“Those men attacked me and beat me brutally and tore my clothes and underclothes until I was naked...The police was standing there, watching...It was clear those were the orders of the police. I caught the hooligan who tore my clothes. But he was helped to escape by the police.”¹

rabea fahmy, lawyer

Targeting women with violence in Egyptian politics

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TEKST: Wafaa Osama

THE USE OF VIOLENCE against women by the Egyptian Security Forces is an increasing phenomenon. Beatings, intimidation, and sexual harassment are very common practices in the hands of the police officers. On occasions, the media has described the violent targeting of women as a striking incident. On the contrary, police always used violence against female political dissidents to humiliate and punish them. The striking fact in recent years is that targeting women has become an epidemic, affecting large numbers of ordinary female citizens who find themselves in police custody as suspects or in connection with criminal investigations.² The Egyptian authorities have not investigated the great majority of female allegations. The silence of the victims accompanied by the lack of effective public accountability and transparency has

led to a culture of impunity. In this article I will try to unveil the curtain on violent acts done by the police forces against women. According to the UN convention on the elimination of violence against women the term “violence against women” means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. In this article, I concentrate on physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the state, wherever it occurs. I will also try to explain the rationale behind using sexual violence instead of other forms of violence. Three different cases are used to throw light on my propositions: what happened to women during the presidential elections in 2005, the incident at the Serando village and the treatment of women in police custody.

Presidential Elections of 2005

On the 25th of May, 2005, a drama unfolded in the streets of Cairo, when small groups of demonstrators gathered to express their opinion regarding the referendum. I was there as a journalist to cover the demonstration. The demonstrators were protesting against the amendment of article 76 of the constitution. “The referendum was on whether to change the constitution to introduce direct presidential elections with more than one candidate for the presidential election running at September 2005”. The referendum was criticized for being laid down to ensure that the Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak, will have no serious challengers, and that his ruling National Democratic Party will not lose its

power. These protesters' mission was to urge voters to boycott the referendum.

Yet, before the demonstration even started, plainclothes security forces members arrived, encircled the demonstrators, selected some of them whom they dragged all over the street and pushed them forcibly into security forces vehicles.

A few minutes later a minibus arrived carrying dozens of young men carrying

*Egyptian police forces frequently use
violence against women to put
pressure on political opponents.*

banners and pictures of Mubarak. Nothing in their appearance or in their language indicated that they had any educational background. They appeared to be groups of thugs. These groups encircled the demonstrators, shouting "yes to Mubarak" and accused the demonstrators of being "umala" (Western agents). The demonstrators had to move to the Press syndicate to join other protestors there followed by these groups of thugs.

I followed the demonstrators along with other media personnel to the Press syndicate. While we were striving to find a place to stand between demonstrators on the stairs of the Press Syndicate, a large number of men arrived. The police were also there. They led them towards us. We kept retreating; we tried to protect ourselves by entering the Press syndicate but the door was closed. The hooligans occupied the whole of the stairs, so we had no other choice except to jump from the stairs while others continued to demonstrate. Assisted

by the security forces, these thugs started to beat the demonstrators. Female demonstrators and journalists were sexually harassed, their clothes torn, and some even stripped naked in the street. All this happened while the police stood by and watched.

The events of the May 25 are, sadly to say, not uncommon. Egyptian police forces frequently use violence against women to put pressure on political opponents. What was exceptional about this incident was not that those events took place, but rather that they took place in public, in downtown Cairo, and in the presence of international media coverage. And because these hooligans could not differentiate between journalists and demonstrators, even some Western female reporters did not manage to escape actions of violence: some of them were harassed, and their equipment damaged. Security forces denied being involved. They claimed the incident was merely political opponents who clashed in downtown Cairo.

Many journalists described what happened on the 25th of May as a "black spot in the Egyptian history".³ The Press syndicate half-masted its flag and called it the "Black Wednesday", and women activists led a rally to mark a national day of mourning. However, I would describe what happened on that day as a white spot in the Egyptian history, since this is the first time women victims of sexual harassment stood up in public and claimed their rights, demanding that the perpetrators be punished.

Targeting women with violence is not rare. The Egyptian police constantly use this old weapon: If you want to humiliate a man, target the dignity of his women. If

you want a prisoner to confess, threaten to rape his wife, sister or daughter. Due to the victims' silence associated with these types of crimes, women lose their rights and no one gets punished.

Getting away with sexual violence

Why do security forces prefer to use sexual violence against women instead of other forms of violence?

Ruth Seifert, assistant professor at the German Federal Armies Institute for Social Science, has investigated the reasons behind violence towards women in warfare and political terror. She concluded that using sexual violence and in particular rape not only serves to humiliate enemy women, it also carries an additional message: it communicates from man to man, so to speak, that the men around the women in question are not able to protect "their" women. Their masculinity is thus wounded and marked as "incompetent".⁴ According to Seifert, when men see the abuse of "their" women as a degradation of their masculinity, what counts in this position not the suffering women, but the effect it has on men. In warfare, therefore, but also in political terror, the body which is abused in order to break the spirit tends to be gender differentiated, and in the case of women, to be sexualized.⁵

It might be added to Seifert's explanation that in societies based on cultural values of "honor" like that in the Arab world, rape and other forms of sexual violence used against women is usually associated with silence. Therefore, perpetrators might be convinced that they can get away with acts of sexual violence, and that they will not be brought to justice. In fact, using violence against women is common not only

towards political actors, but lately it has become prevalent in ordinary police stations, affecting female citizens who find themselves in custody as suspects in criminal investigations. This instrument is used to pressure these alleged suspects to confess their crimes or to put pressure on their male relatives.

The case of Serando village

The Serando village⁶ case is a very good illustration of how the police use violence against women in dealing with ordinary civic cases. The Egyptian security forces had besieged the village of Serando by surrounding the farmland around it. Serando villagers reported that security forces had been conducting arbitrary arrests, terrorising and illegally detaining inhabitants during the night. Women and children were also subjected to this. Villagers also reported that the security forces failed to protect them from armed attacks by thugs thought to be sent by the local landowner. One woman is known to have died following a beating by security forces.

According to accounts by the villagers, as well as information collected by Egyptian human rights organizations, the siege of Serando is linked to an ongoing dispute between the family of a landowner and local villagers. The villagers and their lawyers maintain that they have a legal right to remain on the land where they have farmed for generations. But the landowner family has used intimidation and fraud in an attempt to force villagers farming the disputed lands to sign documents relinquishing that right. According to Human Rights Watch, the head of the police investigations has reportedly used arbitrary detention, false criminal charges,

and intimidation to assist the landowner family in its efforts to force the villagers from the disputed lands.⁷

Furthermore, the Ministry of Interior Police Investigations Officer, lieutenant colonel Ammar, attempted to prevent a delegation of human rights activists, jour-

The Egyptian legal definition of torture excludes cases of mental, psychological and sexual abuse.

nalists, and a Human Rights Watch representative from entering Serando, stating that they would first need to obtain permission from the Ministry of Interior.⁸ He threatened to arrest any member of the delegation who insisted on entering the village. Despite these threats, the Human Rights Watch delegation managed to visit Serando and gather information. They found the area full of policemen and devoid of male residents.

A woman described police breaking into homes, stealing valuables, beating women who attempted to protect their husbands and sons, and taking women and children into custody when male relatives could not be found (they fled because they were afraid of being prosecuted). Some women interviewed in Serando said that they had been illegally detained and had had a terrifying experience in police custody. One woman described being part of a group of fourteen women. The police blind-folded all these women for five whole days while they were being moved from one police check point to another. They slept on bare tile floors without blankets, food or water.⁹

Another woman described being detained outdoors with her three young children for three days without food or blankets in an effort to force her to falsely testify that her husband had participated in burning a tractor.

Nafisa al-Marakbi, aged 38, was arrested by the security forces. The police started humiliating her by removing her face-veil (*niqab*) and grabbing her breast and belly while making sexual threats. Those who saw her when she was released described her physical and psychological state as extremely bad. Her family members had to take her to the hospital three hours after she had been released, and she was declared dead after nine hours.¹⁰ No autopsy was performed on the body, which was buried quickly. The only record on the hospital computer list was a tentative diagnosis of septic shock. Thus, the security forces were not held responsible in the medical report.

Harassing girls in prison

*"The guard here says, 'You are a woman' [meaning sexually matured]. He keeps saying that to me. I keep saying, 'No, I'm a girl [i.e., a virgin].' Yesterday, he said, 'If you are really a girl, take your clothes off so we can examine you.' Then he grabbed my breasts, but I hit him."*¹¹

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Sexual abuse and violence by male guards and officers supervising females and children is a serious problem in Egyptian prisons. Female prisoners claim that sexual degradation and assault are the main forms of torture they face. The police frequently use obscene and degrading language to intimidate and humiliate females in their

custody. Human Rights Watch has conducted several interviews with alleged female criminals. During these interviews females listed sexual violence as one of their main complaints, along with police beatings and prolonged, arbitrary detention. Girls arrested for prostitution or for being “vulnerable to delinquency” faced a high of sexual harassment, as police apparently consider the girls arrested on these charges to be sexually available and to have relinquished their right to refuse sexual contact.¹² Victims of sexual abuse report that violators are most often low-level male police officers who had regular and unsupervised access to children, yet higher-ranking police officers frequently let sexual and physical abuse go unpunished. Girls who complain about police sexual abuse and violence often face retaliation from their abusers or higher-ranking officers. One girl described routine sexual abuse of girls and women in Egyptian prisons/police stations: “There are some guards who are bad, who grab girls’ breasts or say filthy things. The officers don’t do this. Some officers will let the guards do what they want, and some will punish them.”¹³

It is difficult to assess how widespread police-induced sexual and physical abuse against female prisoners is. The girls that Human Rights Watch interviewed clearly feared sexual abuse and violence by police. Several girls reported that sexual abuse and violence was common in specific police stations and even singled out certain police officers as being known for raping girls, but declined to discuss specific incidents. In other cases, girls reported that they or others in the cell avoided rape only because other girls joined in to help beat the guard

who was attacking them. Poor facility design and a lack of female guards significantly contribute to girls’ vulnerability to sexual abuse and violence by male guards. Both the girls’ cells and toilets are located directly adjacent to the guard station, giving male guards easy access to detained girls at all times, and girls must leave the cell to use the toilet, during which time they can easily be deprived of the protection of their cellmates.

The Egyptian authorities fail to investigate and punish sexual abuse and violence by police guards. Despite the detailed reports of female prisoners, the Minister of Interior Affairs, Habib al-Adli, claims that there has not been a single criminal investigation of State Security Investigation (SSI) officials for torture or ill-treatment in the past eighteen years, obviously implying that there is nothing to investigate.

The United Nation Convention Against Torture defines torture as any act by which severe pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.¹⁴ Although Egypt has signed this treaty, the Egyptian penal code limits the definition of torture to become physical abuse when the victim is an accused, and only when torture is being used to coerce the suspect to confess. Thus the Egyptian legal definition of torture excludes cases of mental, psychological and sexual abuse, as well as cases when torture is committed against someone other than an “accused” or for purposes other than securing a confession. Egypt’s penal code therefore fails to provide effective punishment of law enforcement officials responsible for torture and ill-treatment.¹⁵ It also does not recognize

torture or ill treatment by other individuals than officials, but with the approval of a public official. In short, in the three cases mentioned above, the perpetrators managed not to get punished for their acts.

Furthermore, Egypt's Code of Criminal Procedure gives the Office of the Prosecutor General exclusive authority to investigate allegations of torture and ill-treatment, even in the absence of a formal complaint, to bring charges against police and ssr officers, and to appeal court verdicts. However, the Code of Criminal Procedure also states that persons filing complaints against police for torture or ill-treatment do not have the right to challenge any decision, be it administrative or judicial, by the prosecutor's office. These articles prevent victims of torture from challenging arbitrary or capricious decisions by the Prosecutor General, thus granting the authorities effective immunity from judicial review, and allowing them unfettered discretion in determining how to respond to complaints of torture.¹⁶

Egyptian human rights groups have called on president Mubarak to appoint an independent judicial panel to conduct a thorough investigation into the 25th of May attacks. However, the alleged suspects were not even subjected to investigation.

In this article, I have argued that targeting women violently is a common tool in the hands of the security forces in Egypt, whether it is done directly by the police forces, or indirectly by allowing others to do it with their approval. The referendum day came to unveil the curtains on such acts. However, contrary to what the media called the events of the 25th of May – a black spot in Egyptian history – I consider the “Black Wednesday” to be a *white* spot in

our history. This was the day when the victims of sexual violence raised their voices and demanded that the perpetrators be brought to justice, thus paving the way for a more self-assertive approach towards the authorities in the future.

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1 “Police and ruling party thugs in Egypt attack democracy demonstrators during article 76 referendum”, www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php?article_id=6596

2 “The security protection for women rights: whose responsibility?” A joint report between the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights and the Egyptian Center for Women Rights.

3 Stop the war coalition. www.stopwar.org.uk/Cairoactivist_sattacked.htm, Police and ruling party thugs in Egypt attack democracy demonstrators during article 76 referendum. www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php?article_id=6596

4 Cynthia Cockburn, «Gender ,Armed Conflict and Political Violence», p.12.

5 www.wil.int.ch/publications/1992ruthseifert.htm, p3

6 Serando is a village in the southern governorate of Bahariya.

7 Attacks by the security forces in Serando, 17-march-2005, www.hrw.org

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 She was pronounced dead on 15 March, 2005.

11 “Charged with being children, Egyptian police abuse of children in need of protection sexual abuse and violence against girls, Human Rights Watch report, February 2003, vol.15, no1, www.hrw.org/english/docs/2004/02/25/egypt7658.htm)

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 The United Nation Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, www.hrweb.org/legal/cat.html

15 Article 129 of the Egyptian Penal Code states that any official who subjects persons to “cruelty,” including physical harm or offences to their dignity, “shall be sentenced to a arrest period of no longer than one year, or with a fine not to exceed L.E. 200 [\$30].” Article 280 of the Penal Code provides for similarly inadequate penalties regarding illegal detention.

16 Human Rights Watch Egypt's Torture Epidemic “A