March 4, 2011 marked the beginning of a new era in Egyptian history, as longtime president Hosni Mubarak was swept from power by a wave of mass demonstrations across the country. The end of that repressive regime, however, did not herald an end to the problems that had plagued Egyptian society – among them widespread sexual harassment and assault. For years, women in Egypt had endured pervasive street harassment ranging from catcalls and groping to mass sexual attacks. The revolution provided a brief respite as women joined with men to protest, and as one woman said, “In three weeks of revolution we did not experience any sexual harassment by men. What civilization emerged in these weeks! What culture!”

But with the post-Mubarak security vacuum came increasingly violent sexual assaults on women in public spaces.
Cairo’s Tahrir Square, known around the world as the heart of the revolution, swiftly transformed into an unwelcoming place for women; on the very night that Mubarak fell, CBS correspondent Lara Logan and many other women were sexually assaulted by mobs.

According to Amnesty International, “Testimonies from victims and those attempting to save them paint a frightening picture: tens if not hundreds of men surrounding the victims with countless hands tearing off clothes and veils, unzipping trousers and groping breasts, nipples and backsides. In some cases these attacks meet the definition of rape, including penetration with fingers and sharp objects.”

One British journalist described her ordeal: “Men began to rip off my clothes. I was stripped naked… Hundreds of men pulled my limbs apart and threw me around. They were scratching and clenching my breasts and forcing their fingers inside me in every possible way… All I could see was leering faces, more and more faces sneering and jeering as I was tossed around like fresh meat among starving lions.”

As one Egyptian women’s rights activist put it, “We do not want to use the term ‘harassment.’ What is happening today is sexual terrorism.”

This disturbing trend has spawned another revolution, by Egyptians striving to empower women, protect them from assault, and change anti-woman societal norms that blame victims. HarassMap is an online service that enables women to report their experiences of harassment and
assault via SMS, informs them of services such as free counseling, and maps the incidents online. HarassMap also conducts outreach to raise awareness of sexual harassment and assault and encourage Egyptians to stand up against perpetrators and protect victims. The project was founded in December 2010 by a group of women’s rights activists who sought to break down victims’ “feeling of isolation and give a voice to those who would otherwise hesitate to speak.” The demand for the service was so great that within an hour of the beta launch, the HarassMap server crashed.

Goals and Objectives

HarassMap’s main goal is to “change the environment in the streets that tolerates harassment.” As project co-founder Rebecca Chiao says, “We want people to say, ‘This will not be tolerated. This doesn’t fit with our Egyptian values or our tradition or history. It’s a new trend and it has to be stopped.’”

HarassMap includes four main components. First, women who experience harassment can send an anonymous text message or log onto the HarassMap website to report their experience. HarassMap then sends automated responses to each report with information on how to access free services – filing a police report, getting legal aid or psychological help, or taking a self-defense class. Volunteers review reports, culling any that do not list a location or provide enough detail, and sorting them into categories such as

جرح محقوق نگه داشته و هنگامه اجتماعی

 защитا از رایگان رسیدن و راهبردی کنند. طرح آنلاین فوق همچنین وسیلهای است برای آگاهی رسانی به مصوبان در رابطه با آزار و اذیت جنسی و ترغیب آنها تا لذش برای پاسداران از قربانیان این وقائع و استادی خدایی در تاریک جهان آنها این طرح در دسامبر 2010 میلادی از سوی گروهی از فعالان حقوق زنان و کنشگرانی که در پی شکستن دوبار ازدواج این جنسیت و استیضاح و همصدای زنانی که به سختی لب به سختی می گانند، بودند، با پیشی نشست. تفاوتی کاربران برای خدمات ارائه شده از سوی این تاریکا به حذف یک تکنیک مسترد آن، سرور این تاریکا باز است.\\n
اهداف و مقاصد

هدف اصلی تاریکا، دگرگون ساختن شرایط، در کوچه و خیابانی است که آزار و اذیت جنسی را پرتابه و تحمل می کند، ریکا چنان که یکی از پایه‌گذاران این طرح، می گوید: “اما می خواهیم مردم گویند که دیگر این گونه اعمال را تحمل نخواهند کرد. به این معنی نه به شدت نه در روزی که می باست جلوی آن را به چهار زودتر گرفت، این طرح از جهان جزء یک تکنیک شده است. نخست، هر گونه می تواند شرکت روداد را یا یک پایه یا ناشناس، یا وصل شدن به تاریکا، گواش دهنده. رایونه مزبور، با ارسال
“indecent exposure,” “sexual invites,” “stalking or following,” “catcalls,” or “groping.”

HarassMap then maps each incident online, using the text message system Frontline SMS to collate the messages and the online mapping system Ushahidi to plot the locations out. The online map not only provides evidence that harassment exists for those who deny it, it also helps to “break the stereotypes that lead to inaction: ‘harassment doesn’t happen in my neighborhood,’ ‘it only happens to non-veiled girls,’ ‘it happens in dark streets at night,’ or by young men who can’t get married,” all of which are proven false by HarassMap’s reports.9

This evidence provides support for HarassMap’s community outreach and prevention efforts, which are the project’s primary focus. Volunteers across Egypt ask for civic support from policemen, shop owners, and others on the streets in their neighborhoods, most of whom agree to stand up against harassment they witness rather than looking the other way.10

Leadership

The idea for HarassMap originated with Rebecca Chiao, an American who had moved to Egypt to work with the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights (ECWR), and Engy Ghozlan, an Egyptian women’s rights activist who also worked with ECWR. The organization’s volunteers experienced street harassment on a daily basis and would routinely share their frustration with
each other. “One day,” Chiao recalled, “we looked at one another and said that we all work for a women’s rights organization and that we should do something about this!” Chiao and Ghozlan began working on an anti-harassment campaign with ECWR, and through their networking with other women’s rights organizations, they met Amal Fahmy, who worked for the United Nations Population Fund, and Sawsan Gad, who had experience with geographic information systems, or mapping.

The idea of mapping sexual harassment came from NIJEL, a project that helps organizations share information through online maps; when a NIJEL partner’s wife was harassed in Cairo, he approached the women and offered the project’s mapping services for free as a tool to track sexual harassment in Egypt. Since access to mobile phones is widespread in Egypt, the women realized that being able to immediately report harassment via text message would restore women with “the agency to respond to the way they’ve been treated” rather than suffering in silence.

Together, they founded HarassMap as an entirely volunteer-driven grassroots project, with technical assistance from NIJEL and legal aid from a local law office. While initially the co-founders spent a great deal of time trying to legally register HarassMap with the government, they decided to remain an un-funded volunteer group in order to circumvent prohibitive requirements for registration. Over the
following two years, though, with funding from Canada’s International Development Research Center, HarassMap grew to include over ten paid staff members and 500 volunteers in nine governorates across Egypt, from Alexandria to Asyut.\textsuperscript{16}

**Civic Environment**

Sexual harassment is a problem that has long affected women in Egypt; according to a 2008 ECWR survey, 98% of foreign women and 83% of Egyptian women have been sexually harassed.\textsuperscript{17} Half of women experience harassment on a daily basis, and women are especially vulnerable to sexual attack in mass holiday gatherings and political protests.\textsuperscript{18} For example, during 2012’s Eid al-Adha, the holiday marking the end of Ramadan, 727 cases of sexual harassment – many of which took place in front of policemen who did not intervene – were reported to security forces.\textsuperscript{19}

This harassment circumscribes women’s lives in myriad ways; as one of HarassMap’s co-founders writes, “I grew up in Cairo learning how to strategize my life to avoid sexual harassment. I would make sure to run my errands during a
football match when men and boys in the neighborhood are busy watching…I had to go out at expensive restaurants but not the more affordable ‘men-only’ cafes or free public parks, and I had to resort to private taxi rides over public buses. I even turned down jobs because they had no accessible parking, which [would] take me back to the dreadful public bus. And even with all these precautions, I [would still be] still harassed in the few minutes that I have to walk every day between my parked car and any building.19

Meanwhile, societal attitudes place the blame for such attacks on women, their attire or their presence in a crowded public place. A 2008 viral online ad campaign captured this attitude, with an image displaying a wrapped lollipop next to an unwrapped lollipop with flies clustered on it, captioned “You can’t stop them, but you can protect yourself,” that is, by donning the hijab (headscarf).20 As a result of these attitudes, many women feel pressure not to speak about their experiences of sexual harassment and assault, for fear that they will be blamed and their reputation will be damaged. In fact, 97 percent of Egyptian women who have experienced sexual harassment did not go to the police “because they didn’t think it was important or because no one would help them.”21 This is not to mention that police frequently harass women themselves.

In fact, sexual harassment is not just a social phenomenon but has also been used by authorities as a way to deter women
from participation in the public sphere. At a Tahrir Square protest on March 9, 2011, a group of female protestors were arrested, beaten, given electric shocks, and strip-searched while being photographed by soldiers.  

Seven women were threatened with prostitution charges and made to submit to “virginity tests” during which a doctor examined their hymens while soldiers watched and laughed. A senior general justified this violation by saying, “The girls who were detained were not like your daughter or mine. These were girls who had camped out in tents with male protesters in Tahrir Square, and we found in the tents Molotov cocktails and drugs,” and that furthermore, none of the women were virgins. While a civilian court found the “virginity tests” to be illegal, the only military officer charged in the matter was acquitted. 

In December 2011, a widely-circulated image of a woman brutally beaten and stripped to the point that her bra was exposed by soldiers sparked outrage. At the same time, as one Egyptian woman pointed out, “Many people said she had brought it on herself. What was she doing there in the first place? Why was she dressed like that?” In early 2013, a Salafi preacher expressed an extreme version of this perspective as he scoffed at the idea that “naked women, who are going to Tahrir Square because they want to be raped, are off limits,” calling them “devils” and criticizing their lack of modesty.

گونه باور و روبه‌روی اجتماعی را ترسیم کرد: در حالی که یک گروه جوانان دختر با پوشش در کنار یک گروه جوانان دختر پوشیده از آن گم، تصور به جمجمه، ذهنی به می‌گفت، جلوی شان را نمی‌توانی بگیری، تا خودت را "همیشه مخفوف نگاه بداری"، به عبارت دیگر، "حجاب سرت کن تا این بلا سرت نایدا"! به همین دلیل است که برای این زنان قربانی ترجیح می‌دهند که سرت کند و مورد سرزمین محکوم نشود. قرار نگیرد و آبی‌ها را به خودشان ریخته نشود. در واقع، وجوه‌های آن‌ها نمی‌کند، به‌بنای آن دلیل که فکر می‌کرد مهم نیست و با اینکه اصولاً انتظار کمکی هم از آنان ندارند، "بررویه‌های انطاقی اغلب از جمله مرکب‌های آزار و اذیت جنسی می‌باشند.

آزار جنسی تهاکی معطل اجتماعی نیست بلکه مسئولین از آن به عنوان ابزار برای دور نهاده‌شدن زنان از عرصه عامیانه نیز استفاده می‌کنند. در نظر نگه‌دارنده‌ها، گروهی از زنان معرض دستگیری شده، مورد ضرب و شتم و سیاسی بارک‌رسی بدنی لخت قرار می‌گیرند، آن هم در برای دوربین‌های عکاسی سراسری و دیگر مأمورین امنیتی! در این میان، 7 تن از زنان پازداشت‌شده به جرم اولپی روسی‌گری تهیه و مجزاب می‌شوند. بگمی که خود را در حضور پرشک و دید تمسخری و قهقه‌های مقرونوستی "آزمایش" گذاشته و به آزمون پیکرت علی اکرت. یکی از همین زنان می‌گوید: "آن روز، واقعاً آروزی مرگ کردم." یکی از امیران ارتش نیروهای مسلح، نجات‌های فوق‌العاده را چنین توجه کرده است: "این دختران مثل دختر من و شما نیستند. ما آنها را زیر چادره‌هایان در میدان التحریر همراه با مردان نامحر، با کانال مولوتوف..."
Many excuse sexual harassment as the natural product of repressed sexuality. Because of the weak Egyptian economy, many men cannot afford to get married and must continue to live at home with their parents. In addition, premarital sex is frowned upon, and so – some say – men vent their frustration by harassing women. However, the fact that both married men and prepubescent boys harass women undermines this theory.

The HarassMap team has been accused of trying to smear Egypt’s reputation by drawing attention to sexual harassment. The project has responded by sending out a clear message that “We love Egypt; we do not want to leave; therefore, we are not letting harassment push us away. If I have a problem in my house, like water leaking...I do not hide it, or just abandon my home...I fix it, and this is the way we..."
feel about social issues.”

Especially in the wake of post-revolution instability, HarassMap volunteers have experienced a backlash against their work, as some deem sexual harassment insignificant next to Egypt’s other problems; Chiao says, “There’s a propaganda campaign against us, saying now is not the time for women’s rights.” Nonetheless, HarassMap volunteers are determined to continue their work; as Chiao says, “There’s not a time for men and a time for women…it’s a time to build the future of our country right now…for all of us. If any group is excluded from that, it’s not the future that we want to see.”

Message and Audience

HarassMap strives to influence bystanders rather than harassers themselves, in order to “build a community that makes it more uncomfortable for harassers to act like they do now.” As a community-based project, HarassMap does not “tell people what they should...[or] shouldn’t be doing. We talk to them as neighbors.” Volunteers – half of whom are men – are trained to assemble community outreach groups in their own neighborhoods. On a monthly basis, over 500 volunteers go into their neighborhoods across Egypt to speak with “people who have a presence in the street – shop owners, police, the guys that park cars, the doormen,” asking them to watch out for sexual harassment and to stand up against harassers.

During outreach, volunteers emphasize
that sexual harassment is a recent problem and “completely out of step with [Egyptian] traditions and values.”36 Volunteers go on to describe Egyptian tradition, recalling how in the past, bystanders would stand up to defend women, even to the point of chasing down harassers and shaving their heads as a mark of shame. They say, “Wouldn’t it be great if we could together make this happen again and be proud of our streets and…the dignity and culture of our society?”37

Volunteers use the project’s map of sexual harassment incidents and eyewitness stories to show people that harassment really does happen in their own neighborhoods, and they “are often shocked and angered when they realize how common [it] really is, that it happens on their streets and to all kinds of people.”38 Volunteers ultimately ask the people they speak with to “send the message: harassment will not be tolerated!”39

Although usually HarassMap volunteers are first met with resistance, by the end of the conversation, “most people are not just agreeing, but they are enthusiastic and want to take action”; in fact, eight out of ten people typically become supporters.40 These community leaders receive stickers and posters declaring their shops harassment-free zones. In exchange, the businesses are promoted on the HarassMap website as safe places for women.41

In addition to face-to-face outreach, the Internet and mobile phones play a key
role in attracting sexual harassment reports and new volunteers; Chiao says, “With social media, [HarassMap] is growing. As soon as someone hears about your work, they can click the link and volunteer and recruit their friends. The effort to get people engaged is much less.” Moreover, as the number of cell phone users in Egypt has grown to 92 million – a penetration rate of 113 percent – the project’s reach has expanded further, even to “remote villages we would never have been able to reach without technology.”

Outreach Activities

The HarassMap team has networked with women’s rights activists around the world; the project was inspired in part by the Blank Noise campaign against street harassment in India. HarassMap has also worked with the US-based Hollaback movement, which similarly enables women to report their experiences of street harassment online. The project has also helped activists in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Palestine to launch local versions of HarassMap, and HarassMap is also assisting groups in Libya, Turkey, South Africa, the United States, Canada, Iran, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, Cambodia, and Morocco to set up their own maps. HarassMap also worked with groups in Lebanon and Sudan to encourage Internet users to blog and tweet about sexual harassment (#EndSH) on June 20, 2011; in that one day, the campaign attracted hundreds of tweets and over a hundred
HarassMap has also formed partnerships with local NGOs and independent groups and activists to organize activities like art exhibitions, performances of HarassMap reports, open mics, graffiti campaigns, and more. The project also partnered with the creators of the film 678, released in December 2010, which spotlighted the problem of sexual harassment in Egypt; before the movie’s release, the HarassMap team met with its creators and discussed the issue with them, then partnered with the film’s stars on outreach programs.

As HarassMap works to end tolerance of sexual harassment, others have joined the fight. Volunteer groups OpAntiSH and Tahrir Bodyguard, both founded in November 2012, patrol mass gatherings in Tahrir Square, where they intervene to stop sexual attacks, take victims to a safe area, and provide them with medical and psychological support. The groups also pass out hotline numbers that can be used, along with Facebook or Twitter...
posts, to report assaults so that volunteers can respond. They are also launching additional activities, such as free self-defense classes and coordination with political parties to ensure that they provide volunteers to fight sexual harassment during demonstrations. As a Tahrir Bodyguard representative says, “Women have the right to protest in the square, and we are here to protect them and help them protect themselves.”

Between HarassMap’s launch and early 2013, it collected and mapped nearly 1,000 reports of harassment and gathered surveys from almost 10,000 women. HarassMap receives about 20,000 page views per month. As a result of these achievements, the project has been recognized internationally, winning the UNDP’s World Summit Youth Award in the “Power 2 Women” category in 2011. The next year, it won Deutsche Welle’s Best of the Blogs (BOBs) award for “best use of technology for social good.”

In 2013, HarassMap plans to launch an educational program through which teachers and volunteers from public schools and universities will be trained in how to address sexual harassment, including activities adapted for an audience of young people. The project also plans to expand its community outreach beyond the streets, to malls, restaurants, and public transportation.

As Nehad Abul Komsan, head of the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights, says, “This is a silent crime. But now more
women are talking about it,” thanks to the efforts of projects like HarassMap. HarassMap has empowered women with the ability to report harassment and has begun the hard work of ending societal tolerance for this trend. As Egyptians are taking on more personal responsibility for their country, Chiao says, “People don’t feel powerless anymore. They’re ready to exercise their power right now. In the midst of all the political mess...this is something really hopeful.”

Footnotes

4. “Egyptian women and ‘Tahrir Bodyguards’ declare war against rampant ‘sexual terrorism.’” Agence France-Presse. 5 March 2013. http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2013/03/05/egyptian-women-and-tahri r-bodyguar...


52. UNDP’s World Summit Youth Award in the “Power 2 Women” category in 2011


Learn More

News and Analysis

HarassMap website.


Lee, Ian and Teo Kermeliotis. “‘Harassment Map’ helps Egyptian women stand up for their rights.” 21 Dec. 2012. CNN.


Videos

