

# POLICY AND PRACTICE NOTE

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## A Study of the Experience of Women Human Rights Defenders in Eleven Egyptian Governorates

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### Abstract

This policy and practice note is based on the experience of the Women Human Rights Defenders Program at Nazra for Feminist Studies, presenting an analysis of the experience of women defenders in 11 Egyptian governorates. It examines the risks and violations faced by women defenders, namely gender-based violence and family and social pressures. It also examines their protection tactics and the ways in which they diverge from the approach generally taken by rights organizations.

*Keywords:* demonstrators; protection; students; risk; women human rights defenders

### 1. Introduction

The Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD) Program at Nazra for Feminist Studies (Nazra) understands WHRDs as ‘women active in human rights defence who are targeted for who they are as well as all those active in the defence of women’s rights who are targeted for what they do’ (APWLD, 2007: 15). This includes a wide variety of female activists, including young women human rights activists, female protesters, women in vocational professions, such as doctors and nurses; students; young women in old and emerging political parties and social movements; and female labour activists and trade unionists, including in the industrial and agricultural fields. In other words, women whose activism in the public space, for example, confronts social or legal barriers to women running for political office or contests other sociocultural norms seeking to control and constrain the role and status of women.

Consistent with the scope of the definition in the UN Declaration on human rights defenders,<sup>1</sup> and as set out by the then Special Representative of the UN

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1 Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 53/144, 9 December 1998, A/RES/53/144.

Secretary-General on the situation of human rights defenders, Nazra's conception of who WHRDs are thus focuses on the nature of the human rights work the activist does, and goes beyond professional contexts.<sup>2</sup>

WHRDs in Egypt not only face the same gamut of threats and violations faced by their male counterparts, such as arbitrary arrests and detention and torture, among other violations, but in addition as women are targeted with gender-based violence and attacks. These range from stigmatization and sexuality-baiting (by threats to their families and allegations regarding their 'improper conduct', or accusations that they are 'loose' women or 'bad mothers'), to sexual harassment, threats of a sexual nature, sexual assault and rape. At the heart of the violations faced by WHRDs, then, is a deep-rooted belief that their presence in the public sphere defies cultural norms of what the 'acceptable' societal roles for women are.

This policy and practice note describes the nature of risks faced by women human rights defenders according to two broad categories, gender-based violence and family and societal pressures. It looks at the similarities and differences in the experience of women facing these categories of risks in 11 governorates. The protection tactics utilized by the women defenders are then presented, followed by a brief reflection on the gap that exists between the elaborate protection plans presented by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the reality of the activism of the women on the ground. The experience of women defenders in Egypt points to the need for further research into the conditions, experiences, and protection strategies of 'forgotten WHRDs' not reached by NGOs or aided by their pro-forma, manualized methodologies and tools for protection. Seeing that the majority of women defenders Nazra spoke to are young women with little experience in human rights activism, there is a need for further research on this emerging group of women defenders who are largely isolated from the outreach of NGOs.

## 2. Methodology

This paper is based on the experience of the Women Human Rights Defenders Program team in the two-and-a-half years of its operation. The paper presents the experiences of women defenders in Cairo and 10 other governorates. The team interviewed 101 women defenders in 10 governorates, which can be grouped into three categories: Upper Egypt (Asyut, Aswan, Suhag, Minya);

2 The Declaration on human rights defenders adopts a wide-ranging understanding of who a human rights defender is, applying to all human rights defenders, or anyone who, individually or in association with others, promotes and strives for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms (article 1). Such a view that does not limit the conception of WHRDs to women working in human rights organizations or solely to protesters was adopted by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on the situation of human rights defenders, now the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, who included categories such as student activists and trade unionists as HRDs (see OHCHR, 2004: 7).

the Delta area (Alexandria, Dakahliya, Gharbia); and the Canal Zone (Ismailia, Port Said, Suez). While the experiences of women in the governorates were collected through a study conducted by the WHRD Program in the 10 governorates from May to September 2012, the experiences of the women defenders in Cairo are based on interviews that were conducted after incidents of grave violations which took place in the capital, such as the attacks on demonstrators in November 2011. Interviews conducted in Cairo were also for the purposes of producing the initial reports produced by the programme on the risks and violations faced by WHRDs in Cairo. The experience of the programme in Cairo is thus more extensive. The number of women defenders surveyed in the governorates outside Cairo is not large, and this study is certainly not representative of the entirety of the experience of the women defenders in the governorates. Rather, it presents a first look into the reflections of the programme in its relatively new experience in the governorates.

### 3. Violations and risks

Threats directed at WHRDs aim to create an unsafe public sphere with the intention of pushing them out of it to the private sphere, where it is perceived that they belong. Risks are not always limited to the realm of possibilities, however, as they can also materialize into actual violations. Women defenders' experience of violations governs their understanding of the risks that they are likely to face. For example, women defenders who take part in demonstrations in Cairo are aware of the high risk of sexual violence, due to their own experience or that of other women defenders in demonstrations, which often involve the use of sexual violence to punish women for their participation. It is this knowledge of the risks that likely await them that largely governs the protection tactics employed by women defenders.

#### 3.1. Gender-based violence

Women human rights defenders are subject to sexual violence because of their gender, ranging from sexual harassment to sexual assault and threats of rape. Our research indicates that sexual violence is especially prevalent in Cairo against women protesters. Nazra has documented numerous cases of WHRDs taking part in demonstrations in which the risk of gender-based physical attacks translated to actual violations, including the overt targeting of WHRDs taking part in the demonstrations of November 2011 in Cairo, dubbed the Mohammed Mahmoud clashes.<sup>3</sup> According to S., who was arrested

3 The clashes commenced when police forces broke up a sit-in of the injured of the revolution and their families and a group of people who were standing in solidarity with them in Tahrir Square, sparking clashes between the Central Security Forces and protesters in Mohammed Mahmoud Street (hence the proverbial name 'the Mohammed Mahmoud clashes'), starting on 19 November and lasting for six days. The clashes resulted in 36 deaths and 174 injuries due to the gross violations that took place, including the use of rubber bullets, live ammunition, and tear gas.

by Central Security Forces (CSF), a paramilitary unit and an affiliate of the Ministry of the Interior, she was handed to a high-ranking officer who led her to a group of almost 30 men, including CSF soldiers and others she referred to as ‘thugs’. The high-ranking officer instructed the men not to touch S. However, as soon as he uttered this instruction, the group started to harass S. in unison, as she was slapped, kicked, violently harassed and held by the throat to stifle her screams. S. was carried to a police car where she noticed that the driver of the police car and the man sitting in the passenger seat next to him were two of the ‘thugs’ who harassed her.

The context in which the attack on S. took place is significant. Although occurring during the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the Mohammed Mahmoud clashes saw the reappearance of the police on the streets after months of taking a back seat following the fall of Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011. The lack of reform of the Egyptian police meant their return in November was accompanied once again by their long-standing tactic of dealing with protesters through the use of ‘thugs’, men in plain clothes who beat demonstrators and sexually harass female protesters. ‘Thugs’ were employed in May 2005, for example, in the ‘Black Wednesday’ events, to sexually assault WHRDs taking part in a demonstration to protest at constitutional amendments proposed by the Mubarak regime (Nazra for Feminist Studies, 2011: 10).

Context is again important in analysing the violations that were perpetrated during the clashes that took place in front of the Cabinet of Ministers building in Cairo in December 2011, which saw an unprecedented level of brutality against WHRDs.<sup>4</sup> According to testimonies of WHRDs documented by Nazra, with the military police taking the lead in dealing with the protesters, the ‘thugs’ omnipresent just a month earlier disappeared completely. However, extreme violence was used by the military police, along with the detention of WHRDs who were taking part in the demonstration.

According to N., a woman protester who was arrested while hiding in a nearby travel agency, she was taken to the Cabinet of Ministers building. There N. was severely beaten by members of the military police who unsuccessfully attempted to pull her pants down. The military police dragged her by her headscarf to a nearby room, where a lieutenant accused her of using Molotov cocktails and live ammunition against army soldiers. When she denied the charges, he beat her with a thick stick on her face and body, gave her electric shocks throughout her body and genitals, and threatened her with rape.

4 The clashes which took place from 16 to 23 December started when military personnel attacked Aboudy, a young man participating in the sit-in, beating him severely. The sit-in, which dated back to 25 November, was driven by the decision of the SCAF to appoint Dr Kamal al-Ganzouri to the post of prime minister, a decision opposed by many who saw Ganzouri, who had previously served as prime minister in 1996, as a reminder of Mubarak’s era.

Physical attacks were also reported by women defenders in the Gharbia governorate. According to E., who took part in a demonstration on 26 January 2011, a police officer approached her, asking about the reason behind her presence. She said that a minibus suddenly appeared behind her, its doors opened and she felt a strong hand grabbing her headscarf and pulling her inside. She was the only woman in the minibus, with three men also arrested from the demonstration. E. was violently sexually assaulted by an officer from the State Security Investigations Service on the way to the police station. When one of the arrested male protesters in the minibus asked the officer to stop, he was brutally beaten.

E. was searched in the police station by a soldier. When she resisted his attempt to touch her, he used a device ‘similar to the manual metal detector devices’. E. was raped and placed in solitary confinement where she received poor treatment from the prison guards who refused to give her a blanket to sit on in the unfurnished cell or provide her with water. She suspected the police officers told the guards that she was arrested on prostitution charges, so as to make her experience worse. E. started a conversation with one of the guards and let him know that she was arrested for ‘political reasons’, after which his attitude shifted slightly. He provided her with water and occasionally addressed her as ‘my daughter’.

The experience of E. illustrates not only the patriarchal attitudes that create major points of vulnerability for women defenders but also the techniques that women defenders—keenly aware of the manner in which these attitudes are exploited by state agents—develop to counter them and protect themselves. In the case of E., she was able to discern that the attitude of the guard was ‘overly hostile’ and chose to address the value system she knew was in operation, in order to improve her situation.

In contrast with Cairo and Gharbia, the experience of women defenders in the governorates of Upper Egypt did not involve sexual violence or any other type of physical harm. The context in which the security forces operate is highly significant with regard to the ‘feasibility’ of sexual violence against women defenders. In governorates such as Assiut, Aswan, Suhag, and Minya, the widespread possession of weapons amongst civilians is coupled with the prevalence of the concept of *tha’r*, and creates a unique setting for women defenders and the state apparatus alike. *Tha’r* refers to a practice that derives its power from family or tribal solidarity whereby tribes consider the killing of one of their members an assault on the entire group, and the higher the status of the family member killed, the greater the magnitude of the assault and the retaliation or vendetta should be. *Tha’r* is considered an entitlement to the family of the deceased, to restore their dignity, and a duty that must be fulfilled to fend off the disgrace (Abu Zahra, 2012: 66). Aware that they are operating in a context in which the WHRDs and their families will seek ‘traditional’ legal avenues for justice, the authorities are less inclined to use violence against women generally, and sexual violence specifically, owing to its ability

to trigger chaos in conservative settings where violence against women can be especially inflammatory.

Although these conditions offer women defenders relative safety from state violence, they do not mean that the activism of women is uncomplicated. For even though their families are a source of safety for the women, they are not a source of support, as women still face pressures from their families to halt their activism. One woman defender, K., reported being locked in her house by her family and prevented from leaving. Even though the presence of families reduces the level of risk to less than that faced by WHRDs in Cairo, offering them some measure of protection, there is pressure on the women to cease their activism and to become 'respectable' women.

In the governorates of the Canal Zone, a similar absence of violence from state authorities was also reported. As with Upper Egypt, attacks on women here may elicit a violent backlash from families, despite Suez not being an armed society to the extent that communities in Upper Egypt are. Women defenders we spoke with ascribed this to the small size of the governorates, the small number of women activists, and the particularly strong culture of pride and rebelliousness in the region. L., a woman defender from Suez, said that because everyone in Suez knows the identities of the police officers, a sexual attack on women defenders would prompt a violent response from families.<sup>5</sup>

The experience of women defenders was mixed in the Delta area, however, where women defenders reported facing violence from state agents in certain circumstances. One such case is that of WHRDs from the student movement who took part in the demonstration staged by the students of the College of Veterinary Medicine of the University of Mansoura, located in the Dakahleya governorate. The demonstration started on 15 October 2012, to protest against the candidature of Saied Abd el Khalik, a figure associated with Hosni Mubarak's fallen regime, for the post of the university president. Male and female students who had surrounded the car of two deans whom they believed were on their way to vote for Khalik were kicked and beaten by associates of the deans while military personnel failed to intervene, resulting in one female protester, Z., losing consciousness. The violence against the students worsened when, according to H., a female student participating in the demonstration, the students heard a voice from inside the deans' car instructing the driver to run the students over. The driver complied, proceeding to drive the car among the students.

The violations against the students continued when they headed to the police station to report the incident. According to F., a female student who accompanied her colleagues, an officer asked her what brought her to the

5 The contempt for state authority in the governorates of the Canal Zone was illustrated on 27 January 2013 when President Mohammed Morsi declared a state of emergency in Port Said, Suez, and Ismailia after violent clashes between protesters and police forces. The three governorates resisted the decision by taking steps such as organizing football matches after 9pm, which marked the start of the curfew (Shukrallah, 2013).

station. When she told him that it was to report the violations that took place in the university at the hands of individuals loyal to the once-ruling National Democratic Party, he criticized her as one of those who are ‘ruining the country’ and instructed her to leave. When she refused, he told her that his order was not open to argumentation from a ‘girl’, and proceeded to push her, grab her breasts, and pull her veil off, dragging her outside the station while calling her a ‘whore’. As the attack took place, including inside the police station, other officers stood idly by.

While women defenders in Cairo who take part in demonstrations face grave physical violence, this is not generally the experience of those who are active in the student movement. Rather, the violence comes in the form of threats and sexuality baiting—the strategic use of allegations about a woman’s sexuality to shame and discredit her work, by arguing, for example, that a WHRD is ‘promiscuous’ or ‘deviant’ ([Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition, 2005](#)). This was evident in the case of two female students in the Akhbar Al-Youm Academy protests, which started in October 2011 to protest at the decision to appoint Ahmed Zaky Badr, former Minister of Education during the rule of Hosni Mubarak, as Dean of the Academy. Badr filed a complaint against 10 students who had staged a sit-in in front of his office, accusing them of attacking him physically, and suspending them for two years. Badr claimed that he was willing to rescind the suspension decision if the 10 students submitted a formal apology. Of the 10 students, two were female. F. initially refused to apologize, but eventually did so under pressure from her mother, while H. refused to apologize and sued Badr. Even though no violence was used against the students in the Academy, Badr appeared on a well-known talk show to comment on the protests, where he asked disbelievingly how it is possible that ‘respectable girls’ remain outside their homes until after midnight, protesting in inappropriately loud voices.

F. and H. were both subjected to psychological pressure from Badr as punishment for their involvement in the sit-in. Both students learned that Badr was monitoring their Facebook and Twitter posts as Badr directly reprimanded both for the ‘indecentcies’ they posted on their accounts, claiming that the words they wrote should not be posted by ‘respectable women’. Not only were F. and H. tracked electronically, but also in their movements and conversations at the Academy. Badr told H., for example, that she was using words with her colleagues at the Academy that a ‘decent girl’ should not use.

Although it is difficult to explain with any certainty the logic behind repression, this incident at the Academy reflects the view expressed by WHRDs we spoke to, that violations committed in places other than Cairo in general do not receive sufficient attention from human rights organizations. Many WHRDs expressed their belief that they feel that they are out of sight, which facilitates the commission of violations against them with impunity, as security officers know that the defenders do not have the backing that they have in Cairo.

### 3.2. *Family and societal pressures*

Pressures from families and society at large are significant challenges to the activism of many women defenders. In Upper Egypt family pressures were very dominant, with many women defenders reporting the absence of support from their families and friends as a significant challenge to their activism. According to D., a woman defender and a university student in Assiut, a governorate in Upper Egypt, while the dearth of female activists in the governorate allows for a measure of protection from violence by state agents, as explained in the last section, the small number also translates to another set of challenges. D. explained that in Assiut news of women's activism, such as their participation in demonstrations, spreads quickly. D. was told by her female colleagues that it is the 'dirtiest girls' who take part in demonstrations because young men rape women in these settings. The continuation of her activism entails the continuation of accusations that she is 'cheap'. Another activist from Assiut, Y., concurs, saying that her problem is with the circulation of rumours that she has sexual relations with all the men in the political movement she is involved in. The small number of women activists thus helps shed light on the activism of the women; their challenging of acceptable social norms of female behaviour is thus easy to spot.

Another woman defender from Assiut, O., described experiencing pressure from her manager at work to quit her activism, who told her that security men visit the office to ask about her whereabouts, a dangerous, unsustainable situation. Even though she did not face violations at the hands of security officers, O. noted that in the meetings of activists, usually in cafes, to organize their presence in demonstrations, they always saw undercover police agents sitting nearby to monitor their plans.

WHRDs in the Upper Egypt governorate of Suhag reported that pressures from their families to halt their activism were the predominant challenge they face. According to R., the 'problem' is that she hails from a 'large family'. Belonging to a well-known family whose women do not engage in 'rebellious' activities, R. faces significant pressure from her family to conform to the image of the 'respectable' woman. This increased with the passing away of her father, to avoid rumours that she had 'gone loose' after the head of the household passed away. Although R. has not faced direct violations from security officers, anonymous phone calls to her mother advising her to warn her daughter against continuing her activism were common. While many WHRDs reported that they hide their activism from their families, activists from well-known families do not have that advantage, as it is easier for security forces or individuals belonging to the former regime (in this case a member of the now-dissolved National Democratic Party) to identify them and call the activist threatening to inform her family. The pressures eventually forced R. to abstain from participating in activism on the ground for two months, as she was prevented from leaving the house by her family. According to R., the



most formidable risk she faces is that of her family, who are responsive to threatening calls and can escalate their opposition from voicing criticism to preventing her from leaving the house.

Pressures from families are not the only form of non-state violence women defenders are subject to, however. Y., a woman defender who was taking part in a demonstration in Cairo on 17 December 2011, described how, as she was arrested and was being taken away by a soldier, a woman in a passing car asked her: 'Are you happy with your appearance now?' Y. was released later that day; a police officer signalled for a taxi, pushed her against the taxi and warned her that he 'does not want to see her in demonstrations again'. After getting in the taxi, the driver told her: 'If you were a respectable woman and had your parents raised you well, they would not have left you on the streets like this. Respect yourself. You are starting to look like a thug.' Women defenders reported similar attitudes on the streets of Suez, where W., who was taking part in a demonstration, was told by a male passer-by: 'If I had a sister like you, I would shoot her on the street'. Experiences like those of Y. and W. illustrate the fact that the sexual violence committed by state agents against women defenders does not take place in a vacuum, but against a backdrop of a societal setting that largely believes that the private sphere is where all women, including women defenders, belong. Their presence in the public space is considered an anomaly which brings on well-deserved problems. Sexual violence has been documented in many other contexts against a backdrop of prevalent social attitudes that women 'like' to be harassed or that they deserve it for dressing 'indecently', according to male respondents of a study conducted by UN Women on sexual harassment in Egypt (UN Women, 2013: 26). According to the study, 99.3 per cent of female respondents reported being subjected to some form of sexual harassment, while 72.6 per cent of male respondents who admitted to sexually harassing women explained their behaviour as due to the fact that the 'girl's dress was not decent and revealed her body contours'. At the heart of the violations faced by women defenders and all Egyptian women is a hostile public space, one in which it is firmly believed that women are not free to dress and act as they please, but are rather expected to adhere to social expectations of female behaviour, deserving punishment otherwise.

Women also face difficulties from their male colleagues when taking part in sit-ins. The challenge stems from the view, communicated by their male colleagues, that it is inappropriate for women to spend the night outside their homes, and that such an action could jeopardize the cause, as the presence of women and men at night could easily be used to frame the participants as an 'indecent' minority that staged a sit-in as a pretext to practise 'immoral behaviours'. The presence of women thus puts the 'greater cause' at risk and it becomes expected of them to sacrifice their presence for the 'greater good'. For example, in the case of a sit-in staged at the University of Mansoura, in

the Dakahleya governorate, which started on April 2011 and lasted for six months, female students participated in the demonstrations but the option of extending their participation to the sit-ins was not even debated. According to T., a female student at the university, all the female students left the university campus promptly at 5pm. An activist from Alexandria, in the Delta area, spoke of a similar inability for women defenders there to take part in sit-ins, which are almost a ‘tradition’ in and of itself in Alexandria, as the presence of women ‘ruins the reputation of any sit-in’.

However, female students were able to take part in a sit-in in Cairo University in March 2011, where they insisted on staying overnight and overcame initial disapproval from the male students. Rather than putting forward moral arguments, the male students had grounded their opposition in the concern that ‘thugs’ could attack the sit-in, at which point the women would become a burden. According to K., a woman defender present during that sit-in, female students had to defend their right to take part in the sit-in and assure the men that they did not need their protection should the sit-in be attacked. Faced with this insistence, the men’s disapproval diminished and they let them be. The experience of women in the Cairo sit-in reveals that the range of possibilities for activism for women defenders depends on factors including their geographic location, which also plays a role in the nature of risks that women defenders are willing to take. In a conservative setting such as that of Suez, women were willing to take the risk of physical violence and sexual harassment on the street, but not the risk of being labelled ‘loose’ that is attached to participating in a sit-in. Although female students in Cairo were able to stay overnight in sit-ins, the possibilities for WHRDs’ activism cannot be understood simply in terms of how remote they are from the capital. Even within Cairo WHRDs’ experiences vary. The experience of women taking part in a demonstration in Al-Azhar University, Cairo, was different from that of their counterparts at Cairo University. The protests at Al-Azhar University started on 23 October 2011, based on the students’ demand that the president of the university and the deans who were appointed during Mubarak’s regime be ousted. On 24 October, the protests turned into a sit-in. According to M., a student at Al-Azhar, female students did not participate in the sit-in, promptly leaving campus at 2pm or 3pm. Known as the centre of Islamic learning in the region, Al-Azhar is a conservative religious institution where only Muslims can gain admission and there are separate faculties for female and male students. The female students here had more in common with their counterparts at the University of Mansoura than Cairo University, having to face a set of strict norms that the female students at the ‘secular’ Cairo University faced but were able to challenge. The experience of women defenders at Al-Azhar illustrates the complexities in the experiences of WHRDs as a whole, pointing to another factor determining the scope for their activism—the character of institutions through which they try to practise their activism.

#### 4. Protection tactics

An analysis of the protection mechanisms employed by WHRDs is a topic area that has not received sufficient exploration.<sup>6</sup> Nazra's experience in exploring the ways in which WHRDs protect themselves from the risks attached to their activism reflected interesting trends. None of the WHRDs Nazra met have access to elaborate protection mechanisms. Given that most of the women we interviewed entered the public sphere as WHRDs with, or after, the 25 January revolution, many are still in the process of exploring and evaluating their experience. The protection tactics utilized by women defenders in Egypt are largely shaped by their ability to predict risks and the context in which they operate, albeit with some differentiation according to the factors set out above. In the case of WHRDs who take part in demonstrations in Cairo, the best known protection mechanism currently undertaken has been a collective one. Many WHRDs from Cairo interviewed by Nazra spoke about the tactic of male demonstrators forming 'human chains' around them to protect them from sexual attacks. This tactic was later co-opted by attackers, however, as many WHRDs from Cairo reported that they were surrounded by men who claimed to be protecting them, but were in reality sexually assaulting them (Nazra for Feminist Studies, 2012). The prevalence of the tactic of attacking women by men claiming to be protecting them in the context of demonstrations in Cairo drove a group of women and men to form organized groups, such as Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment, which intervene physically to try and release women from the sexual attackers.

The idea of protection in numbers is certainly a dominant one. N., a woman defender taking part in a demonstration for the first time in the wake of the 25 January revolution, was asked by a woman she did not know whether she was accompanied by anyone. When N. told her that she was participating on her own, she was advised by the woman to walk with the latter's 'group', to reduce the risk of being targeted by security officers, who 'target women'. Nearly all the WHRDs interviewed by Nazra expressed the need to be connected with other WHRDs in their governorate and in Egypt generally. Nazra's WHRD Program has observed that most women defenders in Egypt exist in small circles. One woman defender will tend to connect to a group of usually not more than 10 other women defenders, likely active in the same field of rights protection—a trend suggesting this might be a protection tactic in and of itself. When existing in a repressive environment, trusting only a few activists with the reality of your activism might be a way for women defenders to secure their activism. Small circles also enable women defenders to form

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6 Leading works on the subject of protection of women human rights defenders have been produced by networks including the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition, the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), and by authors such as Inmaculada Barcia and Jane Barry.

small solidarity networks that are vital for their ability to continue their activism.

Seeing that many women defenders do not have the support of their families or even friends, they report their reliance on their ‘activist friends’ for continuity. There are several benefits to being connected to a wider community of WHRDs, one of which is the perception that a woman defender’s presence in the public space becomes safer if she is participating as a part of a group. In addition, the knowledge of other defenders that ‘one of them’ has been attacked or arrested, for example, guarantees that word of the violation will get out, which has the potential of reducing the risk of further violations being committed. The experience of B., from Gharbia, for example, is an illustration of the importance of having ‘activist friends’ in the context of demonstrations. B. was beaten and sexually assaulted by CSF officers while taking part in a demonstration in support of the families of the martyrs of the 25 January revolution. According to B., she heard the officer present at the scene instructing the CSF forces to ‘discipline these dogs and bring that bitch’, pointing to her. B. was beaten and sexually assaulted by the CSF forces. A week later, B. was taking part in another demonstration with the same group of friends she had been with in the aforementioned demonstration. The same officer who instructed the CSF forces to beat her a week earlier was present. She cried when she saw him, and her friends, knowing the reason behind her crying, cursed at the officer through a megaphone. B. says that she felt ‘vindicated’ by the actions of her friends, by the fact that the officer was publicly cursed and humiliated. B. and her friends were leaving the scene of the demonstration when another officer approached her, saying that she was ‘the girl who fought’ with the officer that her friends cursed at the demonstration in which she had been attacked and that she should therefore accompany him to the police station. B. says that had it not been for the group of friends who were with her, she would not have been able to escape the police officer. It would not have been likely that anyone would have even noticed the fact that she was being unlawfully arrested in the midst of the usual commotion of demonstrations.

Having friends or colleagues who share an interest in human rights activism helps women defenders, not only as a protection tactic from physical violence, but from psychological distress as well. According to V., from Gharbia, she feels anxious and depressed if she feels ‘alone’, expressing the need for NGOs to open branches in the governorates so that activists do not feel ‘alone and unsupported’ on the streets, explaining that people on the street have more trust in activists who can answer the question ‘who are you affiliated with?’. Otherwise, ‘people generally believe that we are young people who are up to no good’. Being affiliated with a group would thus provide support for women defenders on the ground through a sense of affiliation with an institution that would give them legitimacy on the street and provide institutional support.

According to B., from Aswan, with her political activism, her friends became increasingly composed solely of other political activists. Even though having activist friends is important for the sustainability of activism, some women defenders reported that the loss of their ‘unpoliticized’ friends is a source of anxiety in and of itself. In some cases, non-activist friends are a source of the pressure applied on women defenders to quit their activism. In other cases, such as that of B. from Gharbia, for example, she feels distressed whenever she feels ‘alone’, clarifying that she needs to know that there are other women who share her political interests and activism.

The novelty of the experience of many WHRDs in the public space is one explanation of the tendency for many WHRDs interviewed by Nazra to take time off after facing violations. As such, most WHRDs have coping, rather than protection, tactics. Lacking the means of protecting themselves from the violations and from the stress, and sometimes depression, subsequent to those violations, many take time off to re-evaluate their experience. The majority of these WHRDs expressed a need for psychological support to be able to continue their activism. Given the stigma associated with seeing a psychologist and the fact that such a service is simply non-existent in many governorates, the majority of the women we interviewed believed that being psychologically healthy goes beyond a self-care strategy, to being a protection mechanism that would help them ‘deal’ with violations committed against them or which they witness.

Knowing the context in which they operate, the majority of WHRDs interviewed by Nazra refrained from alerting the authorities about the violations committed against them. In many cases, resorting to the police, for example, would not be an option as they are the perpetrators of violations, such as in the case above of F., in Mansoura, who was beaten inside the police station. Most WHRDs fall back on their support networks, resorting to staying with supportive friends or family members after a violation, or in response to one, such as anticipating the outcome of a threat. Many of the WHRDs we interviewed who faced violations at the hands of non-state actors explained their decision not to resort to the police as a protection mechanism in and of itself, due to the belief that visiting the police would put them on the ‘radar’ as activists. Given that the police have a well-established reputation and record as perpetrators of human rights violations, including gender-based discrimination and violence towards women,<sup>7</sup> these WHRDs saw not formally reporting a violation as a strategic decision to remain unknown to security officers, allowing them to practise their activism without the additional impediment of being ‘known’ to the police, and by extension, the state as a whole.

WHRDs who do not face the risk of violations at the hands of state actors have tended to develop coping, rather than protection, mechanisms, to be able

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7 Police brutality in Egypt has been documented by various human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch (2011) and El Nadeem (2007).

to practise their activism. Facing the challenge of circumventing their families to continue their activism, WHRDs have developed tactics such as concealing the truth of their whereabouts from their husbands. P., a woman defender from Suez, whose family opposes her activism, has resorted to paying her mother for her silence. To deal with her mother's tendency to report her activism to her brother, who believes that such activism is inappropriate for a 'respectable woman', P. gives her mother a regular income to guarantee her silence.

The experiences of women human rights defenders in Egypt in defending rights illustrate the gulf between the protection mechanisms promoted by international organizations working on issues concerning WHRDs generally and the everyday reality of these defenders. While many protection manuals outline elaborate security tips to diminish the possibility of risks and attacks, such as, for example, conducting an analysis of the different factors involved to assess the risks of direct or indirect attacks taking place, for many WHRDs such plans are not possible. Many women defenders do not have the resources or the networks that would enable a calculated analysis of the level of risks they face. Browsing through protection manuals containing tables for gauging threat levels, and comparing that to the experience of the majority of Egyptian WHRDs, it feels they have been written with other rights organizations in mind rather than individual defenders. This might be due to capacity constraints. Although 93 per cent of the women defenders we spoke to owned a personal computer at home, 92 per cent said that the main website they access was Facebook. None of them accessed any of the websites of human rights organizations, whether national or international. Their knowledge, not only of protection techniques and manuals produced by human rights organizations, but of human rights organizations and the services they provide, was non-existent. Women defenders were aware, certainly, that human rights organizations exist, but their responses indicated that they perceived these as distant abstractions. The lack of know-how regarding the actions to be taken when subjected to violations was also apparent in the fact that only 38 per cent of all the defenders we spoke to said they knew about a specific entity they can ask support from. The lack of knowledge about protection measures might be due to the fact that 60 per cent of the women defenders we spoke to were in the 18–29 age bracket with experience in human rights activism which, at the earliest, dates back to 2005, and at the latest, to the beginning of the 25 January revolution.

Had this been an analysis of the protection tactics utilized by women defenders involved in organizations, such as Nazra, which work with women defenders, suggestions for improvement might have included working with donors to prioritize self-care as a legitimate area for funding. Seeing that this study focuses on the situation of women defenders on the ground, such a suggestion would ring hollow as these women are mostly unseen by donors, who largely engage with other rights organizations, or with defenders who are

organized in an entity or a group. The latter observation is reflected in the fact that none of the women defenders we spoke to reported receiving any support, not merely from donors, but from rights organizations generally. Most of the defenders we spoke to reported that Nazra was the first organization focusing on women human rights defenders that got in touch with them, and thus that they know of.

In speaking about their experiences in activism, women defenders often express needs that organizations cannot do much to address directly, such as having a supportive family or feeling respected on the street rather than attacked by other citizens. Nonetheless, a range of possible interventions abound. These include public sensitization campaigns on the role of women defenders in the promotion and protection of human rights, and thus of their value to society. Rights organizations can also play a role in lobbying the Egyptian authorities to publicly recognize the legitimacy and value of human rights defence and to train their law enforcement officials to recognize that the women they target for violations are not ‘loose’ women who deserve punishment, but are women human rights defenders who play an important role by their presence in the public sphere. While the need of a woman defender for a supportive family can be beyond the scope of organizations that work to support women defenders, possibilities for support include working to provide the defender with psychological support, or connecting her with other defenders in her governorate or activism setting. Working with women defenders in Egypt, it is clear to us in Nazra that they overwhelmingly see themselves as the main actors, with organizations like ours existing in the background for the support that they see fit. This is a lesson that was driven by the gang rapes and horrific sexual assault that took place in Tahrir Square and its vicinity on 25 January 2013. While rights organizations were largely taken aback by the unprecedented brutality of the attacks on women, grassroots initiatives sprang from the community of demonstrators, such as Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment. Organizations such as Nazra witnessed these initiatives but had no role in their creation. In fact, had the suggestion for such an initiative been made to an established rights organization, it most likely would not have materialized, as many issues would have arisen. For example, how can we secure the safety of the women and men who are in the very risky situation of trying to assist women to escape groups composed of hundreds of men trying to sexually attack them? What if one of these volunteers themselves gets raped/sexually assaulted/gravely injured by virtue of being in such a setting? Groups of women and men who organize on their own do not necessarily impose self-restrictions such as these, even though they might be very serious and rational ‘constraints’ that organizations are wise to consider.

Rather than depend on organizations for primary actions, defenders—women and men alike in the latter example—chose to act and receive organizational support at a later stage. Organizations thus stepped in to provide

logistical support and medical or psychological aid, and to provide technical guidance on important issues such as establishing an emergency room that can successfully manage an emergency such as gang rapes.

## 5. Conclusion

The experience of WHRDs in Egypt is a complex one, with many factors playing a role in shaping the injustices they face. Seeing that many domestic and international rights organizations focus on Cairo, and pay insufficient attention, or none at all, to the violations committed in the governorates where WHRDs are ‘out of sight’, a conscious decision was made by Nazra to shift the focus to these forgotten defenders. Producing protection manuals that largely respond to the security threats and needs of well-connected WHRDs, who have the backing and the resources of rights organizations, creates an implicit focus on the better-connected WHRDs which leaves many others, possibly the majority, unsupported. If we accept that a gulf exists between the approach of rights organizations in protection of WHRDs and the experience of these defenders, the challenge is how that can be bridged.

The experience of the Women Human Rights Defenders Program at Nazra for Feminist Studies illustrates that in-depth studies need to be conducted to understand the concept of security of women defenders and what they consider would be a viable protection mechanism and tools applicable to their setting, how they perceive organizations like Nazra, and what exactly their expectations are. Women defenders in Egypt operate in an environment in which they face violations from both state and non-state actors, which are largely gender-based, including sexual harassment and assault, sexuality baiting, and threats of rape, among others. The experience of women defenders in Egypt is not monolithic, but affected by factors such as the geographic location of the defender, the context in which they are operating, whether it is a demonstration or a sit-in inside a gated university campus, and the support networks they have. The common thread predominant in the experience of the women defenders we spoke to is that they lack specific protection plans to help them avoid violations or deal with their aftermath when they take place. The latter conclusion is certainly a factor we identified in speaking largely to young women defenders (18–29 years old) who have little experience in human rights activism. Although they have a solid grasp of the nature of violations they are likely to face and the actors responsible, they have little knowledge of the legal avenues to take at the national level, and of protection materials produced by national and international organizations that can be of help. Indeed, as stated above, they have little knowledge of specific human rights organizations, which they see as abstract entities that operate elsewhere, and which are largely non-existent outside Cairo.

Possible initiatives must take into consideration the ways in which NGOs and donors can better reach, and provide for, the more isolated body of individual women defenders and support their small informal support networks,



and their self-care and coping strategies. Seeing that the women defenders we spoke to were largely independent activists, not involved in organized entities or groups, who largely became active in human rights defence with the 25 January 2011 revolution, reaching them can be quite challenging. It is here that the sharing of experiences among NGOs might be of help. That is, NGOs and donors might benefit by reaching out to local NGOs, such as Nazra and others that work with women human rights defenders, on the ways through which they were able to 'find' and communicate with this isolated group of women defenders. Another approach might be to communicate with local NGOs that work with women defenders with regard to whether they believe international NGOs and donors are needed in supporting these groups of defenders, and if they are, on the ways in which they can be most useful, since local NGOs already have contacts with these defenders.

Given that elaborate protection manuals already exist, produced by various international NGOs, efforts must also focus on ways through which the audience for these publications can be widened to include the largely isolated women defenders representative of the nature of independent activism that sprang up in Egypt following the 25 January revolution. These might start by holding training workshops on the protection manuals, available through websites that women defenders currently know nothing about.

Further research into the situation of women defenders in Egypt is still needed. The research project carried out by Nazra, presented in this paper, presented a first look into the situation of women defenders, but also presented many gaps. One involves deeper understanding of why and how WHRDs develop and work in small circles of trust to enhance their protection, seeing that WHRDs Nazra spoke to are largely beyond the protective reach of mainstream rights organizations. An analysis of whether WHRDs consciously create such small circles and how effective this is as a protection strategy would be very helpful to better understand the tactics that WHRDs create independently and the ways in which rights organizations can be of assistance to tailor protection and self-care tactics to these groups, if they should do so at all. Research that goes beyond the focus on the nature of violations faced by women defenders is needed. Although research on the nature of violations faced by women defenders will always be important in order for NGOs to grasp the reality that women defenders operate in, the research areas outlined above are equally important, as it could shed light on the ways that young, isolated women defenders can best be approached by NGOs seeking to cooperate with them.

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