Activists Fight Epidemic of Sexual Harassment in Yemen

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The Clarion Project

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[Sexual harassment of women and girls is so widespread in Yemen](http://www.barakish.net/news.aspx?cat=12&sub=12&id=63423), that a woman cannot feel safe even if she turns to the police. A simple walk to school for a girl can entail so much harassment that she will often choose not to get an education. The phenomenon extends even into Yemen’s prisons, where convicts have told their wives to stop visiting because of the sexual harassment the women are subjected to from the guards.

According to a regional conference about sexual harassment that took place in Cairo in 2009, 90 percent of women in Yemen say that have been sexually harassed. Judging from reports as to how much harassment is part of Yemen’s cultural fabric, the numbers have not decreased in recent years.

Raiyda el-Abassi is one Yemini woman out to change that. In 2011, El-Abassi, along with others, founded an organization called “Safe Streets.” The organization initiated the first campaign against sexual harassment in Yemen.

El-Abassi said that the first purpose of the campaign is to break the barrier of silence about sexual harassment. “We want

The Yemini 'Safe Streets' Campaign logopeople to start discussing this problem everywhere and [create an environment where] the victims of harassment will have the courage to speak about what happens to them. This is the necessary beginning of the solution to the problem,” El-Abassi said.

 “It’s very hard to demand that women get more involved politically when they can’t even go out to the streets because of the harassment.” She added. “We can’t encourage education of girls if they don’t feel safe walking to and from school. Some girls are denied the right to education and work because of the high level of harassment [in Yemen].”

The “Safe Streets” campaign includes a web-based map that gives messages about reports of harassment. El-Abassi has also published a book titled It Happens on the Way which relates testimonies of women who have been harassed, made a short film about harassment and has had an exhibition of pictures about the subject. The organization maintains a Facebook page called “Safe Streets” and a Twitter account.

In November 2013, the “Safe Streets” campaign organized the first conference to fight against sexual harassment in Yemen. The law in Yemen does not define sexual harassment as a crime – in fact, it doesn’t even mention the subject by name.

But women know it is there. “Even if I am with my mother, we are exposed to the same harassments,” said Safia Miayad, a clerk who works in the capital city of Sanaa. Miayad says that she can’t leave her house without being harassed.

Miayad related that once she was being severely harassed by a man who was following her down the street. She happened to see a police car and decided to ask them for help, only to be harassed by the police officers themselves.

According to the daily newspaper, Al Sharih (“The Street”), dozens of women in Dzamar, a central province in Yemen, have complained that when they come to the regional prison to visit their relative or husbands, they are subjected to constant harassment by the guards. Female prisoners also complain of the same treatment, including being subjected to obscene language and having the male guards undress in front of them.

The women report that their complaints have been ignored by the prison management as well as the head of security for the entire province.

One prisoner, who requested anonymity, said that when the [wife of one of the prisoner](http://www.barakish.net/news.aspx?cat=12&sub=23&id=128916)s took her complaints about the guards to the assistant warden, she was told by him, “No one bothers a respectable person.”

The harassment of women visitors to the prison is so rampant that many of the prisoners have requested that their wives not to come for visits anymore.

In response to men who contend that women provoke sexual harassment by the way they dress, talk or act, el-Abassi says blaming the victim just proves how these men look at women – as objects without worth. El-Abassi says it is irrelevant. It doesn’t matter how the woman dresses – and the proof is that women get harassed no matter how they are dressed.

“Whoever says the dress of a woman can provoke a man (sexually) and make him want to harass a woman is saying that the man is a wild animal that cannot control his urges,” El-Abassi continued. Rather, she argues, harassment is a cultural issue and has become engrained in the fabric of the society. “The proof is that there are children that haven’t reached the age of puberty and have no sexual feelings, and yet they harass women because they are imitating grown-ups.”

Bashar el-Mourlis, a lawyer, said that the Yemini criminal laws that deal with the subject of harassment fall under the crimes of “violating honor” and “shameful acts.” The law defines “violating honor” as any act that hurts the value of a person and causes shame, including prostitution, sodomy and lesbianism. The law defines “shameful acts” as any act that contradicts public morals or an act that is disgraceful.

The penalty for these violations range between a minimum sentence of a half a year prison term or a fine to a maximum sentence of a year in prison or a fine of no more than 3,000 Riyals ($14).

In some cases, the penalty is more severe and includes a sentence of up to a year in prison or a fine if the victim is a woman and the crime was against her will. Also, the more severe penalties include up to five years in prison if the victim is a girl under the age of 16 and a boy under the age of 13.

El-Abassi said, however, that the Yemini penal law doesn’t define all forms of harassment. In addition, she says, “The existing penalties are not severe enough that they can serve as a deterrent.”

Still, El-Abassi says, “The law is not our first priority. It is more important to us to raise awareness in the society about the need to break the barrier of silence and start to discuss the issue of harassment. We need to first strengthen the role of society in deterring the harasser.”

Abed el-Rani Abdallah, a supporter of El-Abassi, says that passersby can tapped to defend women who are being harassed – but only if they are alerted by the woman being harassed. However, he says, societal norms mean most women who are harassed feel shame and that their reputation will be damaged by calling for help. Thus, the victims suffer in silence.

El-Abassi’s “Safe Streets” campaign aims to give Yemini women the courage to speak out.