

# Survivors, Not Victims!

## The Problem of the Rehabilitation of Sexually Assaulted Women

**Amal Elmohandes**

In Egypt, girls and women, in the private and public spheres, face varied and numerous forms of sexual violence. In the public sphere, they are exposed to violence, be they activists, human rights defenders, or normal citizens. They are also at risk as they walk through the streets and squares to take the metro, on their way to their schools and universities, or in their places of work. As soon as one of them undergoes a virginity test, is sexually abused, raped, or assaulted, gang-raped, vaginally examined, orally or anally raped, or sexually harassed, everybody, be it the family, friends, the media, medical professionals, or the judiciary rush to label or stigmatize her as a “victim”. Defining women as victims is the result of a regular practice by a patriarchal society that adopts male values aiming to shed light on the offense or violation committed against them from a sexual perspective. Oftentimes, these women are slandered and blamed for the crime perpetrated against them, and sometimes the patriarchal society links the violation these women endured to their honor and virginity as a means to measure their value within society. Such an approach depicts them as women in need of male protection in order to preserve their dignity and honor. This situation is explained by Dr. Aida Seif al-Dawla:

The suffering many women endure as a result of their choices, which may sometimes clash with the community’s expectations, is not in fact the result of a wrongful act done by women, but rather because Arab culture and traditions set specific roles for men and women many years ago, and have not yet succeeded in keeping pace with rapid social and economic changes that have occurred during the last decades, whether related to men or women.

This stigmatization compounds the burden on women survivors at many levels. At this very moment, they need to triumph over the post-traumatic stress precipitated by the violation and offense, then overcome the inner conflict resulting from the feeling of guilt, and from the discourse they have been subjected to since an early age. This discourse instills in them the notion that a woman’s body is a social burden that causes shame and disgrace to the family and constantly reminds them of the traditional customs based on patriarchal values. One must also bear in mind the confusion they feel. Is it wise for them to tell their families and relatives about what has happened

to them, or even to speak out in general, driven by their feelings of responsibility towards a society that is passing through a complex political and societal stage, a society that uses the presence and participation of women in the revolution as a pawn. Furthermore, this same society ignores their physical integrity and their rights. Not only that, it is a society that denies such crimes, which explains the absence of an integrated system to rehabilitate women survivors and reintegrate them into society. In fact, most sexual assaults and gang-rape survivors suffer, as proven by our field experiences, from severe physical injuries given the violence of such offenses. Some of these injuries may change the entire lifestyle of the survivors in the long run and, perhaps, forever. They might suffer from blindness because of damage to their sight, have to resort to a hysterectomy to save their life from fatal bleeding, or have injuries to their vertebrae, resulting in a disability that prevents them from accomplishing certain activities. Some females suffer from severe burns and abrasions, leaving scars in different parts of their bodies like a thorn in their flesh, always there to remind them of what they had endured.

Women's struggle with their bodies does not stop at this point. There comes a moment when they pass through an identity crisis, where they are labeled as victims by the community and the media, or "women survivors" as we like to refer to them. This usually proves to be the hardest and most confusing moment. Then come the reactions of those around them to further complicate and exacerbate the situation even when they are continuously trying to overcome their trauma. Some believe that focusing on sympathy for those women survivors and letting them feel that they are being given support while dealing with them as survivors can cause them to actually believe that their role in life is over. Moreover, they may go through a daily vicious cycle, which reduces their lives to the moment when they were subjected to that assault. Consequently, they are preyed upon by patriarchal protectionist speech which focuses on the necessity of protecting women, on the grounds that they are "vulnerable" beings unable to go on with their lives without male protection. This only increases their marginalization and their feelings of shame of being born female.

Many factors help promote the aforementioned protectionist discourse that instills feelings of shame. The Egyptian Penal Code only recognizes a rape carried out by male penile penetration of a female vagina; in contrast, it defines penetration of the vagina with the fingers or sharp objects, and oral and anal rape as sexual molestation. It is worth mentioning that the female survivor is always referred to as the "defendant" or the "victim".

Another factor relates to the different societal reactions towards the survivors, whether the violation has been committed by the state itself or by individuals within the community. While there are differences in reactions to the deed, they all yield the same result: imposing on women survivors the feeling of shame. In the case of crimes committed by the state, be they virginity tests, sexual abuse, oral rape, or vaginal examination, everyone tends to put the blame on the woman survivor not only for defying authority, but also for the very challenge of being a woman and for daring to stand up against what symbolizes respect, authority, and righteousness. Her intentions are questioned incessantly, claiming that she is "disreputable" since she does not comply with the traditional roles in society. Nevertheless, based on the

prevailing political context, influential actors in the political field express concern about women survivors solely for the sake of reaching a particular political purpose, then disown them afterwards. As for the crimes committed by individuals in general, they are completely ignored, passed over in silence in order not to taint the reputation of the revolutionary struggle and what it symbolizes. This is also linked to prioritizing political and public interests over women's rights. Everyone blames women survivors, and the media portrays the offense as provocative news. Hence, women feel as if the community has cast them off, and their feeling of shame grows stronger. The truth is that survivors think a thousand times before revealing what they have been subjected to, or sometimes take it to the grave.

The perpetrators' constant impunity exacerbates the suffering of survivors following their ordeal. They endure injustice, slander, and lack of interest, despite the recently increasing awareness of the issue of sexual violence in general, and the creation of various initiatives and groups in some provinces outside Cairo that examine multiple types of sexual violence, whether in the public or private sphere. However, the survivors face many problems owing to the absence of a system that enables them to overcome the crisis they are enduring. A limited number of feminist groups work on this issue, but there are still many unknown survivors left to their own fate. Furthermore, the odds of survivors' rehabilitation and reintegration into the community are low for women who are not active in the public sphere.

Needless to say the overall context and the available means that facilitate women survivors' rehabilitation and reintegration into their communities are key factors. Yet, the political will of those around them and the existence of genuine interest in related cases and in their safety directly affects the process of overcoming those traumatic experiences, and their ability to rise above their ordeal. This is what makes the feminist groups concerned with this matter ponder whether these women should be considered as survivors or not. But they are survivors indeed – especially in a patriarchal society that insists on their being powerless victims – trying to overcome their inner conflicts, and to find the logic behind what has been perpetrated against them, and to preserve some sanity to get on with their lives.

### **Rehabilitation System for Women Survivors: Basic Principles**

Before introducing the basic principles for a survivors' relief and rehabilitation system to be incorporated into the national strategy for the elimination of violence against women in Egypt and that was called for by several feminist organizations, we must better understand the physical and psychological processes that the survivors go through, starting from the moment of the offense and ending with the recovery process that follows. According to the Florida Council Against Sexual Violence, which works with women survivors on their rehabilitation and recovery, the response and recovery of a woman survivor are determined by many variables. The post-traumatic stress effect depends partly on factors such as the woman survivor's age, state before the offense, and her ability to adapt and adjust, as well as the identity of the culprit. What happened during the offense affects her experience, including the intensity/duration as well as the number of times it was repeated, if applicable, in addition to the extent of the violation, the availability and the existence of sources of support and the ways in which the community helps women survivors to recover. Usually

women survivors experience a number of symptoms that can last from a few days to several weeks. Some express them, while others control and mask them. Common symptoms mentioned in the immediate aftermath of the crime can be summarized on the following levels:

- Physical: injuries, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, vomiting, and fatigue.
- Emotional: trauma, guilt, apathy, fear, loss of control, helplessness, disability, shame, and anxiety.
- Mental: the inability to understand, self-doubt, the inability to focus for long periods, wondering and asking “What if?” “Where is he?” “What will happen now?” “What should I do?” and “How would they [the family, society] react?”
- Behavioral: eating disorders, sleeping disorders, crying, laughing, screaming, joking, worrying, shaking, anxiety, irritability, silence, or logorrhea.
- Environmental: fear of pursuing work or studies, and stress because of children or other life requirements and responsibilities, as well as the need to spend time in the criminal litigation system.
- Intimacy: needs varying from the desire for physical intimacy, to the desire of the woman survivor to be left alone, issues of trust, and personal difficulties.
- Familial: control, desire for revenge, skepticism, and trauma.
- Spiritual: “Why me?” conflicts with God and awareness of the fragility of life.

Following the trauma, the woman survivor realizes that her life has changed forever. Trying to understand and find a way to get on with her life is seen as a first step. Some women face serious difficulties in re-adjusting. This mostly applies to women survivors who face other problems in their lives, such as poverty or abusive relationships. If women survivors, especially those facing other problems in their lives, do not get the necessary support, the situation might worsen. Survivors experience some symptoms in the long run and their response depends on the kind of support they receive, as well as on the phase they are going through in their own recovery process. These symptoms include:

- Physical: revisiting scenes of the crime, detachment from the needs of the body, high irritability due to sensory factors, weak immune system and fatigue.
- Emotional: vulnerability, isolation, anxiety, breakdown, excessive sensitivity, loss of control, sadness, excessive anger, general fear, and depression.
- Mental: inability to concentrate, lack of self-confidence, blaming one-self, thinking about ideas related to the assault and rape and feeling that she will never be the same, that she makes people feel uncomfortable, and that no one understands her.
- Behavioral: avoiding crowds, isolation, changes in appearance, self-harming, suicide attempts, avoiding sexual relations or having sex when she doesn't actually want to, using drugs without consulting doctors, avoiding loneliness and refusing to engage in some activities that she usually practices.
- Environmental: avoiding any interaction with the perpetrator and seasonal issues associated with the crime, avoiding the media, social beliefs, and the criminal litigation process.
- Intimacy: questioning sexual relationships, lack of trust, and playing the role of the victim excessively.

- Familial: criticism, lack of support, having to deal with buried human experiences, isolation, and mature relations.
- Spiritual: belief in “bad karma”, God’s will (good and evil), and trying to find meaning for what happened.

It is worth mentioning that the recovery process is slow and non-linear. The women survivors need great courage to put their lives back together. Such a recovery does not revolve around them forgetting the crime they were subjected to. One can say in fact that there is a balance between having them work on the recovery and moving on with their lives. The recovery process varies from one survivor to another, and can begin immediately after the crime or even 25 years later. Usually, any new problems that emerge in the lives of women survivors can plunge them back into this trauma. Old memories may return owing to specific factors or with the beginning of new commitments and relations.

### **What to Include in the Egyptian National Strategy to Fight Sexual Violence**

One can deduce from the above that certain factors and various support systems are needed to enable women survivors to turn the page and move on with their lives. These factors are indispensable for their rehabilitation and reintegration into their communities. This includes responsibilities and services that the state must provide as well as the surrounding environment that includes family and friends. These systems can be categorized as follows:

**Medical Support:** The need for tools (i.e. rape kits) to prove the occurrence of the crime and preserve the evidence; for the treatment of sexually-transmitted diseases or infections (STD/Is); the ability to treat severe physical injuries; natural long-term treatment; contraceptives; and training nurses and doctors on how to deal with survivors professionally and humanely.

**Legal Support:** Ensuring a fair and complete legal process; holding perpetrators accountable for crimes of sexual violence in an environment that fosters the survivor’s confidence in the system and respects her privacy; refraining from forcing her to promptly identify the perpetrators or give information that she may not be ready yet to give; ensuring the confidentiality of the process itself; not disclosing any information that might put her at the mercy of the offender(s) or their families; re-defining sexual violence offenses as crimes of violence that are not to be associated with morality and honor, which may increase the feeling of guilt by survivors; ensuring that the medical examination department deals professionally and humanely with the survivor; training staff and doctors; abolishing so-called virginity tests (which are also used in shelters that take care of women victims of violence).

**Psychological Support:** Social workers and psychologists should be available for women survivors in public clinics and hospitals; and they should receive training on how to deal with survivors professionally and humanely; introducing medical and psychological support training and practice in the medical curricula in nursing centers, faculties of medicine and social work, and schools and social service institutions.

**State Institutions:** This includes the Ministry of Interior and police members who must be trained on how to professionally and humanely deal with women survivors; ensuring the speedy filing and submission of police reports to the prosecution; helping women survivors draft reports in different police stations, as well as training officers and police on dealing professionally with women survivors; preventing members of the police force from committing offenses against women, and prosecuting those who do. Additionally, the National Council for Women (NCW) must swiftly set and adopt a National Strategy to fight violence against women, in consultation with feminist organizations and groups. This must also include providing training to male and female lawyers working within the offices of the NCW in all of the governorates of Egypt in matters of criminal litigation process. Shelter houses must also be provided for women survivors of sexual crimes perpetrated by family members, in addition to legal protection. This requires training the staff involved on how to deal professionally with women survivors.

**Awareness:** The state should support youth initiatives, consisting of men and women, to carry out their awareness activities on sexual violence in all the governorates of Egypt and abstain from resorting to the implementation of the law on peaceful protests and rallies against them in their activities in the Egyptian streets. The Ministry of Education should integrate information on sexual violence in the curricula and set up committees to counter such crimes in schools and universities, and to implement clear policies related to these crimes. In this same context, state family planning and reproductive health centers in all provinces and villages in Egypt must raise awareness among women on sexual violence as a crime and discuss places where they can get medical, psychological, and legal support, if needed. Offenses related to sexual violence, in their comprehensive definition, should be integrated into the Egyptian Penal Code curricula in law schools, in addition to the procedures to be undertaken during litigation and investigations.

Amal Elmohandes is the Director of the Women Human Rights Defenders Program at Nazra for Feminist Studies  
Email: amal@nazra.org

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