

Reporting on Rape

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The last twelve months have seen an unprecedented surge in press coverage of rape - be it opinion articles, columns or front page stories. Normally, rape stories appear regularly on the crime pages of both government-controlled and opposition newspapers, be they leftist or Islamist oriented. But two events brought rape to the forefront this year - a fatwa or religious opinion on the rights of rape victims made last November and the revision of the penal code dealing with rape in April 1998.

In late November, the Mufti of Al Azhar, issued a *fatwa* supported by the Grand Sheikh of Al Azhar that women who have been raped are the victims of great injustice inflicted upon them by society and that "it is up to society and the state which failed to protect a raped woman to repair what was damaged through an operation to restore her virginity". The highly controversial *fatwa* helped break the silence on this issue - the fact that the highest representatives of the Islamic establishment were talking very openly about what was a highly stigmatized hush-hush subject. Having avoided reporting or writing about it altogether in our news-

paper, the *fatwa* gave us the mandate to use that as a peg on which to address the issue. It was the same for many newspapers in Egypt.

The content of the *fatwa* was fiercely debated by those who supported it and those who fiercely opposed it. Both sides had one thing in common - their concern for anyone and anything but the suffering and welfare of the woman. Those who supported the decree were supporting it on the basis of *satr* - or protection of the family honor and to a much lesser degree the woman's marriageability. As for the articles and viewpoints, they widely expressed their opposition to the *fatwa* in many newspapers - their argument was in defense of the rights of the victims' future husbands. Hymen repair, they argued, meant that the women pretended to be real virgins when they were not - and this was an act of

sheer deceit. Thus, the victims were no longer the women subjected to assault, it was the poor men who were victims of cheating operations. In the intensely patriarchal debates that followed in the press, it seemed almost impossible to shift the focus from men as the center of the debates to talk about women. Many articles failed to get beyond the obsession with virginity - represented in - a piece of a tissue imbued with all kinds of cultural symbols of religious uprightness and defense of traditions and social customs. In the light of that, it is no wonder that one or two articles openly suggested that the Mufti's *fatwa* legitimizing hymen repair for victims of rape was legitimizing sexual promiscuity. If women believed they could get away with "faking" their virginity, what would stop them from pursuing all kinds of illegitimate relationships?

Though there were some women's voices in the press commenting on this issue, they were few. Many female activists, social workers and psychiatrists welcomed the Mufti's and the Grand-Sheikh's recognition that the assault women were subject to is through no fault of their own. However, they also argued that rather than suggesting hymen repair, social beliefs - and the obsession with the hymen - should be addressed, challenged and uprooted from the social fabric of the country.

Round about the same time as the Mufti's *fatwa*, serious talk in the press began about rape as a phenomenon. So-called experts (most often male) began to give reasons why they think we have so many rape cases today though official statistics on incidence of rape are humorously low, so low that nobody believes them. Many social workers, psychiatrists and women activists believe that the low rape statistics in the country are due to the fact that only women who cannot hide "the scandal" report assault. If you manage to hide it, you don't report it. I strongly believe that the press has a role to play in this. It would not take a great deal to convince a woman reading the crime page that if ever she was subject to any kind of assault she should make sure she doesn't report it, because if it ends up in the newspaper, she will be accused of having asked for it. Except in few rare cases of gang rape and assault on children, reports always construe women as having done something to bring about their predicament.

These statements can sometimes be very explicit like "it is believed that the woman was involved in an amorous/emo-



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tional relationship with the man accused.” You can guess what the message the reporters are trying to get across. Implicit suggestions of women having provoked it tend to be many: i.e. she was returning home late from work; she was walking in a dark street; she was reputed to be out of the house a lot; she was dressed inappropriately.

I believe that if the press continues to portray victims of assault as lewd, liars and pretenders, - we can rest assured that the percentage of women who report rape will continue to be low. Virtually every day, women are reading reports which instill a sense of shame and guilt about any exposure to assault- subconsciously, this must have an impact.

Interestingly enough, there was one small positive move: there were more reports appearing of cases of women reporting rape and then dropping charges when their assaulters offered to marry them. There were a couple of famous cases this year that provoked a mass public outcry when the victim married one of the rapists who gang raped her and dropped all charges. It came more or less in the dawn of the repeal of clause 291 of the penal code. Clause 290 of the Penal Code stipulates that rape is punishable by death; however, clause 291 says that if a rapist offers to marry the victim, and she agrees, all criminal charges are automatically dropped. The repeal of the clause was approved by Parliament last April which sought to put an end to rape crimes. They will no longer be able to commit their crime and get away with it.

Many articles hailed the move as a significant gain in women's rights. But there were also articles arguing that the repeal of the clause was a bad idea because it took away a form of *satr* - or protection for the woman and her family from social stigmatization. Her psychological trauma, her subjection to continued rape etc. were mostly kept out of the writings. Again, the repeal of the clause increased press discussion of causes of rape and the means to decrease rape incidents. These articles are distorted since rape was not examined as an act of violence but the outcome of sexual frustration/deprivation/arousal. Dr Aida Seif el Dawla, a prominent Egyptian feminist and psychiatrist, noted that there is often a pornographic element in the reporting of rape in the details of what made him do it, how she resisted, how he overcome her etc.

An interview with the rapist who raped a housewife, featured in a magazine a few years ago, had a subheading which read something like: “she was white, plump and beautiful” - the purpose of it was not to shock but indulge

readers in voyeurism. And since rape is discussed as an act of sexual deprivation, many of the opinion articles suggested that if you help youth get married early - i.e. fulfill their sexual desires rape would be on the drop. If the government provides jobs for the youth, they will not have to live so many years without the prospects of getting married, and of course once they are married, they won't be suffering from sexual frustration and will not rape women.

Rapists are referred to in the press, not as men but as wolves. A very interesting point about rape is that so far, I have not seen one report about it where the rapists were not referred to as wolves: “three wolves committed a savage crime”, “the wolf kidnapped a young girl” etc. By referring

to them as wolves, Aida Seif el Dawla insists, they are categorizing them as different from the rest of the men, who would never do that. I am not saying that reports should be written on the premise that all men are potential rapists, but this “wolves” business is out of touch with reality - since happily, married men with children do commit acts of rape too.

So, where is all of this leading to? The point I am trying to make is that the *fatwa* and the repeal of the clause were two relatively progressive steps forward in favor of a more humane treatment of victims of rape, but the

press messed it up. They could have taken this opportunity of breaking the culture of silence on rape to address why victims have such a grim predicament and how that can be changed - but they didn't. Instead, the myths and biases were reiterated, and the press, in some ways, only confirmed reactionary ideas that if only women were more out of the public eye, if only they went back home, so many of our social ills - such as rape - would be avoided.

Important questions such as why we don't have shelters, why we don't have a hotline, how sensitive are our police stations and judiciary system were all left out of the debate. It was not about women; it was about women's bodies, and the preservation of certain power relations in society.

We must work to dispel the myths, have active NGOs collaborate more with the media in getting through the facts right, and training journalists, especially crime journalists on reporting the facts regardless of prejudice. The last word must be to the women who read the most sensationalist distorted articles about rape and do nothing to complain to the newspapers.

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