

# ECWR UPDATE

## A monthly update of ECWR's activities and the status of women in Egypt



Dear Friends,

ECWR spent the normally calm Egyptian summer months and month of Ramadan working hard to prepare for our last months of activities in 2007.

In continuing our campaign against sexual harassment in Egyptian streets and raising awareness about sexual harassment incidents that occurred during the Eid el Fitr holiday one year ago, we were proud to be featured on the radio as well as TV this month! **Nogoom F.M.** (a radio station so popular in Egypt that it is commonly referred to as simply "F.M.") sponsored the campaign's efforts and featured a discussion of sexual harassment in Egypt on 2 episodes of "**3eesh saba7ak ma3a CocaCola**" from 8:00 to 11:00 am on October 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> presented by **Ahmed Younis**. ECWR's efforts in facing sexual harassment were discussed, and attended by a star from Yousra's TV series "Kadyet Ra2y 3am."

We also worked with **Modern TV** to air a 2-day program about sexual harassment and rape in late October as well as many other TV talk shows on various popular channels. Working with the media is an important part of our rapidly growing effort to raise awareness about harassment and help make our streets safer for everyone. **A special thanks from ECWR to the Nogoom F.M. and Modern TV teams whose efforts and contributions have helped our work immensely!**

ECWR has also completed the data collection for an important study on violence, civil society and democratic principles in communities in the 6 governorates that saw the worst cases of violence, corruption and votes for the Muslim Brotherhood. The data will be analyzed by our experts and used as the basis of our 2 complementary initiatives that make up our project, "**Fighting Violence, Promoting Democratic Culture**" - civil education and community mobilization. The project will combine trainings for community members and local NGOs, as well as advocacy and public awareness. The results of the research will also be compiled into a report and published.

Finally, on behalf of everyone at ECWR, I wish to extend sincerest thanks to all of our summer volunteers and interns. Our work depends on you and the extent of your contribution is more than can be counted here.

*N. Abul Komsan*

Nehad Abul Komsan  
Chair

### Sexual Harassment: 1 Year of Discussion Within the Public Sphere

Before the notorious and deplorable acts that took place last October, sexual harassment was a taboo topic. Had it not been for individual efforts of private citizens and bloggers, the incident would have passed unnoticed, unreported and without uproar.

Previously, discussions about the subject were regarded as unfounded at best, and outrageous at worst. Today women finally feel entitled to speak out, recently beginning to use their right to defend themselves and walk the streets of their country without fear and insult. A year ago, there was no real dialogue about sexual harassment, what it is, how it affects women, and the great scale of this particular problem in Egypt. The fact that men and women in Egypt are slowly coming to acknowledge that sexual harassment is a painful part of reality for almost all women, is no small victory.

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### The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights

ECWR is an independent non-governmental organization dedicated to improving women's status in Egypt and the Arab region.

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## Free Civil Society in Egypt: A Vehicle for Women's Human Rights

Women's legal rights and political participation cannot be advanced by working in isolation. To affect change at the institutional level, it is essential to also confront obstacles facing broader civil society and human rights in general. Not only are women's rights an integral part of human rights, but women must play a leading role in Egypt's political, economic and social development processes in order to secure their rights in the future. Civil society organizations, particularly those focused on human rights have recently faced increased oppression and harassment at the hands of the government. Human Rights Watch has documented the depth and severity of the problem in their report, *Egypt: Margins of Repression: State Limits on Nongovernmental Organization Activism*, which states that the NGO laws "have stunted Egypt's civil society," thus "wasting a vital source of energy, innovation, and ideas" and allowing "little chance of a functioning democracy or equitable, sustainable development."

Though Egypt has over 22,000 NGOs, the majority of them lack the vision, commitment, and strategic capability to carry out their missions. Many organizations are unable to pursue real solutions because of the restrictive and confusing legal framework established by Law 84/2002, which affects free association, personnel building, and access to funding, and which creates obstacles for effective human rights related activities. NGO leaders may not be aware of alternative means to achieve their ends or they may simply be intimidated, confused, or repressed, rendering their organization little more than a name and registration number.

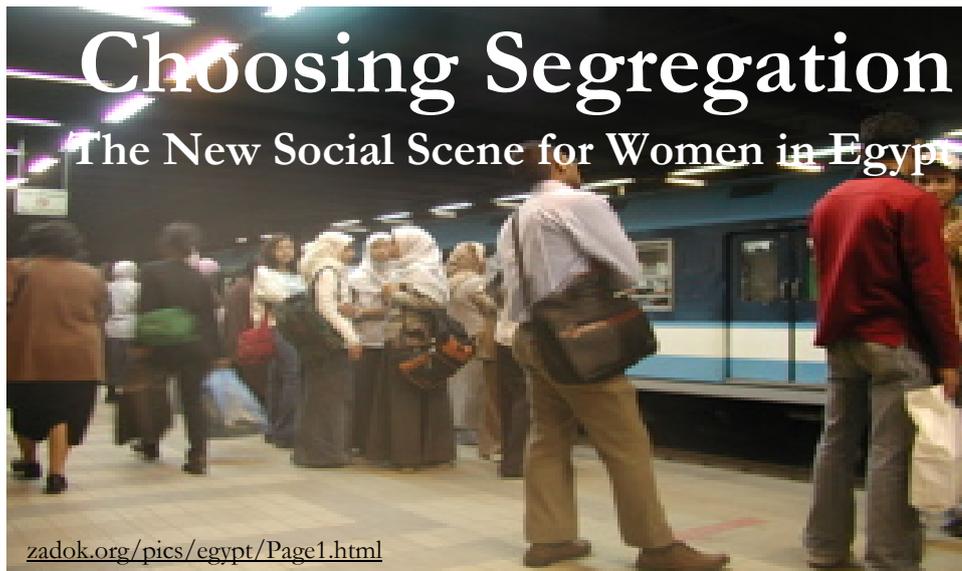
The availability of resources is also a problem, but more serious is the lack of independence and technical activism skills. This has led to increased reliance on international donors whose agendas may shift irrespective of local situations, or the government of Egypt without necessarily reflecting the needs of the Egyptian people. A psychological dependence on foreign funding and fear of harsh consequences from the government for dissent is widespread, and can inhibit the development of alternatives. There are exceptions to these trends, notably a growing business elite increasingly willing to contribute to civil organizations, and a growing spirit of volunteerism that enables action without funding and therefore without government approvals or fundraising.

Because so many issues (human rights awareness, gender equity, documentation of the misuse of force, labor organization, etc.) need to be addressed by civil society in Egypt – as anywhere – this problem is pervasive and affects individuals, associations, and institutions at their core, and has severe consequences for Egypt's human rights and democracy movements.

### NEEDED FOR A STRONGER, MORE INDEPENDENT CIVIL SOCIETY:

- training sessions for activists and other NGOs on how to successfully navigate the complex legal environment they inhabit and implement work effectively
- a monitoring center for recording and reporting on gaps in the legal system
- legal assistance for NGOs
- an activist community that knows how to identify and use its resources creatively
- empowered volunteers that can mobilize their communities
- a strong advocacy coalition to work on these issues

**For more information on the NGO Law 84/2002, the advocacy coalition to change it, our ideas for trainings and monitoring, or to join our effort, please contact us at [ecwr@link.net](mailto:ecwr@link.net).**



## ECWR Activities

**Civil Education & Community Mobilization** – During Ramadan, ECWR researchers completed a survey of community organizations about their strengths and weaknesses, use of violence in their communities and democratic principles. The results are currently being analyzed and will form the basis of ECWR's new grassroots initiative to build democratic culture and independent community activism in Egypt.

**Sexual Harassment** – The sexual Harassment campaign continues to build its outreach through volunteers and working with other organizations. We discussed with the Ombudsman's office at the National Council for Women a cooperation on analyzing data ECWR and NCW receives on our hotlines. We have also begun discussions with a 5 digit hotline provider for help expanding our capacity to take calls from women. Hopefully this will extend into other projects such as Legal Aid as well. Self defense classes will soon begin. And with our partner, Media Arts for Development (MADEV), we began work on the animated video to be used in schools.

**Legal Empowerment & Aid** – ECWR is currently seeking volunteer researchers to help us with legal monitoring and reporting. Please contact us at [ecwr@link.net](mailto:ecwr@link.net) to volunteer.

Over the past few years, Cairo has witnessed the rising popularity of segregated social venues, a natural progression of the prevailing attitudes of gender separation in Egypt. Traditionally, men have enjoyed relative dominance over the social sphere, with female social activities limited to areas like the hairdressers and the first car in the metro train.

Recently, however, there has been a proliferation of 'women only' socialization scenes, ranging from private gyms and beaches, to the more recent ideas about possible women only cafes and restaurants, and even a women only salad bar due to open soon in Maadi.

This subject consistently fuels controversy and debate. How does one commend these places for offering women a safe-haven from sexual harassment or scrutiny without also commenting on the social crisis that has made such places necessary?

Immediately, issues of gender inequality and the marginalization of women in the public and social sphere urge to be addressed. We can only discuss the benefits of such places after recognizing that the Egyptian woman's choice to be sheltered and protected in social situations is gaining popularity. Part of this phenomenon can be attributed to the rising and urgent need to segregate in order to allow women to feel comfortable and safe, almost providing an illusion of liberation. This trend is also symptomatic of the persistent shift towards moral conservatism that calls for the unequivocal separation of the sexes.

The question raised is whether the relegation of female socialization to a female only realm has served to diminish or encourage women to take on active roles within the public and political sphere, especially since most of the social venues opening up exclusively to women seem to cater to the middle classes and the elite.



## Choosing Segregation, Continued...

The past couple of years have witnessed a rise of female involvement in public protests. In 2005 women openly protested the sexual harassment and degradation they faced at the hands of under cover national security police during the constitutional amendment demonstrations. In 2006 women took part in demonstrations rallying against the mass incidence of sexual violation that took place in Eid of November 2006. Women have also been protesting other issues, for example, more recently in March 2007, the women of Qalat El Kabsh, an area deemed by the government as a slum in Sayedda Zeinab stood their ground before parliament demanding reparations after their homes were razed to the ground.

However the rise in the number of women actively participating in public or political roles is far from substantial. In the 2005 elections only six women were nominated by the NDP out of 444 candidates. Women remain largely under-represented in the political arena, and their participation in effecting public policy is negligible. Although providing a safe environment for socialization may offer the illusion of social mobility, the reality remains that the voice of the Egyptian women is barely more than tolerated, assembling in small groups to protest against injustice and returning home to pray for change.

For more information on the Qalat El Kabsh demonstrations please follow the links;

<http://www.hrinfo.net/egypt/elmarsd/2006/pr0129.shtml>

<http://baheyya.blogspot.com/2007/07/from-remonstrance-to-rights.html>

For more information about our sexual harassment campaign and other women's rights issues please email us at [ecwr@link.net](mailto:ecwr@link.net)

### Break the Silence!

Join ECWR and Yasser Hamdi for self defense classes. Starting soon.

Contact [ecwr@link.net](mailto:ecwr@link.net) or +20 2.2.527.1397 for more information, to volunteer or for meeting times, dates and places.

### Sexual Harassment: Continued...

Since last Eid, the combined efforts and bravery of thousands of women and men, coming forward with their stories and more importantly their time, efforts and ideas, have forced the issue of sexual harassment to be addressed by Egyptian society. Media outlets across the country are now host to the sparring attitudes and opinions about the subject, from vehement condemnations and public outcry to morally ambiguous excuses and feeble attempts to belittle or ignore the problem.

Perhaps this has not done as much as it should to deter most males from continuing their oppressive and offensive treatment of women in the streets and public arenas, but it has drawn local and international attention to a problem that none but the victims had previously been privy to. Sexual harassment and the controversy surrounding it has entered the public vocabulary. A constant verbalization of the insidious and wide-spread maltreatment and sexual degradation of women in the streets of Cairo has served to raise awareness and unify women from all walks of life.

But, the crisis is definitely far from over. The ECWR and volunteers across Egypt are continuing to raise awareness and engage community interest to end sexual harassment and gender inequality. To find out how you can contribute or for more information about our ongoing projects as well as our 'Making Our Streets Safe for Everyone' campaign against sexual harassment please visit our website at [www.ecwronline.org](http://www.ecwronline.org), or email us at [ecwr@link.net](mailto:ecwr@link.net)