

# Editorial

**Samira Aghacy**

## Roots of Public Harassment

The so-called Arab Spring and the deadly wars that followed have infringed on women's rights, self-esteem, and integrity through acts that include sexual harassment, rape, sexual slavery, and forced displacement. Sexual, verbal, and physical harassment of women participating in the Arab Spring uprisings became increasingly more violent and simultaneously more visible as it became a public strategy to actively curb women's mobility within the public sphere in the face of shifting power relations at both the state and community levels. In the now-infamous example of Tahrir Square, sexual harassment was widespread and not solely perpetrated by the ordinary man on the street, but also by army and security officers who administered 'virginity tests' to female activists, in order to make them somehow accountable for their own abuse and victimization. These were men that were threatened by the number of women who filled the spaces, signifying a threat to normative patriarchal ideas and control. Women on the streets represented the "loosening" of moral values by subverting the public/private divide. The prevalence of images of public harassment and rape contribute to a 'rape culture' perpetrated by phallic forces where virility and misogyny are the prevailing attributes (Thompson, 1993). These forces restrict women's mobility and geographical freedom and discourage them from appearing alone in public places in order to avoid unforeseen assaults and intimidations.

Street harassment is closely linked to gender inequality which intersects with social, religious, ethnic, and political factors. In other words, sexual violence and harassment that take place in the public domain are, as Cynthia Cockburn notes, part of "a continuum of violence in women's lives" (Cockburn, 2004, p. 24). The contention that "the personal is political" underscores the view that experiences once thought to be private – such as sexual and personal relationships – are linked to social and political forces. In that same vein, public harassment remains inextricable from private battery and rape.

The hopes generated by the Arab Spring were short-lived. The region fell into the abyss of political and military conflicts resulting in escalating turmoil and the rise

of extremist groups in the region. The heinous violations committed by the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant is an attempt to break up the social and cultural fabric of the Arab region through mass killing and rape, targeting minorities in the region such as the now-famous case of the mass kidnapping of Yazidi women and girls. Crimes of sexual violence continue to escalate in the wake of such conflict, including rape; forcing girls as young as nine into marriage; trafficking and selling women as slaves and war spoils in the market; and sexual enslavement based on a narrow interpretation of *shari'a*. Women have paid the price: girls were forced into marriage, offered as sacrifices to men for pleasure or sold as slaves and war loots in the market.

As women continue to deal with the havoc that has spread throughout the region they have also demonstrated unparalleled resilience and strength to carry on. Undeterred by such heinous violence, women's rights activists in the region continue to demand equal rights in the private and public spheres. They are engaged in legal reforms to empower women particularly when it comes to marriage and inheritance laws, and in many instances, such as in Tunisia, they are moving forward with undeterred steps.

This issue of *Al-Raida* focuses on women's incessant struggle in the face of regional conflict and how they continue to manage their daily lives at both the personal and communal levels. Ilham Makki's "Yazidi Women: The Concubines of the 21st Century," deals with the monstrous crimes committed against Yazidi women and girls by ISIS in the name of Islam and the equivocal stands taken by male-controlled religious parties and scholars in the area. After conducting interviews with Yazidi victims, Makki calls for a more in-depth understanding of the hidden facets of masculinities and patriarchal ideology that have set the foundation for such a violation of women and girl's rights in the name of Islam.

Najet Limam Tnani's "Tunisian Women at the Crossroad: Between a Feminist Spring and an Islamic Winter," traces the battles waged by Tunisian feminists in the wake of the revolution and the victory of Enahda, including the smear campaigns waged against women on the internet. Nevertheless, women's fierce resistance and indefatigable efforts resulted in a "feminist spring" after an "islamist winter."

Chourouq Nasri's "Abounaddara: The Cinema of Emergency for an Alternative Image of Syria" centers on a group of anonymous Syrian filmmakers who focus on the quotidian lives of Syrian women during the war. Specifically, Abounaddara attempts to present aspects of war neglected in the media such as the lives of women not only as victims, but as survivors. Abounaddara emphasizes women heads of household overwhelmed by dislocation and lack of economic and health support, but not submissive and determined to move on despite all hurdles.

This issue's Mary Tuner Lane Award Winning Undergraduate Paper "Revealing the Mask" explores Nawal Saadawi's work and its impact on the author, Berna Ismail. The piece criticizes the patriarchal and misogynistic focus on virginity, and what virginity actually denotes socioculturally in the Arab region.

Joud Zaumot's "The HAQI Project: Honor Crimes", the Mary Tuner Lane Award Winning Graduate Paper explores Zaumot's idea for a civil society project and

organization in Jordan that would advocate against, and support families of the victims of honor killings. Zaumot highlights, similarly to Ismail, the faulty misogynistic and patriarchal logics underpinning conceptions of virginity and the disproportionate impact virginity has on women and girls in the region. Zaumot's project, called HAQI, would advocate to change legal policy to penalize perpetrators of honor killings and change the sociocultural acceptance of honor killings both in Jordan, and eventually across the greater Arab region.

This issue of *Al-Raida* tracks the progress of women and girls in the aftermath of the so-called Arab uprisings. Attempts at sustainable changes toward gender equality have again and again been stalled and in worst cases, completely stopped as governments across the region have re-established themselves as powerful centralized powers. Feminist activists have experienced an attack on women's rights and have subsequently had to strategize about new ways forward especially in the wake of worsening crises around the region specifically in Syria and Yemen. This issue is a testament to women and girl's continued resilience in the face of physical and sexual violence as the region continues to forge a new way forward in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings.

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