

Salwa's Guide to Fighting Sexual Harassment

Farah Kobaissy

The Adventures of Salwa Campaign was launched online by a group of young and independent feminists working on raising awareness about sexual harassment in Lebanon. Salwa is the young female mascot and the image of their anti-harassment campaign aimed at creating a society free harassment. This short personal piece by Farah Kobaissy explains the reasons behind starting this campaign.

We started out the campaign because we couldn't take it anymore. There's a certain reality that a woman has to live with all her life, and it is called sexual harassment and this made us really angry. Whenever we sat together or with a group of friends and started talking about sexual harassment, each one of us had many stories of harassment to tell.

This is how Rania Ignatius, one of the founding members of *The Adventures of Salwa Campaign*, expressed what drove her and 3 other feminist activists to start a campaign to end sexual harassment in Lebanon especially when they realized that the anger they felt was shared by many women in Lebanon.

According to Rania, it all started online. The idea was to tackle the issue not in the traditional sensational way that the mainstream media usually uses when talking about similar issues. Rania explains: "we wanted to expose this reality while eliminating all the myths that surround the issue. The animated videos of Salwa were the perfect tool to do that". These videos were watched and shared by thousands of people inside and outside of Lebanon. They have been used by women rights NGOs in Malaysia, Sudan, Egypt, and Tunisia as a teaching tool in their activism.



Cover: Salwa's Guide to Fighting Sexual Harassment

These online animated videos of Salwa, an ordinary girl that faces sexual harassment at university, in the office, while walking in the street, or riding in a taxi were well received by people and many women admitted that what Salwa faces is what they experience themselves on a daily basis.

The main message behind these videos is to encourage women to talk about their experiences of sexual harassment and to start breaking the taboo that surrounds this topic and to fight back. In addition to the videos a blog was designed whereby people could share their experiences and recount their stories. According to Ignatius, “the blog also gave us the opportunity to map where the incidents were taking place” (<http://qawemeharassment.com/>).

We discovered that sometimes sexual harassment occurs in sites that are supposed to be some of the safest places for women (i.e. the family home) and that the culprits are often relatives or friends. It also occurs in universities, in the workplace, in public transportation, and on the streets.

Usually there are myths that justify sexual harassment and help normalize it. It was a challenge for us to debunk them one by one. We usually hear that women get sexually harassed “because of the way they dress” or that sexual harassment is the consequence of “sexual frustration” in our society and it occurs only in our “oriental traditional cultures”. These are myths that help justify the act of sexual harassment by blaming the women first and foremost. The reality is that the uneven gender balance of power in our society is the main reason behind sexual harassment. Usually women get harassed because they are seen as “inferior”. Men have more legal rights, they are in positions of power in the government as well as in private and public institutions. In short, they control the public space. So the existence of an environment where men have control over women allows sexual

harassment to happen without any accountability by men or protection for women. Indeed, the absence of legal protection from sexual harassment in Lebanon at the level of the labor law or the penal code makes the act go unpunished.

We tried to challenge many of the myths surrounding sexual harassment and to provide a more in-depth analysis of sexual harassment in a booklet we issued lately called *Salwa's Guide to Fighting Sexual Harassment*. As a society that wants safety, justice, and equality for everyone, we thought that by breaking the secrecy and taboos surrounding the subject, we will be able to confront and end sexual harassment. The message we want to deliver through this campaign is that sexual harassment is not Ok, and that it is Ok to fight it back with all means possible. We want to say that women have the right to feel safe from any kind of sexual assault and that it should be clear that threatening a woman's privacy, her body, her self-esteem and her sense of security is unacceptable. We want to challenge the widespread tolerance towards this phenomenon because only then will we begin to deal with sexual harassment as a serious and pervasive problem that affects the majority of women in Lebanon. Finally we want to change the idea that women are weak and vulnerable and show that women can also be courageous and militant and that they can work together in order to fight sexual harassment that affects their choices in life. So women: Speak Up!

For more information about *The Adventures of Salwa* visit www.adventuresofsalwa.com
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