



# WILL THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION BRING MORE SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR WOMEN?

## **The Case Against cyber women harassment in the MENA Region.**

By Khadija Hamouchi for DAN

The recent Fairmont Hotel case in Cairo sparked yet another triggering conversation on social media about cyber harassment and sexual abuse towards women in Egypt, and by extension, the wider Arab world. The sordid affair recounts the gang rape of a young girl by a group of young men from prominent families; recording their crime on camera. This time, the unwavering support and advocacy of the many social media users and social activists brought the criminals to justice.

Unfortunately, one cannot say the same for the one in three Palestinian women who are subject to harassment online including receiving unrequested inappropriate pictures, having personal details published, and having their social media accounts hacked - as reported by the Arab Centre for the Ad-

vancement of Social Media in 2018. And indeed, not the case, for the many million Arab women, subject to and victim of such unaccounted and undocumented violence daily, both online and offline. And that is probably where social injustice starts, the erroneous percentage of the cybercrimes in the region does not acknowledge the magnitude of the problem nor the experience of victims.

More than a public health issue, this phenomenon is now a silent pandemic, touching women from across the social spectrum in the Arab world. There are anecdotal reports of female politicians in Tunisia and Iraq being harassed online for their political work. In Egypt, young female professionals are moving homes after their addresses, and phone numbers are widely shared, including with the perpetrators

and their families. In Lebanon, female journalists and activists are being bullied and discredited for their reports and opinions on social media. And in many instances, consequences are far devastating. In Bahrain, a thirteen-year-old girl was raped by a male predator, who adopted a young girl's identity, after grooming her on Instagram. And for the sake of equal treatment, the case of the Fairmont Hotel has shown that perpetrators come from all social strata, even among the wealthiest, an idea that still needs to make its way in the belief system of many Arab citizens.

Now that the Covid19 era has pushed us all online, the magnitude of the problem is becoming alarming. If social media and other online platforms have given many women the flexibility they needed to juggle family life and careers, it has exposed them even more to online harassment. ***"Technology assisted violence against women in many ways"***, bluntly says Raed Sharif, the senior regional programme manager of the Canadian SecDev foundation. The illegal and pernicious retrieval and sharing of private information, including intimate pictures, and the ensuing blackmailing for monetary gain have risen since governments ordered confinement and curfews. Beyond trauma and other psychological consequences, this violence exacerbates the already wide digital divide between genders, substantially reducing internet and device usage among women.

Responses to such increase have not fallen short in the region. The numerous media campaigns against sexual harassment such as the regional #Ismaani (HearMe), the Tunisian #EnaZeda (Me too), the Palestinian #NotYourHabibti (Not your sweetheart), the Lebanese #MeshAyb (No shame) and recent viral video ***"Baklawah got legs"*** by the non-profit Abaad have proven to keep the conversation going as part of the solutions demanded by the victims themselves: women. However, these needed and admirable responses never seemed to cut it entirely for victims or end the social phenomena. And somehow, in a romanesque plot twist, the victims and their supporters manoeuvred their perpetrators' weapons.

The wound is the place where the light enters you, once wisely said Rumi. And if sexual harassment has now gone online, its solution might as well be it. We may all agree that the digital world has collided altogether with our real physical lives. Hence why solutions for prevention, immediate intervention, and post-harassment healing had likewise to surf digitally. ***"If there is one thing that is going to solve the problem, it is going to be technology, bringing some sort of deterrence and punishment to harassers"***, confidently states Pance Nwaisair, the founder of 7emaya, the first informal incubator building technology solu-

tions against online and offline sexual harassment in Egypt. And indeed, in all sorts of ways, it does.

Local activists and organisations have used social media platforms to raise awareness and educate civilians on the phenomenon in the vernacular language such as the Salam@, the digital safety campaign, launched by the Canadian SecDev foundation or the recent anti-sexual harassment online summit by the E7na Foundation (We, in dialectal Arabic). Regionally, there is still a considerable lack of knowledge and skills regarding the risks of online engagement. The platforms' network effects have amplified such efforts, provided more significant reach, and, most importantly, allowed for individual engagement from everyone: men, family members, and parents in particular. ***"I believe in education and awareness rather than in shaming and attacking so that we can allow people to make the change"***, summarises Soraya Baghat, an Egyptian women's rights advocate and founder of Tahrir BodyGuards during the 2011 revolution in Egypt.

For victims themselves, social media platforms were a needed coping mechanism; which amplified women's voices, albeit anonymous, and shattered all shame associated with the experience. Behind their screens and using pseudonyms, women found comfort, trust, and a sense of renewed energy in expressing their experience, in having their pain acknowledged, as well as in fighting back as a group. In sharing their struggle, they finally felt heard. Such a contrast to the slander and the blame they swallow as victims in many gender insensitive police stations around the region. ***"We need to normalise speaking about those problems to help survivors speak about the problem. Not one platform will be too many"***, asserts Sarah Yassin, co-founder of the E7na Foundation. The Egyptian Instagram account, Assault Police, led by the young and courageous Nadeen Ashraf, has amassed over two hundred followers. Similarly, in Morocco, the Facebook page, Masaktach, (Don't be silent in Moroccan dialect), has gathered a sizable audience. Both accounts have shown notable successes in breaking the silence around rape and sexual harassment cultures in their respective societies.

For the wider community, digital solutions and online other campaigns such as #WeSeeYou, Egypt's first safety campaign for late-night parties and the Egyptian Dare App gave the opportunity to expose, name, and shame the abuser. Consequently, it provided users with a sense of community and fellowship in being part of a cause and its solution. Directly available in people's hands, these mobile applications empower their users to participate, whether in prevention, immediate intervention, and post-harassment phases; providing existing organisations

and newly established initiatives that victims and witnesses can reach out to for help. ***“These communities act like connectors in the face of the loneliness of the assault”***, explains Nwaisar. If those digital means cannot immediately halt all sexual harassment, it has undoubtedly proven to deter the harassers, having previously counted on their victims’ silence and fear to pursue their (sick) behaviours with total impunity. ***“All these digital tools diminish the power of the abusers over the victim; letting them face the unpredictability of the consequences of events, communities, and technologies they are not part of”***, adds Nwaisar.

Taking their pain online has provided victims with some sort of healing. Nevertheless, with the enormous pressures of patriarchal societies, the immediate challenge lies in the recovery of the victims; ensuring that they do not internalise the blame; worse, normalise that behaviour. ***“Unfortunately, in Egypt and the wider Arab world, as a woman, you still bear responsibility for your sexual abuse. The percentage of the responsibility depends on how much you deviated from the standard cultural norm”***, deplores Baghat. Against popular belief, online harassment not only attacks one victim; it touches families, homes, and neighbourhoods in such small interwoven societies in the Arab world. ***“While we have established methodologies to counsel street harassment cases, tackling the trauma from online harassment is a completely different game”***, says Sherif. Therefore, hiring empathic women and men as front-liners for such cases is a must to rebuild trust women have in their fellow citizens and use digital means. In Egypt, the mobile app Matkhafeesh (Don’t be scared), launched to offer social, mental and legal support to victims and their families.

And like everything else in modern societies governed by the rule of law, healing cannot fully occur without substantial legislation. All the recent and ongoing calls for action on social media have been just around: reviewing the extent of the social and legal framework to protect women from sexual crimes online and offline. Only nine out of the twenty-two Arab countries have clear anti-sexual harassment laws in place. The remaining thirteen countries are merely lagging. Among the nine countries, Morocco and Jordan have included provisions for online cyber crimes against women. In a region where the law changes are a gruesome process, we have recently seen beams of lights. Last August 2020, Egypt had finally approved the law that gives victims sexual harassment or assault automatic right to anonymity; albeit not fully respected within police stations where police officers still disclose the victim’s details to the perpetrators’ families. As long as laws are not applied, citizens of the Middle East and North Africa

will have to continue creating ways to pressure perpetrators in a culturally understandable way: online shame.

In the meantime, much of the existing technologies still need to adapt to the immediacy of the attack. For years, women’s rights activists have been requesting social media to put protection and accountability measures in ensuring harmful comments, chats, and other predatory acts and the abusers, are being dealt efficiently and rapidly. ***“Instagram is now listening”***, says joyfully Baghat. And indeed, in a world where the user has become the product, it is up to users to reclaim their power over these apps and hold these companies accountable to bring justice victims have been demanding for too long.

