Targeting Cultural Change in Repressive Environments:
The Campaign against Sexual Harassment in Egypt

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Targeting Cultural Change in Repressive Environments: The Campaign against Sexual Harassment in Egypt

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Abstract: Most of the literature on social movements under authoritarian regimes has focused on how protest leads to regime change or threatens such. Little is known about the occurrence of routine protest and political participation in authoritarian environments with non-state targets. This paper contributes to this area by examining the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights campaign against sexual harassment. Data comes from participant observation of the campaign from November 2006 through 2008, interviews with organizational members, and content analysis of the organization’s literature. Findings show that the organization was successful because of its framing of the issue and strategic repertoire, as well as a favorable political opportunity structure, including a focusing event. This paper contributes to the literature on movement mobilization within repressive environments and movements with cultural targets. (words=128).

Introduction

The majority of research on social movements in repressive or authoritarian environments has focused on how movements and their tactics (such as protest or violence) leads to regime change or threatens such (see Goodwin 2001, Hafez 2004, Lee 2007, Bourdreaux 2008). While this has contributed significantly to understanding movement mobilization in authoritarian settings, we still know little about the occurrence of routine protest under authoritarian rule. This is most likely attributable to the understanding that routine protest and political participation under authoritarian rule is rare, and tantamount to challenging the regime. Tilly (2007: xi) summarizes the common idea of a distinct division between the types of political action that occurs in democratic versus non-democratic regimes: “Civil wars, for example, concentrate in undemocratic regimes, whereas social movements form almost exclusively in democratic regimes.” Generally, it is believed that in repressive environments where “competitive national elections are nullified, canceled, and/or perceived as fraudulent and meaningless” challengers will see operating through routine political channels as futile (Almeida 2003:
Routine protest and political participation will be uncommon and the state will not be challenged through established political channels. Egypt is certainly an example of such a society where there is little trust in the regime—“a state where corruption is viewed as systemic” (Slackman and Audi 2008: 1). However, we demonstrate that routine protest can be used successfully in such settings when the goal of a movement is societal change, the state is viewed as a force to be negotiated with rather than as the movement target, and there is an opening in the political opportunity structure.

We use the case of the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights’ (ECWR) Anti-Sexual Harassment Campaign to illustrate that in seeking societal change, even a relatively unresponsive regime can be negotiated with, thus providing the movement with motivation to operate through routine channels. Given that authoritarian regimes are considered to provide virtually no space for protest, we ask: *what are the strategic repertories used by movements seeking cultural change in authoritarian nations?* Also, since the state is considered generally unresponsive to protest and public opinion in authoritarian regimes, *in what ways do movements in such environments interact with the state?* In examining these questions, we contribute to the literature on social movements in repressive environments as well as movements with non-institutional targets. Also, we add to two areas recognized as notably lacking: movements in non-Western contexts and the effect of globalization on women’s movements (Moghadam 2009; 2000). Data comes from participant observation of the ECWR campaign for one year, beginning in November 2006, content analysis of media sources in 2007, follow up interviews in 2007, and attendance at an ECWR press conference in July 2008.
The Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights (ECWR) is based in Cairo and was established in 1996. ECWR is a registered non-governmental organization (NGO) with the Egyptian Ministry of Social Affairs. The organization’s goal as summarized on its website is to “improve women’s political and social status and confront all forms of discriminations against them” (www.ecwronline.org). Its work is based on the belief that women’s rights are a critical part of human rights and that gender equality and women’s empowerment are key factors that will lead to greater democracy and development in Egypt (ECWR literature). According to the organizational mission, it is imperative for women to be involved in political and public life to ensure that they are involved in the decision making processes towards change in these politically contentious times. Thus, ECWR has worked to provide legal aid to women in poverty, and to raise women’s awareness of their civil and political rights through providing training to community-based, non-governmental organizations. ECWR also leads advocacy campaigns for legal reform in the realms of personal status laws and has pushed for reforms to increase women’s political participation. In creating change, the organization tries to use routine political channels, such as lobbying, and also publishes reports and books and has student internships. Underscoring its international recognition, the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights was recognized by the United Nations in September 2007.

This paper examines the ECWR’s multi-faceted campaign to combat sexual harassment from 2005 to 2008. A timeline of the organization’s major events during this period is presented in Table 1. In examining the campaign mobilization, its framing of the issue, and its tactical repertoire, theoretical insight comes primarily from the literature on
high-risk social movements (specifically those in authoritarian environments) and movements with cultural targets. We also draw from research on women’s organization in non-Western contexts and the role of globalization in creating awareness of women’s status in different societies.

**High-Risk Social Movements**

As Doug McAdam (1986) has made clear, some types of activism involve relatively low risks for the participants, while in other cases even marginal involvement constitutes high-risk. The same activity, such as signing a petition, can be essentially risk-free in one situation, but involve high risk in another context. Risk is defined as “the anticipated dangers—whether legal, social, physical, financial, and so forth” of participating in a particular activism event (McAdam 1986: 67).

Movements in repressive environments are recognized as being particularly high-risk as well as difficult to mobilize. In these environments, movements gather materials and organizational resources slowly, and face the danger of losing this to state repression (Hafez 2004). They also face great difficulty in creating change through routine political channels. Ability to mobilize and movement success is highly dependent on the nature of the repressive regime and the degree of democratization in the nation (Ray and Korteweg 1999).

More specifically, there are some cases found among repressive regimes where social movement activists utilize “state sanctioned discourses and strategies to legitimize their actions” and create “safe space” for their activities (Zhao 2009: 11). Moreover, the authoritarian state itself could provide space for social movement mobilization (Zhao 2009) particularly during periods of regime liberalization (such as periods of increasing
institutional access and/or allowing competitive elections) (Almeida 2003). Not only could an authoritarian regime facilitate social movement activity, but there are cases when an institution within the state could collaborate with a social movement, thus supporting the movement (Zhao 2009). Gender may also play a role in creating a political opening; in some cases, a repressive regime may inadvertently create political space for women to organize, because they do not perceive women as political actors (Ray and Korteweg 1999).

Finally, even with the recent theoretical and empirical gains in explaining social movement development and effectiveness (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, Tarrow 1999, Meyer 2002, Wickham 2002, McAdam 2003), social scientists still know relatively little about how these processes work in varying repressive environments as compared to consolidated democracies, which tend to be more similar in terms of political opportunity structures (Almeida 2003).

In Egypt, a repressive political environment combined with strict restrictions on NGO development and operation creates a high-risk movement environment. However given the need for more research on social movement activity in authoritarian states (Almeida 2003), we will examine the abilities of ECWR to maneuver within this high risk environment, particularly through its willingness to work within the system and routine political channels as well as working with a quasi-state institution, the National Council for Women, for social change.

**Participation in Movements and Risk in Egypt**

Though Egypt’s exact regime type has been debated, it is generally recognized to be an authoritarian state (Diamond 2002; Freedom House 2008; Langohr 2005;
In an examination of hybrid regimes, which combine democratic and authoritarian elements, Diamond (2002) classified Egypt as a “Hegemonic Electoral Authoritarian” state. Such regimes are typified by an uncompetitive multiparty electoral system. In 2008, Freedom House classified Egypt as “Not Free” (in a 3 category classification system where states are classified as Free, Partly Free, and Not Free). Specifically, on a 7-point scale where 7 is seen as the most repressive, Egypt was assigned a score of 6 in terms of Political Rights and 5 in terms of Civil Liberties. Diane Singerman (2004) noted that President Hosni Mubarak has ruled since 1981 without engaging in contested presidential elections\(^1\), and there is at least some evidence that his son is expected to follow him in office. Thus, she followed previous analysts in classifying Egypt as a presidential monarchy.

Though Egypt’s exact regime classification may be debatable, it is recognized that in Egypt, as in many authoritarian regimes, the space for citizen action is severely curtailed. More specifically, the emergency law has been in place since 1967, except for an 18-month period in 1980. The law has been continuously renewed since 1981 following the assassination of President Anwar Sadat. Under the law, police powers are increased, constitutional rights suspended and censorship of the media is legal (Agati 2006). The law bestows the executive branch, particularly the Ministry of Interior, with the power to suspend civil liberties such as prohibiting demonstrations, monitoring personal communications, and detaining people indefinitely without charge. Currently, according to estimates by Egyptian defense attorneys and human rights groups, about 5,000 are being held without charge or trial (Human Rights Watch 2008). Others

\(^1\) On September 7, 2005 the first multicandidate elections for president was held after amending the constitution. However the ability of opposition candidates to run competitive campaigns was limited by the regime.
estimate that about 17,000 people are detained under the law and another 30,000 prisoners are held for political reasons (Agati 2006). On May 26, 2008, the emergency law was renewed once again. Parliament pushed through the renewal with almost no discussion and despite objections from opposition and human rights groups (Human Rights Watch 2008). The law was extended in spite of the fact that on March 26, 2007 constitutional reforms proposed by the regime were passed, supposedly to end the emergency laws. The many restrictions on organizing in Egypt has led to a state of apathy regarding the government (Slackman and El-Naggar 2007).

Most observers (such as Brown, Dunne and Hamzawy 2007) were very pessimistic that the political and constitutional reforms, which passed despite low voter turnout, would allow for genuine citizen participation and lead to substantial democratic reform. Instead the reforms put more restrictions on political and civil liberties by institutionalizing the state of emergency into the constitution and giving the regime even more latitude to “combat terrorism” by removing protections from arbitrary arrests, searches and violations of privacy.

Also civil society in Egypt is governed by the Law on Non-Governmental Societies and Organizations (Law 84 of 2002) and the Executive Statute on Law 84 of 2002 (Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs decree No. 178 of 2002) (Elbayar 2005). Law 84 of 2002 (The NGO Law), passed by the Shura Council in June of 2002, states a number of restrictions on the formation and operation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). On the basis of this law, NGOs must be registered with the Ministry, may not be affiliated with any international organizations without the approval of the Ministry, and must have their nominees to the Board of Directors approved by the Ministry (Agati
The government can seize the property, confiscate the papers, and freeze the assets of any organization which violates the NGO law (South Asian Human Rights Documentation Centre). Violations include: using resources for a cause outside the organization’s mandate, joining an organization or association outside of Egypt without prior approval, accepting foreign funding that is not pre-approved, and violating any aspect of the law (South Asian Human Rights Documentation Centre). NGOs are also prohibited from “forming military groups, threatening national unity, violating public order or morals, and undertaking any political actions” (Agati 2007: 63). Because none of these terms are defined, the Ministry of Social Affairs has great freedom in deciding whether an organization has engaged in any of the prohibited categories (Agati 2007).

Members of NGOs are susceptible to criminal punishment if they participate in an NGO that is not registered or engage in political or union activities, which are not clearly defined (South Asian Human Rights Documentation Centre). In addition, NGOs are required to supply meeting agendas to the Ministry of Social Affairs fifteen days before the meeting, and minutes from the meeting must be supplied within thirty days after the meeting (Agati 2007). Such requirements allow the government to closely monitor organizations. This has led the majority of Egyptian NGOs to be “consciously apolitical” with key focus areas being the environment, education, and welfare (Elbayar 2005: 8).

**A Cultural Target and Institutional Ally**

Recently, social scientists have devoted increased attention to how the institutional target a movement selects to focus on in achieving a given outcome affects the tactical repertoires and strategies the movement utilizes (Walker et. al. 2008). The majority of social movement research has focused on the democratic state as the
institutional target, but some studies have examined educational institutions and private corporations. However, relatively recently scholars have noted that the targets of social movements are not limited to institutions and can also be “public opinion, identities, and cultural practices” (Van Dyke et al 2004). Much less is known about the strategies movements use when their goal is cultural change because of the historical focus on the state and institutions as targets in social movement research.

In a study of the targets of social movements, Van Dyke et al. (2005) found that the women’s movement, the civil rights movement, and the gay and lesbian movement were all less likely to target the government than the other movements examined (including the human rights movement, the peace movement, and the environmental movement). While they did target the government for policy change, this was not their main concern; they were at least as interested in raising consciousness of the issue and achieving social change (Van Dyke 2005). While political policies can lead to legal rights, movements sometimes seek broader outcomes, such as “transformative cultural change” (Bernstein 2002: 533).

However, relatively little is known about movements that are oriented towards cultural change rather than affecting state policy. This is largely because most social movement research focuses on democratic societies, where the state is highly accessible. Walker et al (2008) point out that it is not that social movement analysts are over-representing the state in their research, but that the state is omnipresent in movements in the US because of its “relative openness to challenging groups” (Walker et al 2008: 38). In democratic societies even organizations seeking societal outcomes also target the state in order to gain accompanying legal rights.
The Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights is an example of an organization seeking cultural change; it made the main goal of its anti-sexual harassment campaign changing societal beliefs and behaviors. In doing so it chose to use the state as a mechanism, rather than coming into direct conflict with the regime. This placed the organization in a precarious balance—it needed to show supporters it had agency to operate independently of the state, but it also needed to ensure that the state perceived it as an ally rather than a threat. When movements target institutions in democratic societies, they seek to exploit their weaknesses, and the institutions counter-attack by focusing on weaknesses in the movement (Walker et al 2008). However, in repressive environments a movement challenging the state is likely to be shut down. But, by treating the state as an ally in seeking cultural change, the anti-harassment campaign was able to avoid this dangerous situation for the most part. In a repressive environment where challenging groups hold little leverage in attacks on the state, this was an especially successful strategy.

To fully understand the repertoire the sexual harassment campaign employed, it is important to keep both the campaign’s target and the political context in which the movement developed in mind. Walker et al (2008) find that conventional tactics are used more commonly by organizations that target the state than organizations targeting educational or corporate institutions. Because the anti-sexual harassment campaign had a cultural target, its strategies focus much more on raising consciousness of the issue (for

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2 However some of the campaign activities were halted by state security—prohibiting ECWR from entering the campus of Cairo University in order to distribute surveys in June 2007 (field notes) and shutting down a scheduled event as at community center in a lower-working class neighborhood a few hours before the event was supposed to start (Ilahi 2008). There seems to be a limit on the amount of grassroots mobilization and support for the campaign that state security is willing to tolerate.
example, through the director of the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights television appearances) and on changing public opinion through education.

**Globalization and Women’s Movements in non-Western Contexts**

Finally, the role of global communication networks in influencing movements, especially in non-Western contexts, should not be ignored. Globalization has important implications for women’s mobilization because it exposes women to the situations of women and gender inequalities in societies across the world. As societies become more informed about gender relations in other nations, they are less likely to accept traditional roles for women (Tohidi 2002). Tohidi (2002) identifies two main global influences on women’s movements, which she terms the “human rights regime” and “global feminism.” The international human rights regime is defined as consisting of the United Nations and international non-governmental organizations, while global feminism encompasses feminist discourses, the international women’s movement, and transnational feminist networks (Tohidi 2002).

Nongovernmental groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have been important sources in promoting international standards for human rights and publicizing human rights violations. But, Tsutsui and Wotipka (2004) point out that human rights international nongovernmental organizations have been even more important in exposing human rights violations and promoting human rights standards. Many of these organizations have gained official status as consultants for the UN (Tsutsui and Wotipka 2004).

The globalization of women’s movements and feminism has provided support and resources to movements and organizations working for women’s empowerment at the
local level (Moghadam 2000, Seidman 1999). However, there has been a backlash against some women’s movements in the Middle East with women’s rights activists being accused by Islamists and other conservative groups of being against tradition, un-Islamic, and trying to impose culturally inauthentic Western feminism on their societies (Moghadam 2009, Tétreault 2000; Ghabra 1997). Women mobilizing for their rights often “find themselves torn between their identities as women and their cultural identity as Muslim” (Ray and Korteweg 1999: 51; Tohidi and Baynes 2001). Thus local women’s rights NGOs, like ECWR, have to balance their international connections with making their activities relevant to the local context in which they work.

While globalization may be important in making women aware of alternative possibilities in terms of gender relations, some researchers are concerned that too much attention has been given to macro-level explanations for women’s movements, while ignoring local contexts. These researchers “call for less universalistic claims about women’s mobilization and for more attention to the theorizing of the local and particular” (Ray and Korteweg 1999: 48). In this paper, we recognize global processes, but focus on the local environment in explaining the movement’s tactics and outcomes.

Data and Analysis

This paper presents an analysis of the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights anti-harassment campaign based on two years of fieldwork with the organization that began in November 2006. Data comes from primarily from participation observation of the campaign for one year, beginning in November 2006. This is supplemented by interviews with members of the ECWR who were coordinating this campaign and a content analysis of ECWR’s literature from 2006-2008. Information about the visibility of the campaign
and media perceptions of its goals and success was obtained from an examination of newspaper accounts of this campaign in 2007. Finally, information on how the campaign sought to shape public perceptions was gained from attendance at an ECWR press conference in July 2008.

Analysis proceeded in several stages. First, a short overview of ECWR’s campaign since 2005 is provided based primarily on the content analysis and participant observation. Next, the way in which the campaign was portrayed in the media is analyzed, focusing particularly on its portrayal in the Egyptian local newspapers. Attention is given to how the organization worked to frame its efforts for publicity. Finally, some conclusions and theoretical implications of this analysis are discussed.

Political Opening, Framing, and Tactical Repertoire

Though the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights was active since 1996 and was working specifically on combating sexual harassment since September 2005, its efforts were intensified after an incident in October 2006 which achieved widespread publicity and which served as a “focusing” event for the campaign: In October 2006, widespread and aggressive sexual harassment of women occurred in downtown Cairo during the Eid el Fitr holiday. On the first day of the holiday a large number of men gathered downtown to see the opening of a new movie. When the movie sold out, the men who could not get in went on a rampage, first attacking the box office and then assaulting women who happened to be there. These assaults lasted for five hours and included reports of women being grabbed, molested, attempts to rip off their clothes, and attempted rapes. Several shopkeepers and taxi drivers helped some women escape the attacks by pulling them into their stores and taxis, risking their own safety as the mobs of men tried to break into their
stores and taxis. As far as we know, the police did nothing to stop the mayhem. Also the mainstream press (official, independent and international) did not break the story. Bloggers (particularly Wael Abbas) broke the story by using footage of the assaults, which they had recorded on their cell phones. At first, the official press denied it happened but claimed that if it did, the government was not responsible. The official press claimed that the bloggers were trying to damage Egypt’s reputation. The independent press eventually reported that the incident happened but claimed it was exaggerated. Finally, a talk show hosted by Mona Al Shazly on the Dream Channel drew Egyptians’ attention to the incident as it was being reported by the blogs. Mona Al Shazly then followed up on the story by interviewing people on the street about the incident. She even went to the Ministry of Interior for a response and the initial claim was: "We didn't hear of anything. This didn't happen. Things were just crowded in downtown that day, but no girls were assaulted, because no police reports were filed in that regard!" Since then, the incident has been pervasive in the media and the government no longer denies that it happened.

The attack on women in Cairo during the Eid el Fitr holiday created a political opening for the anti-sexual harassment campaign in that it served as what has been termed a “focusing” or “critical” event in the literature. Birkland (1998:53) notes that social scientists have long recognized the importance of “sudden, attention-grabbing events,” termed “focusing events” for setting the policy agenda and creating social change. Burstein (1991:335) notes that while these events may have little meaning on their own, “they are given meaning by groups utilizing particular interpretive frameworks
and may affect politics only when groups are ideologically and organizationally prepared to take advantage of them.”

Though the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights had already been working to combat sexual harassment, the organization took advantage of this focusing event as a time to intensify its efforts to end such incidents. The organization worked to mobilize greater numbers of individuals and expand its constituency. However, unlike other women’s organizations in Egypt, the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights framed the Eid incident as one pertinent example of the persistent sexual harassment of women on the streets.

Though the organization typically networked with other women’s rights organizations, its effort to maintain this framing sometimes required it to hold its own events. For example, in honor of International Women’s Day in March 2007, various women’s groups came together to hold a press conference on sexual harassment. These groups only wanted to focus on what happened during the Eid. The Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights feared that if the press conference only focused on the Eid incidents that the government would only address what happened in October and not the general problem of street harassment. The fear turned out to be right: the government responded to a press release about the press conference by saying that it was not responsible for the harassment that happened during the Eid and that it would install security cameras in the area where the assaults by the mobs of men occurred.

Because the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights felt that the Eid incident was not an isolated event and that the general problem of harassment deserved greater attention, it held its own press conference in March 2007. Its press conference, “Making
Our Streets Safer for Everyone”, brought together 120 participants, including NGO leaders, representatives of political parties, political and legal experts, activists, journalists, and twenty students from the Egyptian national universities. At the press conference, the organization presented the results of over 1,000 surveys it had collected representing women of different ages and professions, a report on sexual harassment laws in six countries in Western Europe and the Middle East, and the relevant articles of the Egyptian penal code. Participants were then divided into three workshops to discuss the three aspects of the campaign: legal reform and advocacy, media and public outreach and greater cooperation with other NGOs.

This incident demonstrates two of the organization’s innovations in framing: first, the organization used the Eid event as a way to highlight sexual harassment, rather than focusing on that one event, and second, the organization worked to appeal to a broader audience, beyond those invested in women’s rights, by framing the issue as “making our streets safer for everyone.”

Another reason the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights was able to mobilize is because they avoided common methods of protest in favor of innovative tactics. The strategies and repertoires it utilized were not traditional street protest. Street protest is the common form of protest seen in Egypt, unlike in Western democracies where there are more opportunities for working through established political channels, such as lobbying. In Arab societies “the street is the chief locus of politics for ordinary people, those who are structurally absent from positions of power” (Bayat 2003: online). Therefore, alternatives to street protest are innovative. The organization’s first “awareness day” was
at a cultural center portraying the issue through art, music and workshops. In general it focused on raising awareness through education, public outreach and the media.

The organization was also successful because it showed interest in creating change through routine political channels. In general, its strategy in dealing with the state was not confrontational but rather one of lobbying and advocacy. In several projects, the organization tried to understand the government’s point of view and then lobby the government for policy and legal reform using justifications that resonate with the government. For example, in the harassment campaign, the organization considered several economic arguments about the negative effects of harassment in terms of tourism and women’s productivity in the workplace as a way to convince the government to reform laws and policies (and thus be more accountable). Thus the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights has been able to mobilize around this issue because it does not want to antagonize the government, but rather work within the system for reform.

Movement Outcomes

What should be considered social movement outcomes is controversial, with state-level policy decisions, expansion of a movement’s social capital, and changes in participants’ biographies all being considered outcomes in various studies (Cress and Snow 2000). Cress and Snow (2000) identify two types of social movement organizational outcomes: resources and representation. These concepts provide an organizational frame for examining the success of the anti-sexual harassment campaign.

Resources include material concessions, such as money, office space, and supplies, as well as less tangible resources, such as moral, informational, and human resources (Cress and Snow 2000). When ECWR recruited a team of American University
at Cairo (AUC) graduate students in the International Human Rights Law program to research laws concerning harassment in other countries in order to help ECWR’s lawyers draft a new law for Egypt, this was a type of human and informational resources. Another example of the organization securing human expertise occurred when The Institute for Gender and Women’s Studies at AUC organized a panel discussion on street harassment and the Eid incident in December 2006 featuring blogger Wael Abbas, ECWR’s International Relations Officer Rebecca Chiao and AUC faculty from economics (Galal Amin), political science (Mariz Tadros) and law (Amr Shalakany). ECWR was also able to obtain material resources in the form of space on a popular website. Masrawy.com (an internet site about Egypt including current events and announcements of cultural activities) agreed in December 2006 to devote a section of its website to sexual harassment. This included the ECWR survey, background on the campaign, and the opportunity to sign ECWR’s campaign.

The campaign has also seen success in bringing media attention to the issue. Two popular Cairo radio stations, Nile FM (English programming) and Nugoom FM (Arabic programming), have been strong supporters of the campaign from the beginning. Since 2007, they have aired donated Arabic and English public service announcements about harassment as well as periodically hosting call-in shows with sexual harassment as the theme. In August 2008, ECWR began working with the Youth & Sport broadcasting station, “Horytna” (Our Freedom), and “Only Girls” to record and broadcast public service announcements encouraging youth to become involved in stopping sexual harassment. Horytna has been successful in promoting the campaign on the internet.
The Egyptian Center for Women’s Right’s press conferences in March 2007 and July 2008, (as well as the Awareness Day events it held in May 2007, February 2008 and March 2008) also received a great deal of media coverage especially in the local press. A review of a sample of newspaper articles covering the campaign demonstrated that the organization’s language and definitions for discussing harassment have been adopted and its discussion of the different types of harassment that women face in public spaces in Egypt has become pervasive. In particular, the articles discuss harassment as a serious problem that needs to be addressed. Newspaper journalists seemed especially impressed by the statistics, which the organization presented at their press conferences and at the “Awareness Day” events. These data convinced journalists how widespread and serious the problem is, rather than something that women were exaggerating or being overly sensitive to. The stories of women experiencing sexually aggressive language and physical violations, as well as the lower levels of harassment such as staring, made an impression on journalists, and they are taking the issue seriously in their articles.

Another important result of the organization’s campaign is that the taboo about discussing sexual harassment in the public sphere has been broken. Even organization staff members note anecdotally that before the incident, people were very hesitant to talk about the issue. Women felt shame and embarrassment and didn’t know how to discuss it. Since the incident, people are now discussing it on TV talk shows, magazine articles, newspaper articles, and having public discussions. With this opening in the public discourse, the organization has been effective in defining what harassment is, why it is a problem and advocating for solutions. The organization is changing the frame for how this issue should be viewed. Previously, it was a taboo and the individual woman was
blamed for the harassment (by her actions and/or dress). The Egyptian Center for women’s rights has had success in creating the frame that harassment is a serious social problem that needs to be addressed at the state, legal and societal levels.

Perhaps most importantly, by focusing public attention on sexual harassment and making it part of public discourse, the organization delivered the Egyptian regime a challenge. The regime must show that it does not condone sexual harassment, so it is now being challenged to handle the issue through legislation (see timeline for a fuller discussion of a proposed law that will be discussed in Parliament). As a result of the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights campaign, the issue of sexual harassment has now come to the forefront in a way it was not before. Mobilization over the issue has challenged this aspect of gender inequality, namely state tolerance of gendered inequalities.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Previous research on movements in authoritarian settings has primarily focused on how movements lead to regime change or come into conflict with the state. This paper examines how a movement seeking cultural change within an authoritarian environment was able to negotiate with the state, rather than coming into direct conflict with it. Though routine protest and political participation is considered extremely rare in

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3 On October 21, 2008 a judge in the Cairo Criminal Court found a man guilty of assault for harassing a woman on the streets of Cairo. The judge sentenced him to three years of imprisonment with hard labor and ordered him to pay 5,001 Egyptian pounds ($895) in damages to the victim. This event (as well as ECWR’s campaign as related to the case) received widespread media attention locally and internationally (see New York Times article by Sharon Otterman on October 23, 2008 for more details on the case and coverage of ECWR’s campaign). Already ECWR has taken advantage of this potential “focusing event” to draw attention to its campaign for appropriate legislation in a press release on October 22, 2008 posted on its website, www.ecwronline.org. More specifically, ECWR praised the enforcement of current laws in this court case and “[d]emands that the Egyptian Parliament immediately issue legislation addressing sexual harassment in all its forms—whether it be committed by individuals or groups, in the street or in the workplace—to ensure that law enforcement officials are fully supported by the law as they work to eliminate this phenomenon.”
authoritarian environments, this paper illustrates how a movement can successfully use routine political channels, even with a relatively unresponsive state. Movements in authoritarian environments generally recognize that the state is not a realistic target in terms of responding to demands for reforms or providing benefits (Almeida 2003). However, this case study demonstrates that the state can be used to assist a movement for societal change, rather than hindering it, if it does not perceive the movement as a threat to the existing regime.

The success of the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights anti-sexual harassment campaign was due to the combination of a favorable political opportunity structure and a movement that used a combination of innovative protest tactics and routine political channels.

**Political Environment**

Though the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights had been campaigning to stop sexual harassment since September 2005, the aggressive sexual harassment of women during the Eid el Fitr holiday in October 2006 served as critical focusing event for the campaign. However, analysts have long recognized that such spontaneous and attention-generating occurrences can only be useful if given meaning by a movement who frames the event in a particular way, and is organized enough to take advantage of the opening (Burstein 1991). Because the ECWR’s anti-sexual harassment campaign was already well established, it was able to frame the event as part of a broader problem of persistent and widespread sexual harassment of women in Egypt. Continually, the movement worked to maintain this frame, even if it meant not participating in events that focused on the harassment of women during the Eid el Fitr holiday as a single event.
It is generally recognized that routine protest and operating through established political channels are rare in authoritarian states. But, this campaign was able to organize within the many government restrictions. Many of these restrictions, such as registering a non-governmental organization with the Ministry of Social Affairs and providing the Ministry with meeting agendas and minutes (Agati 2007), are a way for the government to ensure that the organization is not a threat to the regime. While most Egyptian NGOs have skirted this issue by focusing on clearly non-political issues such as the environment and education, a campaign against sexual harassment could potentially be more of a government threat, especially if it framed the issue as a problem of lax laws, whether on paper or in practice.

The anti-sexual harassment campaign, most likely well aware that it was operating within a regime that was generally unresponsive to protest, set its goal as societal change, rather than directly confronting the state. Because the organization was not perceived as challenging the regime, it was able to organize within a highly restrictive space. For example, ECWR organized an awareness day that included popular bands, speakers, and artistic displays. This event drew high attendance (about 1,000 people), but it was not perceived as a threat to the regime, because its goals were raising awareness, education, and changing individual perceptions.

Campaign Strategies

In many ways, the strategic repertoire of the movement was innovative because it was being used within an authoritative environment. In Egypt, street protest is usually the only type of political action taken. In Arab states, “Street politics is the modern urban
theater of contention” (Bayat 2003: online). Protesting on the street is a way citizens seek to make their claims heard when the regime is unresponsive.

In this case, the movement used strategies that are seen more commonly in democratic societies. This included taking advantage of a focusing event, and subsequent media attention, to frame the sexual harassment of women during the Eid el Fitr holiday as part of a larger problem and using educational and cultural events to shape perceptions of sexual harassment.

**Routine Protest in Authoritarian Environments**

The case of the anti-sexual harassment campaign demonstrates that routine protest may be rare in repressive societies, but movements can use this successfully. While the common idea of protest in Arab societies is on the street, organizations seeking cultural change can mobilize within the restricted political space available. By treating the state as a force to be negotiated with, rather than to be challenged, the movement was able to prevent being perceived as a threat by the regime.

The anti-sexual harassment campaign benefited from a political opening, in the form of a focusing event, as well as an organized and mobilized base that was ready to take advantage of this opportunity. While other NGOs in Egypt have been able to organize by remaining carefully non-political, the ECWR faced a more difficult task in attempting to combat sexual harassment of women. Women’s status in Middle Eastern nations is a topic that has received much attention from Western media, as well as in academia. Thus ECWR had to trend carefully balancing its ties to the global women’s rights movement with creating a campaign that would be effective in the local context. Moreover, if the organization sought to strongly criticize the policies of the incumbent
regime regarding women’s rights, it is likely the organization would face strong repression. But, by stating their goals as “making the streets safer for everyone” and seeking cultural change, the organization was able to present itself as improving Egyptian society, rather than threatening the regime and the more conservative sectors in society.
Works Cited


Table 1. The Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights Timeline of Activism: 2005-2008

**November 2005:** ECWR began its research phase of the campaign. ECWR developed a survey asking women to share their experiences of harassment and its consequences. The survey was at first distributed via e-mail lists and websites.

**December 2005-early 2006:**
1) Distributing surveys and conducting focus groups, working with other NGOs (including AMERA, an NGO that provides legal aid to refugees, which held discussions about harassment in refugee group meetings; and Media Arts for Development, which is developing books and an animated film to teach children about sexual harassment) and individual activists on sexual harassment related projects.
2) Distributed surveys on sexual harassment on the American University in Cairo campus, with AUC’s permission.
3) The director of ECWR, Nehad Abu El Komsan, appeared on talk shows on the Dream and Orbit networks to discuss sexual harassment. The Orbit show in particular aired on both the network and the free preview channels on December 1, 2005 and received more viewers’ phone calls than the network ever had before.

**February 2006:** ECWR participated in AUC’s International Women’s Day Celebration. This was another opportunity for ECWR to distribute its surveys on AUC’s campus.

**April 2006:** In April 2006, ECWR met with AMERA again to distribute more surveys among the refugee community.

**June 2006:** ECWR asked both Cairo University and Ain Shams University to distribute surveys regarding sexual harassment on campus. Both universities rejected this.

**August 2006:** ECWR recruited a team of AUC graduate students in the International Human Rights Law program to research laws concerning harassment in other countries in order to help ECWR’s lawyers draft a new law for Egypt.

**October-November 2006:**
1) ECWR intensified its efforts after the severe harassment of women that occurred in downtown Cairo during Eid El Fitr of 2006.
2) In November of 2006, ECWR helped plan and participated in the AUC student group, The BUSSY Project’s Sexual Harassment Awareness Week.
3) Also in November 2006, ECWR in conjunction with the Liberties Committee of the Press Syndicate held a demonstration in front of the press syndicate in downtown Cairo to take a stand against harassment. About 200-250 people participated in the demonstration.

**December 2006:**
1) The Institute for Gender and Women’s Studies at AUC organized a panel discussion on street harassment and the Eid incident in December 2006 featuring blogger Wael Abbas, ECWR’s International Relations Officer Rebecca Chiao and AUC faculty from economics (Galal Amin), political science (Mariz Tadros) and law (Amr Shalakany).
2) Masrawy.com (an internet site about Egypt including current events and announcements of cultural activities) agreed in December 2006 to devote a section of its website to sexual harassment. This included the ECWR survey, background on the campaign, and the opportunity to sign ECWR’s campaign.
**Early 2007:** The campaign moved toward distributing the surveys to a wider range of Egyptian women, particularly textile workers in Cairo and Alexandria as well as Christian women from poor neighborhoods. During this period, ECWR started working on an integrated ad campaign and was able to secure a donation of Arabic and English public service announcements on two very popular radio stations in Cairo, namely Nile FM (English programming) and Nugoom FM (Arabic programming). These two radio stations also conducted call-in shows with sexual harassment as the theme.

**June 2007:** Cairo University reversed its decision, permitting surveys on sexual harassment to be distributed on campus, but state security forces prohibited ECWR from entering the campus.

**March 2007:** ECWR held a press conference, “Making Our Streets Safer for Everyone”, which brought together 120 participants, including NGO leaders, representatives of political parties, political and legal experts, activists, journalists, and twenty students from the Egyptian national universities. At the press conference, ECWR presented the results of 1082 surveys collected by ECWR representing women of different ages and professions, a report on sexual harassment laws in six countries (France, Turkey, the UAE, India, the UK and Qatar), and the relevant articles of the Egyptian penal code.

**May 2007:** ECWR held an awareness day on May 18, 2007 entitled, “Let’s Sit and Talk: Help Make Our Streets Safer for Everyone”, held at the El Sawy Culture Wheel (a popular venue for musical and cultural events in Cairo). The event drew about 1,000 people and included popular bands, speakers, informational booths, artistic displays and films, self-defense demonstrations. All were organized by volunteers and sponsors.

**September 2007-continues?** Volunteer Team for the anti harassment campaign, “Making Our Streets Safer for Everyone”, meets once a week at the Goethe Institute in Cairo. The plan is to invite professional speakers to the meetings periodically and incorporate hands-on training sessions. They are also working to build volunteer activities in Alexandria.

**October 2007??** organized another Awareness day at the Gezira Youth Center. The event featured live music and high profile speakers, voicing their concern and lending their support to campaign’s goal to make the streets of Cairo safer. Trying to reach youth and broader range of people in terms of social class.

**October 2007:** One year after the aggressive sexual harassment incident in downtown, Nugoom FM (strong supporter of the campaign) held a call-in show on sexual/street harassment during Eid El Fitr (October 12-15) in order to keep the issue alive and to discuss what had been happening over the past year.

Nugoom FM also devoted two three hour (from 8-11 a.m.) episodes of ”3eesh saba7ak ma3a CocaCola” to sexual harassment on October 24 and 25. Both shows were hosted by Ahmed Younis and guests on the Oct. 24 episode included one of Yousra’s (famous Egyptian actress) serial ”kadyet Ra2y 3am” (highlighted problem of rape) stars. ECWR was invited to participate on the Oct. 25 episode.
**February 2008:** Goethe Institute hosted the Second Sexual Harassment Awareness Day on February 15th. 100 young people and volunteers participated in activities and discussions for both men and women on creative ideas for the campaign, a self-defense course and performance by the band, WAVE.

**March 2008:** ECWR sponsored an International Women's Day Celebration as part of the Campaign Against Sexual Harassment: "Making Our Streets Safer for All" on March 6 at the Goethe Institute. Focus of the celebration was ECWR’s call for a new law explicitly criminalizing sexual harassment. The event included legal experts and NGOs representatives discussing the legislative situation and comparing sexual harassment laws in other countries. This was followed by a committee of parliamentarians and lawyers who support the campaign and are working on drafting a new law based on the outcomes of the discussion. Finally the One Million Signatures Campaign for a law protecting women from sexual harassment was launched as part of the larger Campaign Against Sexual Harassment: Making our Street Safer for Everyone, which began in 2005 in response to complaints from Egyptian and foreign women exposed to sexual harassment in Egypt’s streets.

**April 2008:** began a second round of survey research on sexual harassment in Egypt in order to produce a substantial report on it, which will publicize and support the advocacy campaign. Began collecting data from Egyptians (both males and females), as well as collecting data specifically from foreign women (as well as examples of the warnings to women in all the guidebooks) with the hope that the Ministry of Tourism will take up this issue.
**July 2008:** On July 17, ECWR held a press conference, entitled “Clouds in Egypt's Sky,” presented the results of their second study on sexual harassment. This second in-depth study follows a smaller pilot study completed in 2006 entitled "Harassment ...the Social Cancer."

A summary of findings from ECWR's report on sexual harassment in Egypt (from ECWR’s July 2008 e-mail update):

Sexual harassment is "unwanted sexual conduct deliberately perpetrated by the harasser, resulting in sexual, physical, or psychological abuse of the victim regardless of location, whether in the workplace, the street, public transportation, educational institution, or even in private places such as home or in the company of others such as relatives or colleagues, etc."

The sample of 2020 Egyptian participants was divided equally between male and female Egyptians in 3 governorates in Egypt: Cairo, Giza, and Qalubiya. The study also included 109 foreign women living or traveling in Egypt for different purposes.

- 83% of Egyptian women and 98% of foreign women surveyed reported exposure to harassment
- 72.5% of victims surveyed were veiled
- 66.1% of foreign women confirmed that their experiences with sexual harassment had a negative impact on their vision of Egyptian society
- The vast majority of women did nothing when confronted with sexual harassment, fearing for their reputation, or the reactions of people around them.
- Egyptian women and men who witnessed harassment of Egyptian women and foreign women are likely not to help victims of harassment, most attributed this to disinterest in the affairs of others.

Over 60% of the men sampled said they harassed women. The main problem is verbal harassment, and most men consider it non-offensive, not realizing it is a crime. The study also asked why men harass. The men in the sample blamed women for wearing unacceptable clothes (despite the fact that over 70% of the harassed women were veiled).

Press conference and results of the study received attention from both local media (Daily Star, Al Ahram) and international media (BBC, Christian Science Monitor, Child’s Rights Information Network, Washington Post, New York Times, etc...)

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**August 2008:** ECWR issued the following press release:

Behind the Microphone:
Working Together to Stop Sexual Harassment

(Cairo, August 3, 2008) As part of ECWR’s Campaign Against Sexual Harassment, “Making Our Street Safer for Everyone,” we are pleased to announce the beginning of the second phase of our media campaign. ECWR is cooperating with the Youth & Sport broadcasting station, in addition to “Horytna” (Our Freedom) and “Only Girls,” to record and broadcast public service announcements urging young people to become active in stopping sexual harassment. Horytna was also extremely active in promoting this issue via the internet.

ECWR gathered many pioneers and outstanding personalities in the media to participate in spreading information about the issue of sexual harassment and our campaign. Famous broadcasters and actors, such as Buthaina Kamel, Osama Mounir and Mohammed Nagaty, have volunteered by recording PSAs, which will help to raise public awareness.

This second phase of our media campaign for “Making Our Street Safer for Everyone” follows the first phase, in which Nugoom FM and Nile FM were enthusiastic partners in our campaign’s efforts to raise public awareness about the issue of sexual harassment, particularly among young people.

**August 2008:** ECWR held a seminar entitled “Sexual Harassment and its Impacts on the Egyptian Economy” on August 19th at the Pyramiza Hotel. MP Mohsen Rady and Dr. Hamdy Abdel Azem, Professor of Political and Economic Sciences and Former Head of the Sadat Academy, participated in the seminar. All participants agreed that harassment was a serious problem and that better laws and police enforcement were necessary.

The seminar was held because the results of the “Clouds in Egypt’s Sky” study found “high rates of sexual harassment, with 98% of foreign women who were surveyed stating they had been sexually harassed while in Egypt. The study also found that some foreign women had expectations of being harassed in Egypt before they arrived. The majority of the study’s sample of foreign women, 66.1%, confirmed that their experiences with sexual harassment had a negative impact on their vision of Egyptian society, but that it would not prevent them from visiting Egypt again. Seven percent also thought that they would not return to Egypt again, and 4.6% said they would advise their friends not to visit Egypt because of their experiences. These results presage negative impacts on tourism and foreign investment in Egypt.”
August 2008: ECWR publicly praised the National Council for Women (NCW) for drafting a new law against sexual harassment in its August 2008 e-mail update. The law is a culmination of 2 1/2 years of awareness, research and advocacy work by ECWR and its volunteers. “The NCW, under whose mandate falls the proposal of public policy matters on the development and empowerment of women, is advocating for a revision of the laws pertaining to sexual harassment in Egypt. The proposal presented by the council’s legislative committee calls for the Egyptian penal code to include detailed definitions of acts that fall under the umbrella of sexual harassment, with the penalty for assailants being a fine of up to LE 1,000 or a jail sentence of up to a year, depending on the severity of the crime” (Fayed 2008).

October 2008: ECWR held two roundtable discussions on the proposed sexual harassment law. Participants discussed the drafts of a law submitted to Parliament by the National Council for Women, the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, and Member of Parliament, Khalid Qwata. The discussions focused on the potential effects of these laws and participants discussed specific ways in which they can advocate for these laws on both a national and local level. The goal was that these meetings will help ECWR make an effective proposal to Parliament when Parliament reconvenes in November. The first meeting took place on October 21st and included lawyers, legal experts, and women’s rights NGOs. The second meeting took place on October 27th and included representatives from 50 NGOs from 15 governorates. This meeting focused on ways in which participants can advocate for the laws in their local governorates.

November 2008: ECWR issued the following press release:

16-Day Campaign to Address Violence against Women

(Cairo, November 3, 2008) The United Nations has declared November 25th the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. December 2009 marks the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a declaration that has had an important impact on human rights work around the world. Nevertheless, women’s rights, particularly the issue of violence against women, continue to be a significant problem and efforts must be made on an international scale to implement a solution. To raise awareness on this issue, the United Nations has called for "16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence," an international campaign that will begin on November 25th and end on December 10th.

In cooperation with other NGOs, ECWR will organize seminars in 16 governorates throughout Egypt. The goal of the seminars is to fight violence against women by engaging communities in discussion of the drafts of a new law criminalizing sexual harassment. Participants will be asked to share their opinions and suggestions on the draft law as well as their experiences with sexual harassment. The seminars will target all members of civil society including police officers, women, and men to together formulate a law that will ensure women’s safety, privacy, and right to move freely in public.
ECWR applauds the efforts of security officials in their work against sexual harassment. They have organized several campaigns including:

A campaign launched by detectives in Cairo to restore order in the streets, revealed hundreds of cases of sexual harassment, among them 300 cases of verbal harassment and 80 public acts of obscenity.

A campaign launched by the security administration in Al-Monofya to monitor areas around Al-Monofya University and some colleges in New Shibyn, resulted in several arrests of jobless men who were caught harassing female students and other pedestrians.

A campaign, launched by security officials in Giza to restore order in the streets and to improve traffic flow, revealed 41 cases of sexual harassment including 8 cases of public verbal harassment. 7 of the accused were arrested.

ECWR appreciates these efforts and their impact on public security and order. At the same time, we emphasize the need to follow legal procedures and consistently uphold human rights while carrying out security campaigns.

To ensure the eradication of this dangerous phenomenon and restore confidence in Egypt’s security and legal system, ECWR recommends:

Creating a unit in each police station to receive complaints from women who have been subjected to abuse or sexual harassment. The proceedings of this unit should be kept private during the entire process - from filing the complaint to the final court sentence.

Set up booths in the street next to security booths to facilitate the process of filing a sexual harassment report. Under current Egyptian law, victims of sexual harassment must provide proof, in the form of their harasser’s full identity, in order to make a report. These booths should therefore have the authority to arrest harassers in order to ensure the existence of proof.

Support from all NGOs in the “Making our Streets Safe for Everyone” campaign against sexual harassment, which aims to provide legal support for victims by implementing a law that criminalizes sexual harassment and raise awareness about the issue.