

Egyptian women describe sexual abuse by officials as routine

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These women, speaking publicly for the first time, talked about sexual violations that they said had been committed in police stations, prisons and hospitals in Egypt.

Women chant slogans at a protest against sexual harassment in front of the opera house in Cairo. (Photo: Reuters)

They were either arrested for speaking out or had gone to the authorities to report a crime. In each case, they said, they were sexually abused by the officials sworn to protect them.

Whether they are victims of crimes, witnesses or the accused, women who encounter Egypt's criminal justice system risk being taken aside and stripped, groped, prodded and violated.

This treatment is illegal, but in this authoritarian and patriarchal country, there is almost nothing they can do about it.

These women, speaking publicly for the first time, described sexual violations that they said had been committed in police stations, prisons and hospitals.

Some occurred during routine searches by the police or prison guards, the women said. Others were carried out by state-employed doctors ordered to conduct invasive physical exams, including so-called virginity tests.

There is no public data on the number of these incidents, which rights groups say may amount to torture and sexual assault. And women in Egypt rarely report them because sexual assault victims are often shunned and disparaged.

But civil society groups, experts, lawyers and therapists say there is enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that it happens frequently.

The New York Times found a dozen women who recounted similar experiences. Most spoke anonymously, fearing arrest and worried about stigmatizing their families.

Government officials have generally dismissed and denied accounts of systemic abuse, insisting that they are conducting standard searches that are lawful and necessary in investigations or to keep contraband out of prisons.

Officials at the Ministry of the Interior, which oversees the police and prisons, and the Public Prosecutor's office did not respond to requests for comment.

One police officer, however, who worked for years in a police precinct and a prison, said that sexual abuse of women by legal authorities was "everywhere." Speaking on the condition of anonymity because he was afraid of retribution, he said that the aim was not to gather evidence or search for contraband but to "humiliate your humanity."

Search as Punishment

Asmaa Abdel Hamid, 29, was arrested in Cairo for protesting an increase in subway fares. She said she was subjected to invasive searches three times.

The first was in police custody, when a female inspector forced her to strip, grabbed her breasts and watched her urinate.

The second was in a public hospital, in front of a male doctor, with the curtain half drawn, exposing her naked body to a group of officers. The doctor told her to bend down and pull apart her buttocks. He then made her lie down and he looked between her legs. He said he was investigating whether she was a virgin.

The third time was in prison, during intake. A guard penetrated Abdel Hamid anally using her finger wrapped in a plastic bag that she picked up off the floor.

Arrested in 2018 for raising a sign objecting to the new ticket prices, Abdel Hamid was charged with joining a terrorist organization, disrupting the constitution and interrupting public transportation.

Rights groups say these searches constitute cruel and inhumane treatment that is prohibited under international law.

“Women are essentially describing being violated and being assaulted,” said Rothna Begum, a senior women’s rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Strip searching can be considered OK in certain contexts as part of security measures but the intention here seems to be to degrade them.”

In Abdel Hamid’s case, the intention also seems to be to quash dissent, even about an issue as minor as subway fares.

Egypt has deployed sexual violence to intimidate political opposition before.

After the military detained at least 18 women at a protest in 2011, strip searched them and subjected them to virginity tests, President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, who was then the head of military intelligence, said he recognized the “need to change the culture of the security forces” and promised to “protect detainees against ill treatment.”

A decade later, and seven years into his presidency, that promise has yet to be fulfilled.

She Was Seeking Justice

Invasive searches are not limited to criminal suspects or activists. The Times spoke to two women and the lawyer for a third who said they came to the justice system as victims of sexual assault and were violated by state medical doctors.

One woman said she had been raped. When the prosecution ordered her to go to the Forensic Medicine Authority, the office responsible for medical exams in criminal cases, she complied.

It was a scorching summer day, and the door kept swinging open as more medical personnel joined the small crowd slowly forming around the lower half of her body. The bedsheet offered as a cover was filthy, so she opted to lie naked instead.

The doctor, she said, asked her detailed questions about her sex life. Without explanation, she said, instruments were inserted into her vagina and then she was required to turn over, get on her knees and hug the bed while an invasive anal examination was conducted.

By the time the exam ended, she was sweating profusely. She struggled to pull her pants up over her clammy skin. But just as she was set to leave, a new doctor walked in and told her to undress again. The inspection, they said, was

inconclusive. They started over.

Women in Egypt often avoid reporting sexual assault out of fear that they will be blamed. The justice system gives them another reason: that they will be violated again.

There are valid reasons for forensic medical exams to search for evidence of assault. According to accepted protocols, they should be conducted by specialists trained to minimize trauma and with the sustained consent of the victim.

But in Egypt, lawyers and experts say, forensic professionals are not sufficiently trained to deal with sexual assault victims, relying instead on discredited practices like virginity exams.

A senior doctor at the Forensic Medicine Authority, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to give an interview, said the exams were carried out even in cases when a crime may have taken place months or years earlier and there was unlikely to be any physical evidence.

But obtaining evidence of a crime is not always the point.

“The point is to establish whether a girl was raped or if she was used habitually,” said Mostafa Foda, a former director of the Forensic Medicine Authority. “Used habitually” is the agency’s term for a woman who is sexually active.

If the victim is sexually active, he said, the case will likely not be prosecuted.

“Then she will get nothing,” he said. “How do you differentiate a woman like that from a prostitute?”

Foda defended virginity testing but acknowledged that the agency’s staff lacked the training and resources to deal with victims of sexual assault. He also said that the system’s “conservative” and “Eastern” culture explained why forensic doctors may treat sexual assault victims with contempt.

“They’re disgusted by them,” he said.

Determining Her Sex

Malak Elkashif was arrested in 2019 for protesting government negligence after a deadly train crash. Elkashif, an outspoken transgender woman, took to the street that day among dozens of other protesters.

She was detained in a police station for two weeks, she said, as security officials tried to determine whether she should be held in a men’s or women’s prison.

They sent her to a public hospital, handcuffed to a uniformed police officer, who insisted on attending the medical exam. She was told to undress, her private parts were inspected, and she was subjected to an invasive anal exam.

Minutes later, as the same officer escorted her back to a police station, she said, he grabbed her thigh and quietly declared to her that he was aroused.

Human rights experts say that there is no question that forced anal exams violate human rights and medical ethics. The practice, which often involves a doctor inserting his fingers or other objects into a person’s anus to try to determine whether the person regularly engaged in anal intercourse, is often used in cases of debauchery — a charge used to

prosecute gay people.

The practice has been condemned by the United Nations, Human Rights Watch and professional groups like the World Medical Association and Physicians for Human Rights.

The consensus is that it has no scientific basis and could constitute torture and, in some cases, rape.

“Our state is blind to justice and is motivated instead by a vendetta,” said Khaled Fahmy, an Egyptian professor of Middle East history at Cambridge University. “They use bodies to get at human souls.”

In Elkashif’s case, because she had undergone hormone therapy and had begun transition surgery, the exam was deemed inconclusive. The prosecution sent her to the Forensic Medicine Authority for a second opinion and another exam.

Finally, they resolved the problem by locking her in a solitary room in a men’s prison.

“It was supposed to protect her,” said Hoda Nasralla, Elkashif’s lawyer. “But in reality they made her spend five months in solitary confinement.”

Nasralla said she had represented at least two other clients who had undergone similar exams to determine their gender and sexual orientation.

Silencing a Journalist

One woman, an activist-turned-journalist, freelanced for Al-Jazeera, a Qatari-owned TV channel. The Egyptian government considers the network a pulpit for the Muslim Brotherhood, a political group that has been banned and designated a terrorist organization. Anyone said to be affiliated with the group faces the possibility of arrest.

The woman had broadcast reports of sporadic unrest in Egypt.

One rainy April evening in 2018, with her laptop and camera tucked away in her backpack, she was stopped by two plainclothes officers. They drove her away blindfolded, she said, and took her to a security facility where she was interrogated.

She was accused of joining a terrorist organization and spreading false news.

During the first 24 hours of interrogation, she said, she was groped by a man whom she believed to be an officer (she was still blindfolded). She said she was groped a second time when she entered prison, where she spent about a year without trial.

She complained to prison authorities. But nothing changed until 2019, when another prisoner in the same prison – Al Qanater, on the outskirts of Cairo – filed a complaint with the public prosecutor’s office that she had been sexually assaulted.

The second woman’s account drew public attention to the problem and appears to have pushed the prison to introduce changes.

A new corrections officer was assigned to search inmates, according to several former prisoners. And a hand-held

scanner was introduced that precluded the need for physical contact.

It is not clear, however, if the new procedure is always followed.

- NYT