credibility” than “a woman who does not wear the hijab.” Aisha also expressed reservations regarding Group B, because she considers “it to be a reactionary movement,” due to its inability to disseminate alternative countercultural “forms of knowledge production [*al-intāg al-ma'rify*] towards altering grassroots conditions and mobilization.”

Further, Sana describes how although Group B “started off small...as it grew, hierarchies did develop in terms of the choice of who is allowed to join” and which actions they could participate in. This is an inevitable concern, as asymmetries of power persist on an individual and collective level in all organizations. The fact that Group B is a deinstitutionalized and non-hierarchical collective does, however, help to challenge and minimize the asymmetrical power relations amongst organizers themselves through mutual accountability and responsibility. Its non-authoritarian model implicitly and organically implies that horizontal power is consistently subject to contestation, particularly as Group B is a communal group that is neither a corporation, nor relies on NGO funding.

Sana offers further criticism, however, noting that she is concerned “with Group B’s political posturing, in the sense that when the Muslim Brotherhood went to protest, Group B was not there, but then what does that say about why and what our commitments are, regardless of who

is being harassed or who fills the squares?” To Sana, even if it was a Muslim Brotherhood sit-in, “Group B had the ethical and political responsibility to be there,” precisely because “even hijabi and *niqabi* women are subject to daily harassment.”

Sana’s insights demonstrate how patriarchy, gender, and sexual harassment and violence are reproduced not only by Islamists or state-secularists, but also within queer-feminist and broader circles, including those who claim to be #MeToo anti-sexual harassment campaigners and organizers. Aisha recounts the telling example of Group B’s anti-harassment campaign in collaboration with Tahrir Bodyguards. Tahrir Bodyguards are volunteers who “provide protection for marches, as on International Women’s Day.” They often wear “yellow vests and hardhats” and at other times “white T-shirts that say in red with the words “Against Harassment” on the front and “A Square Safe For All” on the back” (Langohr, 2013). Tahrir Bodyguards, similar to Group B, used Twitter to start itself as an initiative and “modeled itself on Tahrir Supplies, a group whose Twitter account broadcasts requests for medical and other supplies needed at field hospitals so that followers can purchase and deliver them” (Langohr, 2013). As Toma (2015) writes, its members tend to cluster at “the front and back of the march and along the sides to prevent harassers from entering.” However, Tahrir Bodyguards’ “men were resistant to women and girls joining mobilizations,” and hence re-instantiated cis-heteropatriarchal gender norms. Consequently, members had to “discuss and explain how it is a woman’s choice to play a combative part in risky interventions in the square.” According to Aisha, Tahrir Bodyguards argued that “not wanting women to go down isn’t about believing in equality.” But Aisha and other women in Group B insisted “on explaining why women need to support other women as

it's vital that the first face that harassed women see is that of another woman, as [both] an empathetic and sympathetic tactic and technique."

Sana offers another example of conflict with Tahrir Bodyguards, where "someone who was homophobic objected to working with queers and [yet] we decided to proceed because of our common shared goals in the interim." Despite the anti-feminist and queerphobic views that some participants in Tahrir Bodyguards express at times, Sana states "they still represent people that have sacrificed their lives for others and are some of the most honorable and truthful people I met, especially when circumstances were quite depressive, yet in these difficult moments they acted." Further, although the group "initially relied on all-male intervention teams," their collaboration with Group B led "a male member of the group's leadership" to note "that pragmatism had led them to include a few women in the groups" (Langohr, 2013).

Similarly, but in reference to cis-heteropatriarchy's replication within Egyptian queer circles, Mariam argues that some same-sex practicing Egyptian men are biphobic and transphobic because "they are societally taught [through patriarchal norms] that they need to continue to identify through heteropatriarchal binaries." She adds, when "pure gay men, in particular, identify themselves as either exclusively top or bottom, passive or active" they believe that doing so allows "their emotional and mental lives to be in unison and they consider this a victory."

Mariam recognizes that *'unsuriya* (discrimination) and sexism towards bisexuals exists in the queer community, but argues that the reason is complex. First, some same-sex practicing Egyptian men "feel that due to social pressures and their own fears, bisexuals will choose to practice only a part of their sexual identity that coincides with an acclimating sexuality that is more secure and easier to deal with socially in a heterosexist society." She continues, "it's like

having someone be a part of you (your community or group) but at the same time isn't—it feels like betrayal, but for me that's a mental component of our struggle, and it has to do with feeling betrayal and *khizlan* [deep disappointment]." Michael also discusses the way queer Egyptians replicate sexist heteropatriarchal binaries. He notes, "when parents find out that their son is a homosexual, they ask them if they give or take. And if they do give and are hence active, the parents then think it's no problem." "But," Michael continues, if their son "takes": "because women are seen as less (whether in terms of their sexual appetite or even socio-political and economic roles) than men, then the parents usually say, why do you want to debase and lower yourself to become a woman when you have so much privilege having been born a man." This, for Michael, is the source of bi- and transphobia within the queer community: "Of course we do see transgender peoples as our brothers and sisters and bisexuals, as well, sit with us, but it's true, the struggles over and with bisexuals have also birthed hate."

Former conscript in the Egyptian military Seif was not a part of Group B, although he was nonetheless "welcome to attend meetings." His disinterest in joining Group B and other initiatives is related to his view that sexual harassment is "a societal problem." Respectfully, Seif states he is not "going to work on reforming and changing laws [for] punish[ing] the harasser or forbidding harassment through laws," as these act as merely symbolic legislative gestures towards managing societal bigotry, especially when there is unexceptional state violence against nonnormative persons. In this sense, and at best, reform is aimed at restoring a measure of state-sanctioned justice with reform merely acting as an arbiter as opposed to being a truly transformative practice by developing non-statist, egalitarian, and horizontal ethical-political and spiritual alternatives to state-sanctioned justice. As Amy Brandzel (2016) writes with respect to

“hate crime” legislation in the US, sexual harassment laws in Egypt obscure and actively disavow and “*disallow* the connection between the (supposedly legal and valid) violence of the state and the (supposedly illegal) violence of the individual” (p. 42). In other words, such reform laws are detached from the reality that the state and its loyalties to cis-heteropatriarchy and racial capitalism constitute and are constitutive of our every relation, both personal and political. We are not systemically governed and managed by neutral institutions that stand apart from us, or by a state set over and against a “civil society, but rather we all govern each other” and reproduce “a complex web of capillary relations of power” (2016, p. 125).

Seif, who believes in *islāh* (reform), finds it ironic that the “youth and Tahrir Bodyguard groups that use violence towards someone who is a harasser [are] operating in tandem with a heteropatriarchy we’re all socialized with.” Relatedly, Aisha believes that these initiatives need to be complemented with an exploration of how movements “can actually transform society as opposed to always reacting in times of crises.” To Seif, the strategy has to exceed the “deployment of anti-sexual harassment groups as a tactic,” which means finding a way to fulfil anti-sexual harassment “goals while respecting the dignity of the harasser,” because the harasser was never socialized to understand what the ethico-political problematics of sexual harassment are, nor were they offered “alternative healthy ways of engaging issues of gender and sexuality.” To Seif, a long-term strategy must not “oppress someone else on account that they don’t know how to express their sexual desires, and when society itself doesn’t allow and forbids them from exercising their sexuality in healthy ways.” Seif notes, “no one is born as a sexual harasser,” but rather is “socialized to become one” out of an insecure, individualist, survivalist necessity.

Seif's observations indicate that addressing sexual harassment is complicated, and necessitates more than just the harasser's arrest and public shaming by hiring "female police officers who adopt hypermasculine roles as wards of the state, and record photos and videos of their 'reprimanding of alleged harassers'" (Rabie, 2015). In Egypt, harassers are now fined (with money which they do not necessarily possess), or alternatively are tortured and beaten in prison, which accumulatively multiplies the exponential abuse they have often already been exposed to and that is likely to be reified and replicated onto others later.

Michael, who was involved with anti-FGM (female genital mutilation) campaigns, similarly states, "there is no such thing as 'reasons' for sexual harassment, but rather there are factors for it, and all organizations need to acknowledge this and how they face it." Michael continues:

If the problem is sexual harassment, we have to deal with the harasser (the active participant) and subject committing harassment and not merely or person harassed (the passive participant)...Moreover, those exposed to harassment cannot just be considered as survivors precisely because harassment manifests in different forms in Egypt.

This perhaps indicates the need for local experimentations with non-statist forms of transformative justice, as Gustavo Esteva (1991) notes in an example from the context of Zapatista communities such as Tepito. In the case of Tepito, "an attempted rape of a four-year-old girl by a neighbor was discovered one day, and the entire *vecindad*," or community, discussed "what to do." They decided that they would not demonize the "harasser and abuser," but rather bear the communal responsibility of their rehabilitation and healing (Esteva, 1991). It was only once the community moved beyond statist practices of justice and retribution that they

were able to actively dictate what reform might look like, and how the community might move forward from such an instance of potential violence.

### **Birth Group A: Learning from and Transcending Group B**

In response to Group B's limited horizons, and conscious of the internalization of Islamophobia amongst feminist and queer Egyptians, Aisha and Sana started Group A, a non-hierarchical, self-funded collective affinity group and knowledge hub, informed by anarchistic principles. In Group A, diverse decisions are engaged "through meetings and by mutual consensus" as much as "disagreements are addressed by talking, and more talking." Group A's objective, Aisha states, is the explicit "production of knowledge and education, as well as the establishment of reading groups and circles, given that we discovered early on that the great majority of feminist movements (*al-harakat al-nisawiya*) in Egypt do not read and don't read critically and we're not talking about blogs or newspaper articles here, but rather books." Aisha relates how founders of Group A "decided we're not going to chase feminists or reform the state, but rather create our own space, where we can engage with non-academic and nonfiction literature, social movement theories, and histories that include reinterpretations of Islam, Muslim, and secular Arab, as well as African and Chicana, feminists, Frantz Fanon, black feminists like Audre Lorde, even online archives and discussions, including, network organizations such as *Women Living Under Muslim Laws*."<sup>6</sup> Besides over-simplistic critiques that could be leveled against Group A for engaging with what Massad considers to be orientalist and liberal Third World feminist organizations like *Women Living Under Muslim Laws*, this should not overshadow Group A's exceptional and revolutionary embrace of feminist queer politics. Group A's goal is to "trouble the relationship and association between 'us and them' [i.e. those we read and those who don't], one step at a



time, by establishing this critical space for sharing, debating, and exchanging knowledge and hopefully its production, not just to earn degrees or to get past schools but rather as a space to genuinely welcome everyone to read and write.” We see here that Group A is concerned with knowledge creation and the fusion of critical race, anti-colonial, and anti-imperial transnational women of color scholarship as well as Arab and Muslim feminisms. This enables participants to theorize their own lives without assimilation or appeals to a queer discourse of rights and the reform of the Egyptian state.

Sana believes that the “best alternative is to create spaces outside the system.” Sana forthrightly admits it is insufficient to “drink, eat, and not talk about” the psychological, mental, emotional, and physical repercussions of mob assaults; rather we must strive “to create a new face, base,” and alternative to them—moving towards mobilized resistance, such that Egyptians can “express, live, and continue their struggles.” As Sana states, “Egypt is in a very dark place right now and it’s broken; broken in terms of faith and the struggle of living, as well as the question of even if we do succeed then what does ‘success’ mean, given there will always people” who are marginalized and disenfranchised. Sana initiated Group A as part of her search for social justice, given her adamant belief that receiving “money for working on social justice issues while you’re sitting in an office” is problematic. Sana indicates that Group A arose from “the absence of adequate and critical education as well as Egyptian society’s arrogance.” Group A publishes zines and has translated Kimberle Crenshaw’s critical work on intersectionality. Group A regularly organizes, as Sana notes, “gender and sexual-based seminars” and has held up to “twenty separate film screenings” since its establishment. Other translated scholarship that Sana mentions includes the work of Audre Lorde and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, and Sara Ahmed’s *Feminist*

*Killjoys*. Group A even established non-stigmatizing HIV/AIDS support networks and “led and facilitated a 12-actor theater production in Upper Egypt” with abused youth. The aim was to use theatrical performances to address and heal trauma, to engage gender and queer issues, and to explore and connect diverse queer urban metropolis themes with those of the rural periphery. Group A’s first gender and queer studies seminar, which I participated in, was held between November and December 2013, and included over sixty applicants and applications that were screened, given expected security concerns and limitations of space.

Topics of seminars range from discussions of sex positivity, to the online and offline reproduction of patriarchy, biophobia and transphobia within queer circles, to the importance of feminist-queer discourses, the surveying of distinct waves of queer feminism in the global North/South in the last century, and post- and decolonial approaches. Sana states that “seminars are often offered as a mixture of both Arabic and English (given that the majority of the literature on contemporary gender and sexuality is in the latter language), while also mobilizing the former, Arabic, to ensure accessibility to participants (who vary in their English reading and writing skills).” Sana states this is also to strategically “encourage and challenge Egyptian participants to begin mobilizing the theoretical tools, experiences, paradigms, and skills they learned towards actively producing knowledge, theorizing, and writing from within their own local indigenous and regional contexts.” Group A, as Sana highlights, struggles with the absence of “translated English to Arabic resources” and hence faces challenges related to “the ‘politics of translating’ gender and sexuality that can be extremely problematic.” Aware of the dangers of the “politics of translation,” Group A engages in its own translations, premised upon what Sana calls “personal initiatives, save what scarcely has already been documented and written in Arabic by Arab and

Muslim feminists.” Outside of Group A’s work, Sana states that English to Arabic translations all too often “remain entrapped within secular/religious and second and third wave feminist debates,” without engaging in social movement and decolonial theories, or even alternative poststructuralist and “transnational feminist discourses, disabilities” and Indigenous studies. Finally, Group A, Sana notes, also contributes to “building social networks of clinics and medical health professionals” to assist same-sex practitioners with safe access to “sexual health facilities and transmitted disease testing (STDs).” Group A, Sana expands, has also sought to raise awareness regarding “HIV and sexual reproductive health” among young marginalized women.

#### **Conclusion: There are Only Middles, No Beginnings and No Ends**

In this article, I described my fieldwork participants’ involvement in social movements and the creative decolonial and abolitionist initiatives they innovated in Egypt. I noted their views on the distinction between *islāh* (liberal-progressive reform) and *al-tajdīd al-thawry* (revolutionary renewal), and what they perceive to be social change and resistance in the context of Tahrir’s January 2011 uprising, as well as the revolutionary events of Mohammad Mahmoud Street and the June 2013 revolt that ousted the Muslim Brotherhood. Running through their discussions is a recognition that an understanding of “queer-feminist Egyptians and Muslims” cannot be achieved outside of the struggle for broad social changes. Their queerness is not centered on a politics of “rights” but rather on a collective politics of responsibility towards the community, even those who would participate in, and uphold the same cis-heteropatriarchal system that they themselves are trying to fight against. The discussion of their local/regional/transnational solidarities and queer activism is not focused on sexuality, but on combatting (non-)state violence and micro-fascisms reproduced by individuals against one another at the molecular

level. My participants are keen on divesting from the state, and they collectively gesture to an abolitionist ethical-political stance that employs queer as an imminent critique of all identity politics, and that addresses all forms of social justice. To them, abolition and decolonization are inherently spiritual acts.

The question remains: What can a decolonial and transnational social justice interpretation of Islam birth theologically, politically, economically, and historically? How can it contribute to transformative justice not only in Egypt, a franchise-colonial society, but in settler-colonial societies like the U.S. and Canada? How can such a revolutionary interpretation elucidate the cyclical relationship between settler- and franchise-colonial societies, and the ways that these relations frame and situate Islam, abolition, feminism, race, and queerness? In a recent article, I argued that “decolonization is also transnational and migrational” (Abdou, 2020). In other words, “it demands that we understand the entwined relationship between conquistador settler-colonial—US and Canada—and franchise colonial societies—like Egypt—that are symbolically, spiritually, historically and materially interrelated. Settler-colonialism, homonationalism, pinkwashing and cis-heteropatriarchy in the US and Canada fuel imperialism and the upholding of military and religious dictatorships abroad” (Abdou, 2020). The consequence of this is the subjugation of entire peoples in postcolonial nations. Conquistador settler-colonialism *can be*, if not in fact *is*, the circulatory agent of another colonialism” (Abdou, 2020). Without contending and divesting from nation-state paradigms that frame abolitionist and decolonial (im)possibilities in postcolonial and settler-colonial societies, it is most likely that gender and sexual harassment will persist in Egypt and elsewhere.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All names have been anonymized.

<sup>2</sup> Angie Abdelmonem, "Reconceptualizing Sexual Harassment in Egypt: A Longitudinal Assessment of El-Taharrush El-Ginsy in Arabic Online Forums and Anti-Sexual Harassment Activism," *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, 1, (2015); Paul Amar, "Turning the Gendered Politics of the Security State inside Out? Charging the Police with Sexual Harassment in Egypt," *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 13(3), (2011); S Hollemeyer Taylor et al., "'When She Stands among Men': Sexual Harassment of Women at Political Protests in Cairo, January 2011–August 2013," *Al Nakhlah, The Fletcher School's Online Journal on Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization* (2014).

<sup>3</sup> During her "interview on Youssri Fouda's *Akhir Kalam* show the next day, Shahba, whose eye was swollen closed over a bruised cheek, noted that when one of the attackers saw her face, he said that he had seen her on TV speaking out against Mubarak during the uprising and that she was not fuloul." Shahba reported "her attackers took her to a police officer, who told the men, 'Whatever you want, I will do it to her'" (Langhor, 2013). Initially, following the Tahrir 2011 uprisings, Langohr notes, "when cases of assault could not be clearly attributed to the army or Muslim Brotherhood supporters, as in the attacks on Eltahawy and Shahba, many revolutionaries hesitated to speak out about assault for fear of ruining the image of Tahrir Square" and therefore "the political parties didn't want to say anything, [because] people were afraid of hurting the image of Tahrir" (Langhor, 2013). However, as Langohr writes, anti-assault activists "reject[ed] the idea that discussing assault 'dishonors' the revolution" and "insist[ed] that victims of protest assault should be honored like any other victim of protest violence (Langhor, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Homonationalism (*al-qawmiyyat al-mithliyyat*) and pinkwashing (*al-ghaseel al-banafsajiy*) refers to the domestication and neutralization of queer communities to white settler-state authority) and cis-heteropatriarchy (which preserves Victorian notions of nuclear family units, privatized routes of inheritance, and the individualist and commoditized ownership of land and nonhuman life). Homonationalization shows that homosexual integration into a nation does not necessarily undermine society's heterosexual structure, and more critically patriarchy. In fact, it supports and conceals the sexist, classist, racist, and colonial/imperial citizenship axes and politics that structure the latter, while simultaneously rendering queer and religious as contradictory terms. Pinkwashing refers to the specific application of homonationalism in the Zionist white-supremacist settler-colonial context of Israel. Both entail the conscription and militarization of LGBTIQ, be it through non-governmental organizations and human rights paradigms that promote gay marriage and Euro-American coming out narratives towards neocolonial and neoimperialist ends.

<sup>5</sup> In one of the incidents, "Ayman Nagy, a founder of the group Against Harassment, participated in the rescue of a woman trapped with her brother in a room in the Arab League building in Tahrir Square. As he wrote in a Facebook note, the woman said that the people in the room had assaulted her, and she felt she had lost her virginity. As activists tried to lift another woman over a fence to safety, men pulled off her clothes while others took pictures with their phones. A tea seller tried to repel the attackers by spraying boiling water at them, scalding Nagy, as the tea seller could not distinguish rescuers from attackers" (Langohr, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> For a deeper discussion of *Women Living Under Muslim Laws*, see Marie-Aimee Helie-Lucas, Marnia Lazreg, see Joseph Massad, *Islam In Liberalism*, 2015.

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