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Egypt: Impunity fuels sexual violence

Letting perpetrators in Egypt get away with sexual harassment and assault has fuelled violent attacks against women in the vicinity of Tahrir Square in recent months - continued impunity will only lead to further crimes, Amnesty International warned today in a new briefing.

Based on the accounts of survivors and activists gathered by Amnesty International, mob-led sexual assaults follow a clear pattern.

Women are attacked alone or separated from friends by a group of men that quickly escalates in number; the survivors are dragged inside the mob as hands and sometimes weapons violate their bodies and the men attempt to remove their clothes.

“Horrible, violent attacks on women including rape in the vicinity of Tahrir Square demonstrate that it’s now crucial President Morsi takes drastic steps to end this culture of impunity and gender-based discrimination, and for all political leaders to speak out,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

“Impartial, thorough investigations are vital to determine whether these mob attacks are co-ordinated by state or organized non-state actors and ensure perpetrators are brought to justice.

“The tactics used by mobs in recent protests is a harrowing reminder of the sexual harassment and assault against women protesters under ousted president Hosni Mubarak. Women have been a vital part of protests and have sacrificed much in their fight for freedom and social justice. Egyptian authorities need to honour their activism and pull out all stops to address endemic violence against women in all echelons of society.”

Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault (OpAntiSH/A), an initiative set up by a number of Egyptian human rights organizations and individuals, received reports of 19 cases of violent attacks against women on 25 January 2013 in the vicinity of Tahrir Square. The group I Saw Harassment intervened in a further five cases.

Amnesty International has gathered testimony from women recently attacked by mobs in and around Tahrir Square often using weapons in attacks that last from five minutes to more than an hour. Female and male activists who have intervened to rescue women from such attacks have also reported physical and sexual assaults.

Doctor Madga Adly at the Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence confirmed that in at least two cases blades were used, including on survivors’ genital areas.

Women’s rights activists and some of the survivors believe that the attacks are aimed at excluding women from public places, silencing them and breaking the spirit of the opposition.

Doctor Rawya Abdel Rahman, a 67-year-old women's rights activist and grandmother, told Amnesty International what happened to her during a women's march in 25 January protests: "Tens of hands then came onto me, some touching my thighs... I started screaming... Then five or six men dragged me away from the circle, as someone was trying to lift my clothes-up."

Despite these attacks, survivors are undeterred in their fight for justice and insist on continuing to participate in events shaping Egypt's future. One survivor of a violent sexual assault, Dalia Abdelwahab, told Amnesty International: "I will not stay quiet. All women in Egypt need to wake up.... Otherwise, such violence will continue..."

"Given the stigmatization attached to harassment and sexual assaults against women and the attitudes of law enforcement officials, many cases go unreported. Those who do try and press charges face a wall of indifference and even blame and contempt in their struggle for justice," said Hadj Sahraoui.

The Egyptian Constitution adopted following a public referendum in late December 2012 ignored the rights of women and did not explicitly prohibit discrimination on the grounds of gender, further entrenching discriminatory practices and attitudes.

The state National Council for Women condemned the violence and called for investigations. It is now time for President Morsi, as the head of State, to do the same and demonstrate real political will to tackle the violence.

In 2005, groups of men were reportedly hired by the government to attack women journalists calling for a boycott of the referendum on constitutional reform. To date, nobody has been held to account.

In March 2011, 17 women protesters were subjected to "virginity tests" by the military. In March 2012, a military court dismissed the only case brought by one of the women.