How Egypt’s State Sanctioned Violence On Women Erodes Its Ancient Prestige

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This past June 30-year-old Egyptian socialist, writer, and lesbian activist Sarah Hegazi committed suicide in Canada. Her last Instagram photo showed her laying under a blue sky with the words "The sky is more beautiful than earth. I want the sky, not earth."

Hegazi had lived in exile in Canada since 2018 after fleeing Egypt following her 2017 imprisonment for raising a rainbow flag at Mashrou’ Leila concert in Cairo–the band’s lead singer Hamed Sinno is openly gay. Her three-month imprisonment and torture on charges of "promoting sexual deviancy and debauchery” left her with severe PTSD. Hamed Sinno dedicated a [song](https://www.facebook.com/1328501785/videos/10223708227916890) inspired by Hegazi’s last Instagram words.

In a year with landmark anniversaries of women’s rights, women’s safety is at utmost peril worldwide and endangered in Egypt under the current Saudi-backed Sunni, general-turned president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s rule. Hegazi joins thousands of women victimized under Egypt’s military Islamic dictatorship since June 2014.

A 2013 U.N. report on women showed [99.3 percent](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-arab-women/egypt-is-worst-arab-state-for-women-comoros-best-survey-idUSBRE9AB00820131112) of women and girls are subjected to sexual harassment in Egypt. A Reuters poll of experts on women's issues had Cairo voted as the most dangerous city in the world for women.

“There has been an upsurge of domestic violence and femicide–30 cases were reported in just two months,” says Rana Allam, former chief editor of Cairo’s Daily News Egypt (DNE) newspaper, a commentator on Middle East political affairs and human rights issues who serves as Senior Editorial Adviser and Strategic Communications Director to the International Civil Action Network ([ICAN](https://icanpeacework.org/)) and the Women Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL) organization. “A husband pushed his wife off a balcony because she tested Covid-19 positive. A woman left her fiancé, he maimed her by throwing acid on her face. A man killed his mother, wife and daughters so he could marry someone else. A man failing to divorce his wife for financial reasons, arranges her to be raped to prove her immorality–she’s killed by the rapist. And the list goes on.”

Allam explains how financial stress, rising unemployment, extreme heatwave and socio-economic conditions have escalated unleashed violence by men against women–more than culturally tolerated levels.

### **Revolving Doors Of Arrests And “Promoting Debauchery” Charges**

Amnesty International reports during 2018 [Egyptian authorities](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2018/09/egypt-freedom-of-expression/) arrested over 113 individuals on such charges as: “satire, tweeting, supporting football clubs, denouncing sexual harassment, editing movies, giving or conducting interviews.”  Under the guise of “state security” Egypt’s pre-trial detention centers are crowded with social media influencers, lawyers, activists, doctors, journalists, women reporting rapes or speaking out against unjust rules. The incarcerations and torture are justified with charges of “attacking family values of Egyptian society.”

When a teenager posted on TikTok she was gang raped, she was arrested along with her attackers and charged with “promoting debauchery.” Only after [Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights](https://eipr.org/en), which protects basic rights and freedoms in Egypt, raised questions about the charges, the girl was transferred to a rape victims center.

In July, authorities charged [five young female](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/egypt-jails-tiktok-women-influencers-indecent-content-200727161102096.html) social media influencers with morals violation for using TikTok and Instagram. They were sentenced to two years in jail and fined $18,000.

When 50 women took onto social media to report sexual harassment and rape over the years by [Ahmed Bassam Zaki](https://egyptindependent.com/egyptian-womens-council-to-investigate-sexual-predator-case/), son of an Egyptian elite, his classmates at the American University of Cairo stood up in his support. The authorities took no actions until Egypt’s National Council for Women (NCW) filed a report demanding an investigation by the Public Prosecution–Zaki was arrested. Only women from elite families received information while other women who filed complaints against Zaki faced harassment and even arrests.

The former Director of Military Intelligence, Minister of Defense, and General now serving as Egypt’s sixth president, el-Sisi’s campaign slogan “Long Live Egypt” aimed to eradicate poverty by calling on the private sector to lower their profit margins. Now Egypt’s private sector is choked with the army’s full economic takeover and control of supply chain development and the distribution of goods at lower prices across hospitality, construction, Telecom, IT, e-commerce–even the corner shops.

And all this with full support of Egypt’s conservative, middle-class.

Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Middle East and N. Africa director, writes: “The Egyptian authorities have made it very clear that anyone who challenges the official narrative will be severely punished.” Amnesty [reports](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/03/egypt-has-made-journalism-a-with-crackdown-says-amnesty-international) how under the disguise of Covid-19 campaign, 37 journalists are detained and media representatives challenging the government’s Covid-19 reports face imprisonment. The longtime Guardian reporter, Ruth Michaelson, was [expelled](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/26/egypt-forces-guardian-journalist-leave-coronavirus-story-ruth-michaelson) and her visa revoked when she reported that Egypt’s Covid-19 cases were higher than reported. At least [10 doctors](https://apnews.com/cf9528ebff1d5dd7e3b95d467d7e9418) have been arrested and others warned to not share opinions on the government’s handling of the pandemic.

“Because of government shortfalls, hundreds of medical doctors have died for not having the proper tools to treat Covid-19,” says Allam.

**Virginity Tests Disguised As State Sanctioned Rape?**

Perched between three continents and two seas, Egypt holds the end basin of the river Nile which snakes through 10 countries before reaching Cairo. The ancient land of powerful female Pharaohs, hailed in the Arab world and beyond for its refined sophistication, is now reaped with social ailments and injustices while its fundamental president [justifies](http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsPrint/103354.aspx) mandated virginity tests for female prisoners as means "to protect the girls from rape, and the soldiers and officers from accusations of rape.”

According to Amnesty International, women refusing virginity tests are threatened with prostitution charges–beaten, endure electric shocks, strip-searched while photographed by male soldiers. In the end, women are forced to submit to ‘virginity checks’–as was the case with two of the imprisoned TikTok influencers.

Many consider virginity tests as state-sanctioned rape–and women protestors arrested during the 2013 protests in Tahrir (liberation) Square in Cairo attest to this. Sexual harassment was criminalized in 2014, but Egyptian courts rarely issue convictions against men. In fact, sexual harassment, gang rapes, and marital rapes are rampant and culturally tolerated.

During the 2013 protests, grass-roots organizations and groups like [Black Block and Tahrir Bodyguards](https://www.cnn.com/2013/03/05/world/meast/tahrir-bodyguard-egypt-assaults/index.html) (guarding women protestors against sexual harassments and gang-rape) and [HARASSmap](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HARASSmap%22%20%5Co%20%22https%3A//en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HARASSmap%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) (providing safe routes for women throughout Cairo) safeguarded women from the cultural norms of female harassment.

“Today members of these groups are all either killed or imprisoned,” says Rana Allam.

Sunni’s are the largest branch, 85 percent, of the 1.9 billion strong Muslim religion–and over 90 percent of Egypt’s Muslims. The el-Sisi regime’s exploitation of women contradicts the Prophet Muhammad’s famous farewell sermon: “My parting counsel (wasiyya) to you is to treat women with kindness for verily they are your partners and [committed helpers](https://yaqeeninstitute.org/nazir-khan/women-in-islamic-law-examining-five-prevalent-myths/#ftnt20)” emphasizing “The best of you are those who are best to your women.” An Islamic teaching says, “An honorable man treats women with honor and respect, and only a despicable person treats women poorly.” The  [Prophet stated](https://books.google.com/books?id=1if1DwAAQBAJ&pg=PA18&lpg=PA18&dq=%E2%80%9CDo+not+strike+the+female+servants+of+God%E2%80%9D+and+%E2%80%9CDo+not+hit+them+and+do+not+revile+them.%E2%80%9D&source=bl&ots=kzTJFZxsbM&sig=ACfU3U2tHy7UOiU4Dpvz8s-SDI6WGq4iOg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiEu6zr45XrAhWCwVkKHe4UBv0Q6AEwAHoECAoQAQ#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%9CDo%20not%20strike%20the%20female%20servants%20of%20God%E2%80%9D%20and%20%E2%80%9CDo%20not%20hit%20them%20and%20do%20not%20revile%20them.%E2%80%9D&f=false), “Do not strike the female servants of God” and “Do not hit them and do not revile them.”

Last August, Egypt’s highest Sunni Muslim religious authority, Al-Azhar, called for harsh penalties against sexual harassers–and decreed that a woman's clothing should never justify harassment, according to a [CNN report](https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/04/health/egypt-sexual-harassment-intl/index.html).

The [Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights](https://ecwronline.org/)(ECWR)–a civil, independent, NGO, non-partisan, non-profit that supports Egyptian women obtaining full rights and equality with men–has called on the Parliament to tighten “penalties for domestic violence crimes against women and accelerate the issuance of a unified law to confront violence against women.”

A “Long Live Egypt” motto can only be realized when all Egyptian citizens are treated with honor and respect.