

Nadia Ilahi is a recent graduate of the M.A. program in Sociology-Anthropology at The American University in Cairo (AUC). She currently resides in Cairo, Egypt and works at AUC as a researcher for both the Cynthia Nelson Institute for Gender and Women's Studies and the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies. Her intellectual interests revolve around gender and sexuality, with specific focus on issues of gendered performance and mobility in public space. ○○○○●○○○○○

Gendered Contestations: An Analysis of Street Harassment in Cairo and its Implications For Women's Access to Public Spaces

by Nadia Ilahi

The city offers untrammelled sexual experience; in the city the forbidden – what is most feared and desired – becomes possible. Woman is present in cities as temptress, as whore, as fallen woman, as lesbian, but also as virtuous womanhood in danger, as heroic womanhood who triumphs over temptation and tribulation. (Wilson 1991, 6)

Introduction

Street harassment in Egypt is a widespread phenomenon that women from a variety of backgrounds, circumstances and social locations experience on almost a daily basis. Harassment hinders women's mobility and infringes on their access to public spaces. Gender inequity and multiple exclusions of women from public spaces produce a masculinisation of these spaces in urban settings. In this, women are forced to perform a model femininity to retain their respectability in the street. This paper explores street harassment and its implications for social change among a small sample of foreign and Egyptian women. This research draws heavily upon data gathered from Fall 2006 - Spring 2008 using textual analyses of in-depth, informal interviews conducted in English and Arabic with men and women, as well as previously collected data from a small sample of surveys distributed in the fall of 2006 around various parts of Cairo. The street is a gendered space that operates within dynamics of class and race, forging interactions between many groups of people.

For this reason, I explore the local and global implications of harassment within the context of the body politic. I compare the relationship of the Egyptian state to feminist agendas operative within civil society. I also examine the intersections of gender, race and class within Egypt. Women's responses demonstrate the ways in which they discursively negotiate urban spaces through a multitude of practices. This examination of street harassment is an attempt to underscore and further understand the collective experiences of women in their everyday lives as social actors negotiating public space. In turn, their behaviours at times contest the framework of what constitutes masculine and feminine by reshaping what their very presence means in urban areas.

That which keeps women from participating equally in various religious, political and social public spheres impinges upon their experience of public space. The *public sphere* in

Habermasian terms denotes “the entire realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed,” (Habermas 1964, 49) which includes material spaces. Salwa Ismail adds to this notion in pointing out the public sphere embodies a space of debate and deliberation as well as the construction of “public subjects through techniques of marking, differentiation and identification” (2007, 7). In what ways are the experiences of urban spaces gendered? Wilson argues, “Both western and non-western societies have regulated women’s movement in cities, although to varying degrees” (1991, 16). In fleshing out the gendered ambiguities cities have accumulated, Wilson draws upon the notion that women nefariously represent urban chaos in opposition to their male counterparts. As she traces the city from eighteenth century London to postmodern L.A., the city gains ambiguity. Wilson’s reading of the “flaneur” as strollers and loiterers etch into context the gendered conditions of such an experience:

George Sand was one of the most successful of nineteenth-century French writers...She described how, disguised as a man, she could experience the pleasure of being a flaneur – a stroller, that quintessentially Parisian way of relating to the modern industrial city of the nineteenth century: ‘no one knew me, no one looked at me...I was an atom lost in that immense crowd.’ (Wilson 1991, 52)

Much of what Wilson purports necessitates the need to explore women’s relationship to and notions of gendered harassment in urban space. The female flaneur in Europe will experience the aspects of city streets differently than in parts of the Middle East. In Egypt, Cairo’s streets are a major point of convergence for all people. The streets host unrelenting human and automobile traffic at all hours of the day, and the social activities of street space are not limited to the selling and purchasing of goods, people watching or protesting. Women are commonly seen outside in Cairo’s streets where they face gendered hostilities. According to Wilson, women’s presence in urban spaces were read as a problem of order, partly because their presence “symbolized the promise of sexual adventure” (1999, 6).

The early twentieth century European view of women as problematic, endowed with unbridled sexuality, can be seen as justifying masculinist understandings of women in public spaces in parts of today’s Middle East. According to Bruce Dunne (1998), masculinist-appropriated Islamic doctrine concerns itself with women in very particular ways. The charms or seductive powers of women are viewed as a source of “fitna” or social chaos that usurps the rightly guided rationale of men. Pertaining to earlier Islamic societies, Dunne adds, “Social segregation was legitimized in part by constructing ‘male’ and ‘female’ as opposites: men as rational and capable of self-control; women as emotional and lacking self-control, particularly of sexual drives” (1998, 9). If in the Middle East, masculinity has in many ways been shaped in opposition to the feminine, femininity always bears some relation to masculinity. Simone de Beauvoir frames this argument historically in *The Second Sex*, underscoring the ways in which the female subject has been cast as inadequate to man, both biologically and culturally. Cognizant of the importance of context, de Beauvoir notes, “These facts take on quite different values according to the economic and social context” (1968, 53).

Discursively-shaped behaviors of men and women are performed through particular appropriations of gender division informed by specific contexts. Butler frames the notion of

gender performativity as demonstrating ways in which “reified and naturalized conceptions of gender might be understood as constituted and, hence, capable of being constituted differently” (1988, 520). Gender in Cairo is not perceived as fluid, but is rather more narrowly understood as either male or female. In those narrow confines are ascribed aspects of behavior. Gender performance offers one lens for locating and understanding sexual harassment in Egypt as a form of punishment; in Butler’s terms, “Those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (1988, 520). In the nascent stages of this research, I found that women who respond verbally or physically to men who harass them are seen as acting outside of their appropriate gender category as females, when local practice dictates women should ignore them and walk away in order to retain their respectability.

Defining the Problem

A working definition proposed by Cynthia Grant Bowman defines street harassment as verbal and non-verbal behaviours that characterise the targets of harassment as female, the harassers as both male and strangers to their targets and the encounter as forced and taking place in public spaces such as the street, sidewalk or metro station. Bowman argues street harassment hinders women’s mobility and participation within the public domain: “In this sense, street harassment accomplishes an informal ghettoization of women – a ghettoization to the private sphere of hearth and home” (1993, 520).

Emanuela Guano draws on a variety of interesting parallels in her exploration of public harassment in Genoa, Italy. While examining the discourse and practices associated with gender performance, Guano argues that women modify their public behaviours in order not to draw unwanted male attention, therein resisting “their exclusion from the public domain even as they reproduce the restrictions that weaken their claim to it” (2007, 66). Guano’s insights are particularly relevant and useful in the case of street harassment in Cairo, where traditional gender binaries between men and women perceived largely through performance seemingly exclude women from the public sphere that is largely marked as masculine. Highlighting the violence of such exclusion, Elizabeth Arveda Kissling, in her brief comparative study of street harassment from the United States to the Arab world, states that the multiple functions of street harassment – which range from complimenting women to social control – all “work together to produce an environment of sexual terrorism” (1991, 451).

There should be an introductory sentence here; if it this belongs to the paragraph above, you need a sentence that links this conceptually to the paragraph above. Arguing that women and men experience space differently in Cairo, I highlight a number of instances of harassment that shape an understanding of women’s preoccupations with their sense of space and personal safety. One foreign informant, Erika (pseudonym), said:

I have been groped, stared at, catcalled, and made to feel very unwelcome on the streets of Cairo. I find that in general the worst incidents happen in the street and so I try to take taxis and not walk in the street, which is very annoying because I like walking the city. I am always conscious of my body in Egypt and feeling ashamed if I draw any attention. Is it a coincidence that these guys have been doing this or is it becoming normal?¹

¹ Ilahi Interview Notes 2006

Her comment suggests the multiple exclusions women face in the streets as well as the normalisation of the male practice of street harassment. Although space is an imagined category that is experienced by men and women, it develops corporeality within certain masculine performances such as catcalling women, making lewd comments, staring, groping and following, which in turn render space a contested category which cuts across race, class and gendered lines.

During the 2006 Eid El Fitr holiday, a celebration that marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting, a series of vicious attacks against women commenced in downtown Cairo. The events that took place occurred during a new movie opening. Dina, a famous Egyptian belly dancer, was purported to have been there, dancing “wildly at the entrance of the cinema with scant regard of the professional etiquettes expected of artists” [sic]² It is then understood that when the movie sold out, the men who could not get in rioted, first charging the box office and then attacking veiled and un-veiled women passersby. Egyptian bloggers were among the first to lament the fact state media’s neglect of the issue; and when finally confronted and forced to respond, state media talked about public harassment as an isolated incident rather than a widespread, urban, social issue. The bloggers criticise Egyptian society as a whole for its myopic attitude towards harassment of women.

The juxtaposition between culture and religion reflects a significant series of changes that have taken place in Egypt over the past several years. An influx of satellite television and internet signalled marked technological advancements and heightened material evidence of economic disparity, while the rise of religious conservatism or the Islamic movement connoted a backlash against the perceived ills of Western modernity. Haideh Moghissi illustrates this point well, noting how “by selectively appropriating [the] past, lending it divinity and imposing it on the present, the struggle of socially disadvantaged groups and classes is diverted from the centres of power to ‘imagined’ areas of conflict (e.g., women’s dress)” (2005, 161).

This tension helps to create naturalised dichotomies, assigning women as sole members of the private sphere and men as proprietors of the public sphere - a relationship of social hierarchy. Furthermore, street harassment hinders women’s mobility as it escalates and continues to be ignored by patriarchal, state structures. As women vie for basic rights within human rights frameworks, where do they belong as citizens within the Egyptian nationalist project? Local Egyptian feminist organizations such as the Egyptian Centre for Women’s Rights (ECWR) are actively working to create a campaign which seeks to eradicate “sexual harassment.” A current study undertaken by ECWR surveyed over 1,000 Egyptian men and women, concluding that 62% of Egyptian men surveyed admitted to harassing women (Hassan, Shoukry and Abdel Komsan 2008). ECWR defines harassment as any uninvited behavior that is sexual in nature and makes women feel uncomfortable or unsafe. This includes behaviors such as calling out in an obscene or threatening way, following or stalking, fondling, and even indecent exposure, masturbation or assault (Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights 2007).

The term “sexual harassment” is a new concept in Egypt. Commonly referred to as a Western concept, a more nuanced examination of the term should precede its use in a wide range of cultural settings. The meaning of “sexual harassment” translated into Arabic carries

² <http://www.arabnews.com/?page=9§ion=0&article=88655&d=18&m=11&y=2006>

serious and negative connotations. So part of the problem the ECWR faces is being able to normalize the term “sexual harassment” just as the behavior they mean to describe has become so prevalent. For the purposes of my research, I adopt the term *street harassment*, the local manifestation of which fits the definition proposed by anthropologist Micaela di Leonardo:

Street harassment occurs when one or more strange men accost one or more women...in a public place which is not the woman's/women's worksite. Through looks, words, or gestures the man asserts his right to intrude on the woman's attention, defining her as a sexual object, and forcing her to interact with him. (di Leonardo 1981, 51-52)

The parameters of what counts as public harassment against women undoubtedly stem from a hegemonic, Euro-American definition. To locate street harassment as a form of sexual violence against Arab and non-Arab women in a Western, contextual understanding of the term sets limitations for a culturally-based explanation of the issue. In problematizing the idea of a “universal oppression” of women, Sherry Ortner challenges this distinction of universal versus particular in a number of ways. Like Ortner, I argue that in order to properly situate the problem of male harassment against women in Egypt, we must situate harassment in a cultural and historical moment. Ortner posits “that each culture, in its own way and in its own terms, makes this evaluation” (1972, 7). Ortner constructs three types of data sets, assigning female groups as subordinate or oppressed in terms of elements of cultural ideology, symbolic devices or social rules – gestures that weaken the vantage points of women in various societies (1972, 3).

Importantly, Ortner exposes the dynamics involved in the production of gender inequity. However, problematic as a concept in Egypt, harassment is largely overlooked by the state as an endemic form of violence against women. It is partly ignored because women do not commonly report cases of harassment to the police: police are some of the worst harassers and therefore, it becomes pointless to seek help from them. One frustrated respondent commented, “I live in Garden City where all the streets are blocked off with officers. Needless to say, I am harassed with all sorts of comments from them on a daily basis.”³

Even men feel powerless at times in dealing with law enforcement. In a conversation with Ahmed, a middle-aged Egyptian man, lamented:

I was walking along the Nile and noticed a man standing facing the water. He had his eye on two veiled women who were seated on a bench nearby. As I approached, I noticed he was masturbating. My first instinct was to react violently, throw him in the river, but I saw a policeman standing nearby. I ran up to him and told him what was going on, sure that he would apprehend the man and make an example out of him. I was so angry when he met my words with a blank face and muttered, ‘You’ll have to find another police officer elsewhere; I don’t patrol this area.’⁴

The apathy of state police and the absence of any anti-harassment laws further complicate the notion of reporting while sending a message to men that public violence against women is acceptable. Additionally, women fail to report sexual crimes to avoid being blamed for the way they were dressed or seemingly behaving at the time of the incident. This suggests a tacit

³ Ilahi Personal Communication 2006

⁴ Ilahi Personal Communication 2008

acceptance of normalized everyday sexual violence as condoned by the state against all women, regardless of their social location. Because there are no harassment statistics reported to the police that would substantiate it as a problem, government officials can then vehemently deny the seriousness of this problem.

The Intersection of Gender, Race and Class with Street Harassment

Research undertaken in the autumn of 2006 suggests that race plays a crucial role in street harassment. Although race cannot be easily defined, for the purposes of this research, I will situate race as a shared, lived experience by women in Cairo. In the most literal ways, race will be viewed in terms of what women say in their narratives.

The many Egyptian and foreign women who took part in my research believed that all women receive some degree of harassment, but those whose features stood out more in terms of skin colour and ethnicity felt prone to higher and more severe degrees of harassment. To be a non-Egyptian may distinguish a person as an outsider, potentially open to unwanted sexist and racist remarks in public places. One respondent observed: “I think skin color makes a huge difference; my women friends who look more explicitly foreign [those who are very white or very dark skinned] get tons more remarks and harassment than I do because I look Egyptian.”⁵

While women who fall outside the physically-denoted demarcations of “Egyptian” may receive racialized comment and a higher degree of harassment, all women are subject to discrimination, made to feel unsettled about their presence and sense of physical space. As a mechanism to conform, women modify their movements and daily actions. Many who have moved to Egypt reported that they have made alterations in their form of dress and movement, such as wearing scarves to cover their chests or, purposely veering away from and avoiding eye contact with men considered to be potential threats. In turn, I read these as important strategies women cultivate in order to diffuse harassment.

In 2005, the violent removal of Sudanese refugees camped in Mohandessin, a suburb of Giza, underscores underlying racial tensions in Egypt. Race is a somewhat divisive issue in Egypt. As a country situated in both Africa and the Middle East, many Egyptians scoff at the idea of identifying as African. Tensions between Egyptians and Africans are manifested in a range of milieus. In this example, I examine race in a transnational context. One cannot overlook the treatment of many Sudanese refugees vying for survival while simultaneously facing barriers such as harassment and discrimination in Cairo. *Al-Abram*, an Egyptian state newspaper, featured an article entitled, “Radical Refugees” which underscored the racism Sudanese asylum seekers face publicly in parts of Cairo:

They bitterly complain of the hostility meted out to them on the streets of Cairo. ‘We are called names and children make faces at us. We want to be relocated to a country where there is no racism,’ said one of the protesters. ‘We want to go to a country where no one hurls racist remarks at us.’ (Nkrumah 2005)

Other informants in my study recounted incidents of racialized harassment in the streets as they described being called names such as *sarmada* [black/dirt] and *abd* [slave] in Arabic racist slang.

⁵ Ilahi Fieldnotes

African-American women and women from sub-Saharan Africa attested to similar situations in the street and problematic encounters with men who view them as prostitutes because they are black. Cases like this highlight the objectification and commodification of black bodies. Jane, a young Kenyan woman related the events of being followed home by a man:

He actually followed me up the stairs to my flat and then took off his trousers revealing himself to me in the hallway. I screamed and chased him out of the building. I was mortified and no one tried to stop him as he fled through the street.⁶

Gender, race and class, as they relate to harassment, bring to light aspects of male privilege on with space. In an examination of the effects of racial and gender discrimination, Laura Beth Nielsen argues that “members of traditionally disadvantaged groups [i.e. women] face a strikingly different reality on the street than do members of privileged groups [men]” (2002, 279). She discusses the similar tensions women and African Americans feel in their encounters with street harassment, which involves being targets of hate speech in public places. In a study involving in-depth interviews with people in Northern California, Nielsen concluded that acts of hate speech, like street harassment, are not “isolated incidents; rather, they are embedded in social structures and hierarchies” (2002, 279).

Women face similar circumstances globally in being targets of public harassment. Tying Nielsen’s study into my own, I am critical of how the state minimizes the seriousness of violence against women by caricaturizing harassment as isolated incidents. Harassment against women in Egypt is endemic; women constantly vent to me how they cannot simply walk in the streets in peace. “You have to psychologically prepare yourself to go out and run a simple errand because of the harassment you are most likely going to face,”⁷ Selma, a student at Ain Shams University commented. Our social positions as women are interwoven in our experiences of the city.

Class, like race, is also embedded within notions of public harassment. While class is linked to certain privileges or disparities among certain groups, upper class women, depending on the time they spend walking in the city, are not protected by their social status. Shilpa Phadke demonstrates the division of public space through class arguing that women are barred from public space but not in the same way. Phadke writes that because of access to economic capital through private infrastructure and cultural capital through education, middle class women have greater access to public space (2007, 1513). The symbolic capital of the middle-class woman affords her the privilege and class status of being less visible in the street. For those who rely on public transportation, avoiding harassment is a daily ritual. Hind, a woman I interviewed from Shobra, a large, poor district in Cairo, admitted to slapping a man who grabbed her from behind on a microbus:

He was sitting behind me on the bus, and I remember feeling his hand on me. I reached around, slapped him in the face, calling him *biawan* [Arabic insult meaning animal], and the whole scene drew so much attention, he got kicked off the bus.⁸

⁶ Ilahi Personal Communication 2008

⁷ Ilahi Personal Communication 2007

⁸ Ilahi Personal Communication 2008

Having a car, chauffeur or someone to run errands may serve as strategies employed by women from higher classes to avoid street harassment. For some women, having a car drastically changes their lives. Reham, an Egyptian woman I interviewed, explained that her car affords her safety from the pressures of people in the street, as well as room to dress less conservatively. In this case, the car can come to represent a mobile (but not impenetrable) private space which women appropriate in order to negotiate their mobility.⁹ The privilege of having a car and the effect of being less visible in street space further reifies the gendered public/private dichotomy. In cars, women are hardly seen except through windows, encased in compound-like structures that work to maintain a strict sense of separation.

Women in the street are not shielded by their class status and professional privilege. Having a car may provide temporary refuge from street harassment, but once outside its confines, women are again exposed to unwanted attention. May, a student from Cairo University in the Faculty of Dentistry commented:

A colleague of mine had just parked her car and this guy came up to her and showed her his penis. Then, she just got out of the car and ran. The word had spread that this guy has been doing this to several girls who parked in that area.¹⁰

May's testimony about her friend reveals the blatant and crude behaviours which embody street harassment, as well as women's fears and responses when confronted publicly in such a manner. Women's narratives on street harassment urge us to question why it becomes so endemic.

Reflections on Why...

Conversations with both men and women draw upon three major themes of why men harass: a harsh economy, gender disparities and socio-cultural-religious explanations. I focus on examining the discourse of these themes as people associated them with rising unemployment, religious conservatism and women's dress.

The global crisis of rising food and gas prices along with high rates of unemployment in Egypt are reflected in people's explanations for explaining the increase in harassment. Galal Amin underscored this notion in his discussion of Egypt's high unemployment problem, which started in the late 1980s, and stemmed from decreased migration of employed workers to the Gulf region of the Middle East. Since that time, Egypt has seen its population rise by 50%, and unemployed youth between the ages of 15-24 years old, when not in school, spend their time idling in the streets (Amin 2006). Due to financial woes, men and women face longer delays before marriage, beset by the costs of securing housing, furnishings and basic security. Both men and women I interviewed recall the disparity in young people being able to afford getting married because of the high costs involved in the process. A *New York Times* article recently noted, "Here in Egypt and across the Middle East, many young people are being forced to put off marriage, the gateway to independence, sexual activity and societal respect. And so, instead of marrying, people wait and seek religious outlets for their frustrations" (Slackman 2008). Respondents in my

⁹ Men still harass women while driving or being driven in cars by following them.

¹⁰ Ilahi Personal Communication 2006

study suggest that harassment functions as an outlet because of the growing frustration and sexual repression caused by delaying marriage. Sex before marriage in Islam is considered a sin and is punishable by law in Egypt. Religion discursively dictates the behavioral practices of men and women. Sexual repression as a way to understand harassment is reductive and minimizes *women's* experiences of sexual repression. Due to the limitations of my research, I did not delve into examining how sexually frustrated women cope in a society where the laws against pre-marital sex are harsh. However, in understanding how particular aspects of masculinity are produced, the notion of “sexual repression” was a feature of this discussion. With the rise in Islamic religious conservatism since the 1980s, markers of Islamic piety, as seen through the veiling practice of *hijab*, are increasingly popular. Some suggest the hijab helps to empower women in particular ways, yet it must also be recognized that it leaves them open to street harassment.

Religious Islamic conservatism as a trend corresponds with the rise in harassment. Informants I spoke to often vented about diminishing respect towards women and its relation to religious custom, which they believe fuels harassment. There is nostalgia for the past, around 15-20 years ago, when many claim that harassment like this did not exist. Often times, I have heard young people make comments such as, “Our mothers used to walk around in mini skirts, displaying French high fashion with their hair beautifully coiffed.” Interestingly, the aforementioned *New York Times* article portrays more and more young people adhering to a more traditional Islamic lifestyle as a way to cope with economic instability: “More young people are observing stricter separation between boys and girls, sociologists say, fueling sexual frustrations” (Slackman 2008).

Religious responses to harassment continue to urge women to veil in order to evade harassment. The absence of veiling becomes a tool to blame women for being harassed. For example, an email campaign urging women to veil in Egypt warns, “A veil to protect or the eyes will molest” (Knickmeyer 2008). The accompanying picture oddly compares men to flies and women to pieces of candy. The first of two images uses a piece of untouched and covered candy to represent the ideal, veiled Muslim woman. In the next image, silhouettes of unveiled women wearing tight clothing are compared to sticky pieces of uncovered candy. This message clearly links women to notions of sexual chaos, whereby because of their presumed sexual powers, held within notions of their femininity, men are unable to control themselves.

In some of my discussions with men, I gathered they had difficulty accepting behaviour as a form of harassment. One man I spoke to named Maged, a tailor from Cairo who works with his uncle making clothing near the district of Hussein, expressed firm denial. He defined harassment as having purpose to either 1) engage in sexual discussion or 2) have fun and flirt with a woman. When I ran down a list of behaviours, explaining why they made women uncomfortable, he exhaled from his cigarette and leaning in towards me, he said, “They say no, but they mean yes. These women walk suggestively, wearing makeup and we men are supposed to just ignore it.”¹¹

¹¹ Ilahi Personal Communication 2008

Women's dress and behaviour come under scrutiny and criticism within the discussion. The hijab is worn freely and eclectically by Egyptian and non-Egyptian Muslim women in Cairo. The styles of hijab range from conservative, covering the whole body of a woman, to extremely chic, covering a woman's hair, yet revealing stylish tight-fitting clothing. The popularity of the hijab has fetishized particular forms, where in some cases, women wearing the *niqab* (a scarf covering the face) are assumed to be either hiding one of two things-their beauty or the possibility that they could be prostitutes manoeuvring through spaces unrecognized. So too, women in hijab are not free from the judgmental gaze of others. Blame is usually placed on women in that they are somehow "asking for it." A male informant named Wael confessed to me in an interview that he routinely harasses women. When I asked him why, he replied:

You can tell the type of girls that are looking for it. You can feel it off of them. They walk swaying their hips and looking at men. A woman who doesn't want to be harassed would not do that.¹²

The good girl/bad girl dichotomy makes it difficult to move beyond conceptions of masculinity where "boys will be boys" and femininity that suggests silent acceptance of men's behaviour. Veiling does not exempt women from gender inequity in public spaces.

Dovetailing with Ismail's earlier mention of identification practices in public space, the appropriation of the veil and other markers of piety by some Muslim women is one way in which the visible signs of one's religiosity argue her right to public participation. Ismail also emphasizes "that such practices discipline the self while also opening up spaces for resistance" (2007, 15). It is important to note that not all Muslim women veil and the practice of hijab does not necessarily imply a particular political position. The practice of veiling in Egypt specifically demonstrates that while the hijab is adopted by some women to reaffirm religiosity, it may also be worn to contest exclusion and harassment within public space.

The veil and its growing popularity is one of the ways in which women renegotiate moving through the public sphere. MacLeod interprets the prevalence of veiling in Cairo as "accommodating protest" in terms of women's simultaneous resistance and subordination to gendered dimensions of power. In a cultural study of working class Muslim women in Egypt, MacLeod focuses on the veiling movement in Cairo in order to situate women's decisions to veil within the matrices of "power, protest and accommodation" (1992, 535). Within this practice, working class women subscribe to Islamic notions of femininity while appropriating the veil to maneuver through space, attain employment and protest perceptions of their identities as oppressed and confined because they veil. Veiling and avoidance of eye contact serve as a form of what Jane Khatib-Chahidi (1981) calls "fictive invisibility," where women methodically try to draw less attention to themselves from men in order to maintain their respectability, while attaining more public freedom.

¹² Ilahi Personal Communication 2008

Fear, Space and Modification

Street harassment is a public safety concern for women. Women in this study negotiate personal safety by managing aspects of personal space. The variety of public-private spaces, such as the women's car in the metro underground, are limited in the protection they serve to women. It is the upholding of particular gendered behavioural expectations which shape discontinuities between safety and reputation for women. Hille Koskela and Kristen Day both examine women's fear in public spaces as shaped by violence and sexual harassment. In terms of gendered power relations, Koskela finds that "by restricting their mobility because of fear, women unwittingly reproduce masculine domination over space" (1999, 113). Day situates masculinity in opposition to women's fear in public spaces, where performance of "bad boys" masculinity or that of "chivalrous" men depend on the sense of a woman's vulnerability in maintaining these roles. In this context, the performance of particular aspects of gender highlights the disparity in equal access to space. However, in order to negotiate this, Egyptian and foreign women differently employ traditional aspects of feminine-associated modesty as strategies to maneuver through space safely.

My interviews with women revealed ways in which, through fear of being harassed, they modify their own movement within urban spaces. One woman noted:

I ask my husband to respond verbally or switch places with me so I am further away from the harasser, asked male friends to do the same. I try to make sure I am not walking by myself or riding the metro by myself, and I ride in the women's car on the Metro. I've stopped going to certain places, like Talaat Harb in downtown for instance.¹³

Phadke's work on public space in India suggests taking an active stance toward the issue of safety. She urges us to explore the realm of feminist rights to the city and argues that passive modes of seeking safety is an unviable feminist strategy to enhance access to public space. With such an approach, performing respectability and issues of honor take precedence over women's safety (Phadke 2007, 1512). Dressing differently, avoiding eye contact and not walking alone are examples of how daily life is modified in urban spaces by foreign and Egyptian women. In leftist feminist terms, women are then marginalized because the act of performing their "worthiness of being protected," outweighs their right to basic tenets of safety and legal recourse. Observantly, when I saw women out walking at night, the majority were relying on male escorts such as relatives, co-workers or boyfriends. This strategy may reproduce the gendered notions built up within society about a woman's place being in the home unless accompanied outside by a male. Fear acting as a mechanism to drive women back into dichotomous conceptions of space limits their equal access to public spaces and infantilizes them as helpless and prone to danger by men.

Conclusion: Agency, Resistance and Negotiating Public Spaces

Street harassment serves as a means to maintain traditional gender norms that mask male violence against women, which is grossly ignored and portrayed as insignificant by the Egyptian state. It is a masculine performance rooted in normative patriarchal ideals. Through participating in

¹³ Ilahi Interview Notes 2006

harassment, men maintain privileges of space over women. Subsequently, women are relegated to traditional feminine roles directly linked to their behaviour and dress, following Phadke, help constitute their role in upholding patriarchal values of control over their bodies. More and more women push gendered boundaries by aggressively fighting back alongside Egyptian feminists. They continue to oppose the absence of harassment laws and the practices perpetrated against the female body that continue to oppress women. Today's Egyptian feminists would help create a safer environment for women spanning diverse class boundaries by focusing on redirecting efforts to encourage alternate forms of masculinity and femininity. Social space as felt in Egypt does convey a different set of experiences for men and women, and further research is needed to illustrate how particular feminist notions of reclaiming space are impacted by class divisions. Women in Egypt are reclaiming space, and it is men and women alike who challenge or acquiesce to the various meanings of these spaces.

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