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## Women human rights defenders in Egypt

Women human rights defenders in Egypt are currently facing persistent violations by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), a practice inherited from the ousted regime of Hosni Mubarak. In an environment that does not encourage women taking leading roles in the public sphere, including a political atmosphere that does not trust women, women human rights defenders defy cultural, religious, and social norms about the role of women in society and thus arouse more hostility than their male counterparts. Even though those women face the same risks faced by all human rights defenders, they also suffer additional violations because of their gender that are predominantly sexual in nature, ranging from harassment and rape to sexuality baiting on the basis of their reproductive or marital status.

Women human rights defenders have faced persistent attacks from the Egyptian state long before the SCAF took power after the 25 January revolution. The attacks have been used to target journalists covering demonstrations and activists. The nature of the assaults, stripping off of clothes, sexuality baiting, and threatening women with prostitution charges, reflects the gender-specific violations women human rights defenders have faced for years. The context in which violations occur is especially important, as it underpins the tactics undertaken to silence women human rights defenders. Tapping into collective beliefs about women's worth, their "normal" space and role in society makes it easy to dismiss violations against women human rights defenders as "normal."

Systematic violence against female Egyptian activists after the start of the revolution has been documented starting on March 9 with the virginity tests and the failure to investigate and hold accountable those responsible. A case that was filed before the Cairo Administrative Court of Justice last July against the compulsory virginity testing in Military detention facilities was won on 27 December 2011. However, the persons who conducted the tests were not tried.<sup>1</sup> The violence was seen again in the events of November 19, when the army disappeared from view as police forces took the lead in using systematic violence against protestors, including women, and again in the events at the cabinet building on December 16. Militarism exacerbates the situation of women human rights defenders, characterized by an increased justification of the use of violence and the use of coercive power to ensure "stability," facilitating violence against women human rights defenders and restricting their ability to challenge the violations they face.

Nazra for Feminist Studies documented violations against women human rights defenders during the last two most severe clashes in 2011, in November and in December. The emotional pain and agony of the female activists was much stronger than the physical pain of the violence they had to face from the military police. Being exposed to the scrutiny and humiliation that they faced was more violent than the electric shocks or the bruises and injuries sustained all over their bodies. The fear they felt every time they took part in a demonstration after these two incidents, and the growing paranoia of being

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<sup>1</sup> There is an ongoing criminal investigation in the military prosecution office, but the case is not yet in trial.

exposed to harsher punishment for wanting to play a role in the public sphere, was beyond the physical pain they had to live with for some time.

Testimonies of female activists during the November clashes showed that they were subjected to sexual assault, both physical and verbal, by police forces and persons in civilian clothing. The documented violations include arbitrary detention; beatings and kicks, at times with military boots and batons; dragging; attempted choking; sexual harassment, including attempts to strip women; rape threats during detention; insults of a sexual nature; and other forms of degrading, inhumane treatment, as well as the temporary confiscation of personal belongings.

During the December clashes at the cabinet premises, women were more clearly targeted by the army soldiers, not just the military police. The situation was even more severe for women activists in this incident, as they faced more brutal treatment and were detained for longer time spans. Two of the women who had their testimonies documented at Nazra for Feminist Studies were transferred to a military hospital after being detained for 24 hours at the Shura Council downtown. They were tortured and both had their arms broken along with other bruises all over their bodies. They also received degrading treatment at the military hospital, as they were told they did not deserve to be medically treated because it cost a lot of money to receive medical care at a military hospital with the tests they had to take and the x-rays they had to do. Hence, their rights as patients were further violated, and not just as protesters in the demonstrations. The policy of targeting women human rights defenders is part of an attempt by those currently in charge of the country, the various security agencies, and the remnants of the former regime, to expel women from the public sphere. These events were marked by targeted assaults on women; photographs and video clips clearly exposed the flagrant abuses faced by female activists, who were detained, beaten, dragged, and stripped of their clothing.

The use of sexual violence against female activists cannot be seen outside the context of attempts by the military establishment to marginalize women and prevent them from defending their rights and exercising their right to actively participate in the politics of the country at this important stage in Egypt's history. These attempts involve the use of physical harm, intentional humiliation, and sexual assault, which is accompanied by a severe social stigma in the community.

Women were at the forefront of the recent clashes in November and December 2011, and they have participated in every protest since the start of the revolution, holding their own rallies as well (in December 2011 and February 2012). We thus urge the protection of women human rights defenders, not to shelter helpless women, but rather to support the right of women to demonstrate and protest as an active partner in democratization and the transitional period. We call on the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights Defenders to conduct a study, in collaboration with the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, on the role of women human rights defenders in the context of fighting militarization and pro-democracy demonstrations and movements.