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Myths, Masterplots and Sexual Harassment in Egypt

Abstract

Formally a taboo subject, public sexual harassment in Egypt has received increased media attention since the 2011 revolution. The scholarly literature on the topic, however, remains thin, particularly with regard to the social mechanisms that sustain an environment permissive of street harassment. Drawing on the rape myths literature, this article argues that naturalised and stereotyped understandings of the causes and implications of street harassment provide discursive resources to excuse harassers and blame victims for the harassment they suffer. It argues, however, that these understandings are better understood as narrative masterplots to be contested than as myths to be debunked, emphasising that falsity and prejudicial impact must not be conflated. It concludes with recommendations for activism and future research, arguing that it may be more effective to promote alternative interpretive frames than attempt to directly challenge currently dominant understandings.

Keywords

Egypt, sexual harassment, women, myth, narrative

Introduction

Egypt's problem with the sexual harassment (SH) of women in public places is well attested and undeniable. The first attempt to quantify the incidence of public sexual harassment in Egypt, published as recently as 2008, reported that 83% of female Egyptian and 98% of female non-Egyptian respondents had experienced harassment (Hassan and Shoukry 2008). In a similar study conducted in 2013, 99% of respondents reporting having been recently sexually harassed (El-Deeb 2013). Street harassment in Egypt takes diverse forms, with a 2014 report finding that unwanted touching, catcalling, ogling, comments, stalking, indecent exposure and phone calls were all common (Fahmy et al. 2014). Far from a trivial issue, it has been repeatedly argued that harassment can have serious consequences for the harassed (Richman et al. 1999; Fitzgerald 1993; Rozée and Koss 2001; Koss et al. 1994) and negatively impact women's ability to participate in public life (Crouch 2009; Bowman 1993).

In its 1993 "Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women", the UN described sexual harassment as a form of gender based violence and as:

a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men ... violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men (United Nations 1993)

Sexual harassment must therefore be viewed as one aspect of broader patterns of gender inequality and gender based violence in Egypt including, but not limited to: widespread domestic violence (Heise 1994; Rico et al. 2011), one of the highest rates of female genital mutilation in the world (Shell Duncan and Herland 2000; Yount 2002), and the organised use of sexual violence (SV) by the state to restrict female participation in politics (Amar 2011; FIDH 2015; FIDH et al. 2014; Holman 2012; Skalli 2014; Hafez 2014). Tackling public sexual harassment should consequently be viewed as one component of the broader struggle against endemic gender-based violence in the country.

Despite its prevalence and significance, however, it took until 2005 for the first campaign against street harassment in Egypt to be launched, by the Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights (Abdelmonem 2015), and until 2010 for the first organisation specifically focused on ending SH in Egypt, 'HarassMap' (خريطة التحرش), to be founded. These were followed by others including the 'Imprint Movement' (حركة بصمة), 'I saw Harassment' (شفت التحرش) and 'Against Harassment' (ضد التحرش), all of which started their activities in 2012. Ever stricter laws against NGO activity, however, have limited campaigning (Mada Masr 2016) and, although the Egyptian regime has so far tolerated a degree of gender-focused activism and anti-SH organisations have proven adept at altering their approaches, doubts remain as to the long-term sustainability of the movement (Tadros 2016, 229–50).

Since the 2011 uprising, SH, and especially state-sponsored and politically motivated sexual violence against protestors, has received increased media and academic attention (Amar 2011; Kandiyoti 2012; Zaki and Abd Alhamid 2014; Langhor 2013; Kirollos 2013; Kingsley 2013; Morsy 2014; Awadalla 2013; Golson 2014). Yet scholarly research on day-to-day SH in Egypt is scarce. There have been limited attempts to explore changing perceptions of SH (Abdelmonem 2015), identify its causes (Peoples 2008; Skalli 2014) and implications (Ilahi 2009) and to examine the nature of the anti-SH movement in Egypt (Rizzo, Price, and Meyer 2012; Skalli 2014; Abdelmonem 2016). Even so, significant gaps remain, particularly regarding the social structures that facilitate widespread acceptance of harassment in Egyptian society and the most effective ways to combat it.

This article seeks to add to our understanding of SH in Egypt in three ways. First, it applies insights from the literature on “rape myths” to the issue of SH in Egypt, arguing that recurring, culturally accepted, but frequently dubious, explanations of the causes of harassment provide a powerful mechanism for blaming victims and exculpating perpetrators. Second, it argues that myths, as employed in the rape myth literature, can be usefully reconceptualised as belonging to the broader category of “masterplots”: basic narrative structures that shape storytelling and meaning-creation. Rather than fallacious myths to be debunked, such structures are essential cognitive crutches without which it would be impossible to make sense of the world. This suggests that the goal of the anti-SH harassment movement should be changing dominant masterplots, rather than seeking to eliminate “myths”. Third, it explores how such change might be achieved, analysing the sources of dominant masterplots’ durability and arguing that activists are more likely to achieve success by promoting alternative masterplots than by seeking to undermine existing ones.

Myths

Although the social factors enabling SV are diverse, there has been a growing consensus since the mid-1970s that “rape myths” regarding its causes and implications play a central role in maintaining male hegemony and facilitating victim blaming (Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1974; Brownmiller 1975; Burt 1980, 1991; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994; Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald 1999). More recently, the myths concept has been applied to other sexually violent behaviours including stalking (De Fazio et al. 2015; Lyndon et al. 2012; Sinclair 2012; McKeon, McEwan, and Luebbers 2015) and sexual harassment (Cowan 2000; De Judicibus and McCabe 2001; Diehl, Glaser, and Bohner 2014; Diehl 2014). The applicability of the myths concept to behaviours as diverse as rape, stalking and verbal harassment is based in the idea that such behaviours sit on a continuum of SV, differing in intensity rather than in their fundamental nature and causes (Strain, Hockett, and Saucier 2015; Kelly 1988; Pryor 1987). It therefore seems highly likely that the social mechanisms that promote and facilitate SV, beyond patriarchy in a general sense, are in many cases the same across the continuum. “Rape myths”, “stalking myths” and “sexual harassment myths” might thus be usefully re-labelled “myths about sexual violence” (MSVs) to reflect the broad applicability of the concept.

Lonsway, Cortina & Magley (2008, p.600), echoing Lonsway and Fitzgerald’s (1994) widely cited definition of rape myths, define myths about sexual violence as “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women”. They are understood as stereotypes that structure interpretations of sexual violence and facilitate narrow definitions of what constitutes “genuine” sexual assault and who should be considered a “real” victim (Estrich 1987; Williams 1984; Ullman 2010; Yescavage 1999), allowing for a wide range of sexually coercive behaviours to be presented as legitimate. As Burt (1991, 27) argues, when people

“hear of a specific incident in which a woman says she was raped, they look at the incident, compare it to their idea of a “real” rape, and, all too often, decide that the woman was not “really” raped”.

Amongst the most important categories of such myths identified by Burt (1991) are: “nothing happened”, allowing perpetrators to deny that an assault took place at all, often based on the trope of the “lying woman”; “no harm was done”, allowing perpetrators to acknowledge that a sexual act took place, but to deny that it had negative consequences for the victim; “she wanted it”, in which assailants argue that their victims were not really victims at all, but willing participants, as demonstrated by the victim having dressed or acted in a supposedly provocative way; and “she deserved it” in which assault is justified as punishment for behaviour deemed inappropriate by the perpetrator. Burt adds to these a group of myths pertaining to male behaviour, for example the notion that men cannot control their sexuality once aroused or that “only crazy men rape” (Burt 1991, 32).

Rape myth acceptance by men correlates with their being more likely to sexually assault women and to hold victims responsible for the violence they endure (Scully 1990). Rape myth acceptance by women, seemingly common in both the USA (Weiss 2009) and Egypt (Hassan and Shoukry 2008; El-Deeb 2013; Fahmy et al. 2014) makes them more likely to blame themselves for the violence they experience and less likely to report incidents to law enforcement agencies (Tomlinson 1999; Du Mont, Miller, and Myhr 2003).

There have been no quantitative or qualitative studies specifically concerned with MSV acceptance in Egypt, nor has the concept of MSVs been applied to Egypt in the past. Nonetheless, strong evidence for the widespread acceptance of beliefs regarding sexual harassment similar to those described by Burt can be found in the three interview studies to explore the perceived causes of harassment in Egypt conducted to date: Hassan and Shoukry

(2008); el-Deeb (2013) and Fahmy *et al.* (2014). The myths identified in these three studies can be divided into “justifications” and “excuses” (Scott and Lyman 1968; Scully and Marolla 1984). With the former, it is accepted that the act in question occurred, but it is deemed to have been appropriate in the context in which it occurred. With the latter, it is accepted that wrongdoing took place, but external mitigating factors are presented to excuse it and minimise the perceived culpability of the perpetrator.

Several of the justifications highlighted as common in the Egyptian context closely mirror those identified in North American studies. Many male respondents in all three studies cited women’s clothing choices as leading to their harassment, at rates as high as 96.3% in el-Deeb (2013), and 97.4% in Fahmy *et al.* (2014). A significant proportion of male respondents in el-Deeb (2013) and Fahmy *et al.* (2014) also claimed that women enjoy sexually motivated attention from strangers: 30.1% and 37.1% respectively. Although less information is provided on female perceptions of the causes of SH, the available data suggest that MSV acceptance is also high amongst women – el-Deeb (2013) reports that 94.6% of female respondents supported the idea that “non-compliance of girls with religious values with regard to appearance” was a cause of harassment while 92.4% considered that “immoral behaviour of girls” and 91.3% that “the way of walking of girls” were significant factors.

In terms of excuses, the picture is more mixed. A significant number of male respondents cited the satisfaction of repressed sexual desire as an important cause of street harassment (41.8% in Hassan and Shoukry 2008 and 34.2% in Fahmy *et al.* 2014). This suggests the prevalence of a similar conception of irrepressible male sexuality to that observed in North American studies (Weiss 2009; Schultz and DeSavage 1975). From this perspective, men cannot be held fully responsible for their actions due to their incapacity to control themselves in the face of overwhelming sexual desire. Their harassing of women can therefore be excused as undesirable, but unavoidable.

Other excuses were more specific to the Egyptian context. Unsurprisingly, the myths concerning alcohol consumption as an excuse for assault seen in studies conducted in North America are entirely absent (Rozée 1993; Scully and Marolla 1984). Instead, respondents cited explanations rarely seen in North American studies, such as economic problems (Hassan and Shoukry 2008; Fahmy et al. 2014) and declining moral and religious standards and issues with the way in which children are brought up (Fahmy et al. 2014; El-Deeb 2013; Hassan and Shoukry 2008). el-Deeb (2013) and Fahmy et al. (2014) also found a significant proportion of respondents citing provocative media content and the widespread availability of pornographic materials as key factors – 97.2% of respondents in el-Deeb (2013) agreed that “foreign pornographic programmes” were a cause of harassment and 34.4% of respondents in Fahmy et al. (2014) considered “lack of control of the media” to be a significant cause. Lastly, significant numbers of respondents in both el-Deeb (2013) and Fahmy et al. (2014), studies conducted after the 2011 uprising, also report the poor security situation as playing a significant role in the prevalence of harassment.

To what extent can these explanations be disregarded as myths? Two features recur in definitions of rape myths: that they are typically false and that they facilitate the maintenance of a rape-supportive climate. All the justifications and excuses identified in el-Deeb (2013), Hassan and Shoukry (2008), and Fahmy et al. (2014) absolve male harassers of responsibility for their actions and thus fulfil the latter criterion. Determining to what extent they are “false”, however, is more difficult. Several are not supported by available empirical evidence. Hassan and Shoukry (2008), el-Deeb (2013) and Fahmy et al. (2014) found no correlation between women’s manner of dress and the likelihood of their being harassed. Similarly, the notion that more than a tiny proportion of women want to be harassed is difficult to credit given the overwhelmingly negative consequences experienced by the victims of harassment reported in

the three studies on harassment in Egypt and the broader literature (Richman et al. 1999; Fitzgerald 1993; Koss et al. 1994; Koss 1990; Logan 2015).

With some of the other justifications, however, the picture is more complex. The difficult economic situation faced by many young people in Egypt makes it difficult for men to amass the capital necessary to be viewed as credible husbands (Mcbain 2015). Peoples (2008, p.16) argues that this has produced a situation of “masculinity in crisis”, where many young men are unable to perform traditional gender roles. She argues that widespread harassment is one consequence of this crisis. Lee, Becker & Ousey (2014), meanwhile, link disintegrating social structures with sexually predatory behaviour more generally, offering support for Peoples’ argument. The impact of Egypt’s shaky security situation since the 2011 uprising is also difficult to gauge. The high levels of harassment recorded in Hassan and Shoukry (2008) show that harassment was widespread before the emergence of the post-revolution security issues. However, 48.9% of respondents in el-Deeb (2013) reported that harassment became more common after the revolution. This makes it difficult to simply disregard a link between security issues and street harassment. Finally, the consumption of pornography and SV proclivity have been linked, albeit in complex ways, in numerous studies (Malamuth 1981; Donnerstein and Barrett 1978; Allen et al. 1995; Seto, Maric, and Barbaree 2001; Kingston et al. 2008).

Such explanations cannot simply be dismissed as myths, nor are they described as such in the MSV literature. Yet this does not mean that their impact is not prejudicial. Whether they are true or not, they provide excuses for SH and mechanisms for minimising the culpability of harassers. A widely held false belief, such as women’s clothing causing harassment, and a widely held more valid belief, such as pornography consumption objectivising women and normalising sexually aggressive behaviours, may have similar outcomes in terms of facilitating the minimisation of male responsibility for sexually coercive behaviour . I propose,

then, that although the legitimacy of widely held beliefs about sexual violence is clearly important, especially for researchers and activists, it should be de-coupled from the issue of their positive or prejudicial impact and the validity of a belief should not be allowed to distract from its social function. Lonsway et al. (2008, 601) go some way towards acknowledging this when they assert that the cultural significant of MSV lies in “their function, which is to deny and justify male violence” rather than in their “accuracy”. It remains the norm in the rape myths literature, however, to conflate falsity and prejudicial impact (Briere, Malamuth, and Check 1985; De Fazio et al. 2015; Chiroro et al. 2004; Burt and Albin 1981; Edwards et al. 2011; Flores and Hartlaub 1997; Hockett et al. 2016).

This is not the only problem with the concept of MSVs. In the MSV literature, references to myths as “stereotypical” beliefs are overwhelmingly negative. Linking harmful impact and stereotypical beliefs concerning sexual assault suggests that stereotypical beliefs are inherently prejudicial. This implies that the goal of activism against SV should be the confrontation, and ultimately elimination, of stereotypes. But stereotypes, while inevitably reductive, are not necessarily harmful. When feminists argue that the default position should be to understand sexual violence as an exercise of male control over women, rather than the result of inappropriate female behaviour, for example, they are arguing for the replacement of harmful, sexist stereotypes with more positive and valid, but still not universally applicable, alternatives, rather than for the abolition of stereotypes altogether. In other words, the goal is to impose a “counterhegemony” (Lincoln 1989, 6) or a new orthodoxy (Bourdieu 1977), rather than to oppose hegemonic or orthodox discourse in and of itself. On a deeper level, it is questionable whether we would be able to cope with the complexity of the world without stereotypical cognitive schema to guide interpretation. This issue is discussed in detail in the next section.

A third problem is that although proponents of the rape myth concept argue that myths support victim-blaming and provide excuses for sexual violence, there is comparatively little discussion of how exactly they do this. Burt's (1991, 27) suggestion, cited above, that people compare specific incidents of sexual violence against their definition of rape, which is in turn informed by rape myths, suggests an active process, somewhat at odds with the typically subconscious invocation of a stereotype. While jury members in sexual violence trials, for example, are required to test evidence against a clearly articulated and shared definition, it is more difficult to imagine that this is the case with more everyday appraisals of incidents of sexual violence. Scully and Marolla (Scully and Marolla 1984) and Weiss (2009) attempt to resolve this issue using Lyman and Scott's notion of "accounts" (1968) and Mills' (1940) "vocabularies of motive". This helps to explain the link between myths and victim-blaming but, as used in the MSV literature, the focus remains strongly negative – accounts and vocabularies of motive are seen as inevitably used to excuse wrongdoing, rather than as a potential tool for positive change.

In the next section I argue that reconceptualising recurring explanations for sexual violence as "masterplots" rather than myths, as conceived in the MSV literature, can help to overcome these limitations, providing a more theoretically satisfactory account for their role in sustaining patriarchy and leading to more useful recommendations for frontline anti-SH activists in Egypt and beyond.

Masterplots

"Masterplots" (Abbott 2002), "master narratives" (Bamberg 2004; Beeman 1991), "canonical narratives" (Gould 2002), "canonical scripts" (Bruner 1991) or "cultural narratives" (Phelan 2005) are skeletal narrative structures which do not relate specific events occurring in specific places, but encode abstract configurations of causal relationships between events that can be used to structure accounts of specific happenings. As Phelan (2005:8) argues, "cultural

narratives typically become formulas that underlie specific narratives whose authors we can identify, and these narratives can vary across a spectrum from totally conforming to the formula to totally inverting it". Powerful examples are masterplots of pregnancy, marriage or the elderly as asexual. Throsby (2004), for example, discussing the experiences of women who unsuccessfully undergo IVF treatment, analyses the culturally dominant masterplots of "reproduction as the natural and inevitable life course" and "IVF as successful". The prevalence of these masterplots means that women whose IVF treatment proves unsuccessful are left with a lack of discursive resources to express and make sense of their experiences, which do not readily fit into available masterplots.

The stories told about harassment are important due to the intimate link between narrative and meaning. As scholars across numerous disciplines have argued, the stories that we tell do not merely represent the world but create knowledge about it and shape our experience of it, with storytelling functioning as a basic mechanism for the production of meaning (Bruner 1986; Polkinghorne 1988; White 1987; Mink 1970; Mink 2001; Carr 1997). Telling stories about events allows us to set them into relationships with each other and interpret their significance in terms of their positions within larger narrative units. Setting the same events into different stories can result in entirely different meanings being attributed to them. From this perspective, the meanings that specific incidents of harassment come to take are largely the result of the stories that are told about them. The significance of a woman's being harassed by a man, for example, is likely to be understood very differently depending on whether the harassment is deemed to have been caused by his or her actions, and on whether the outcome of the harassment for the victim is negligible or substantial, even if the actual act of harassment remains the same in each case.

That acts of storytelling as a meaning making process inevitably draw on existing masterplots, rather than beginning from zero, gives masterplots a central role in shaping the meanings that

come to be attached to phenomena. In Egypt, for example, there is a commonly accepted masterplot saying that provocative female behaviour is a cause of women's being sexually harassed, encoding a particular understanding of the causal relationships which produce harassment. The widespread acceptance of this masterplot conditions observers to look for provocative female behaviour when seeking to understand specific cases of harassment. In a well-publicised case of a group of men sexually harassing a female student at Cairo University in 2014, for example, the university's president Gaber Nasser drew on the masterplot of women's clothing causing harassment to blame the victim, describing her clothing choice as a "mistake" (Kortam 2014; Kingsley 2014). The masterplot provided a basic configuration of causal relations suggesting that female clothing causes harassment, onto which he grafted the specific details of the case (who was involved, where the incident happened, what precisely she was wearing etc). This then shaped the meanings attributed to the incident – the girl in question deserved to be censured for the harassment she endured, since it was her own inappropriate actions that caused it to happen in the first place.

Masterplots, however, are not inherently prejudicial. They influence the stories that we tell, and thus the meanings that we construct, and are also, as I argue in the final section, resistant to change. Yet they also provide vital anchors for meaning-making, providing a starting point for interpretation. It is impossible to interpret the world, in all its complexity, without drawing on frames or schema which tell us how things happen. The masterplots of pregnancy discussed at the outset of this paragraph are problematic for women with "abnormal" experiences of pregnancy, but nonetheless provide ready structures for understanding to woman whose experiences accord with the patterns of events encoded in the masterplot. As Bamberg (Bamberg 2004) argues, they "give guidance and direction to the everyday actions of subjects; without this guidance and sense of direction, we would be lost". They also shape our understanding of major political events. Through invocation of the masterplot of "revolution",

the Egyptian Uprising of 2011, for example, was conceptualised as a revolution long before regime change had been achieved (Papacharissi 2015). This imbued it with particular meanings and shaped perceptions of its causes and probable implications. The masterplot of revolution provided a mechanism for making sense of an outpouring of popular anger which otherwise lacked ideological coherence and structured the way it came to be understood. The inability of many to comprehend the “popular coup” in which the Egyptian military deposed the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated president Mohammed Morsi in 2013, on the other hand, was partly attributable to a lack of readily applicable masterplots.

We should note that beyond the MSV literature, the notion of “myth” has been described as playing a role very similar to that of masterplots, as I have presented them here. From Lévi-Strauss onwards, scholars in anthropology and other disciplines have argued for the central role of myth in cognition. Rather than viewed as inherently false, “myths” have been presented as cognitive schemata providing guides to interpretation. Hutchins (Hutchins 1987), for example, describes a process of interpretation whereby “particular instances are plugged into the slots in the [mythical] schema” resulting in its “instantiation” to produce a “proposition that is an assertion about the world”. Milburn and McGrail (1992, 618) describe “the government as protector of the people” and “a mother’s love can overcome all odds” as examples of myths, and refer specifically to “underlying plot[s]/myth[s]” as providing the structure for specific narratives. Myth, used in this way, is an almost exact synonym of masterplot, serving as cognitive schema in which issues of truth and falsity are bracketed. There are, however, several factors that lead me to prefer the latter term, beyond the influence of my own background in narrative theory. First, the term “myth” continues to often refer to frequently repeated stories considered “sacred” in one way or another. This is as true with myths in so called “primitive” societies as it is with political myths in contemporary Europe (Dundes 1984; Flood 2002). This connotation is not necessarily present with masterplots, of

which comparatively few members of society are likely to be explicitly conscious and which need have no connection with the sacred.

Second, “myths” are frequently understood as stories relating specific sequences of events in a real or imagined past (Eliade 1963; Lévi-Strauss 1978). Masterplots do not have this (quasi-)historical dimension as they do not refer to events occurring in unique times and places. The relationship between specific myths and the stories based upon them is also different to the relationship between stories and masterplots. Parallels and analogies may be drawn between mythical events and contemporary ones, as in Hutchins (Hutchins 1987), yet the myths themselves in such cases are fully instantiated stories in their own right, rather than merely narrative structures recurring in multiple stories. Such myths may therefore serve as the origins of recurring masterplots, but are not masterplots in and of themselves. Third, in popular and non-specialist academic usage, it is common for ‘myths’ to refer to simply false understandings of phenomena, as in the MSV literature. The wide range of uses to which the concept has been and continues to be put by specialists and non-specialists alike results in significant capacity for confusion, as the term is overloaded with ever more meanings.

Prejudicial “myths” about sexual violence, of the kind examined here, can therefore be classified as part of the broader grouping of masterplots. Masterplots, I have argued, are essential cognitive tools for meaning-making that can have both positive and negative implications, an issue quite separate from their validity. “SH is caused by women’s clothing choices” and “SH is caused by consumption of pornographic material” are two masterplots that, as previously discussed, differ in their validity, but may both have harmful implications if invoked to explain incidents of SH in ways that efface male agency. Feminist masterplots such as “men harass women to exercise control over them” also provide basic skeletons onto which specific details can be grafted. They rely, however, on systems of causal relations that encourage the production of meanings which acknowledge the unequal distribution of power

undergirding the practice and acceptance of SV. They differ from those discussed at the outset of this paragraph principally in their effects, rather than their basic role in meaning-making. The key question for activists is therefore how to change which masterplots are invoked, rather than attempting to debunk “myths”.

Masterplots do not exist in a vacuum but are intimately connected with broader social attitudes. Studies have shown, for example, that accepting prejudicial masterplots about sexual violence frequently correlates with holding other misogynistic beliefs such as acceptance of interpersonal violence and strong sex-role stereotyping (Burt 1980; Briere, Malamuth, and Check 1985; Costin and Schwarz 1987; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1995). Prejudicial masterplots, as part of a broader discourse of hostility towards women, do not merely reflect these attitudes but play a role in creating and sustaining systemically uneven power relations (Fairclough 2010; Wodak 1997; Van Dijk 1998; Lazar 2005). This suggests that changing prevalent masterplots, and thus changing the stories that are told about harassment and other forms of sexual violence, can both remove an important tool for victim-blaming in cases of SH and SV, while also undermining one pillar of broader misogynistic discourses that sustain the patriarchal organisation of society and the oppression of women. The question for activism is how this can be achieved.

Challenging Masterplots

The integration of masterplots with society and culture makes them highly durable. They form part of “the mythological structure of a society from which we derive comfort, and which it may be uncomfortable to dispute” (Kermode 1979, 113). As part of this societal fabric, masterplots, understood as understandings of basic patterns of causality, have a tendency to assume a “doxic” character (Bourdieu 1977), coming to be taken for granted as self-evident explanations of why phenomena come to pass. Female provocation, for example, is widely understood as a cause of harassment that does not require justification or supporting evidence.

It is not considered to lie within the realm of “opinion”, as a matter about which multiple opinions can legitimately be held (Bourdieu 1977, 167). Understanding there to be a causal link between female behaviour and harassment is often perceived as the result of applying ‘common sense’, rather than of consciously testing incidents against specific definitions, as described by Burt (1980). The link is understood as obvious, in the same way that it is obvious that stepping off a ledge will result in being pulled back to the ground by gravity.

That masterplots encode society’s “shared understandings” (Nelson 2001, 152) highlights that their durability also derives in part from their integration with values. As Fisher (1984) argues, stories grounded in values are frequently regarded as much more compelling than those based in logical (in the Aristotelian sense) argumentation. The idea that harassment is caused by women failing to dress or act modestly, for example, derives much of its credibility from its invocations of the social values of female honour and respectability, and of the negative consequences of failing to respect those values, rather than from any real or imagined empirical correlation between style of dress and the likelihood of harassment. This represents a major challenge to activists since counternarratives which are not grounded in targeted communities’ accepted values are comparatively likely to be rejected, regardless of their other merits.

These problems are compounded by the fact that knowledge encoded in culturally accepted masterplots tends to become more strongly naturalised over time. Repetition of both masterplots and specific narratives based on them is mutually reinforcing, imbuing them with what Fisher (1987) terms “material coherence”, produced when stories accord with other similar stories. Telling specific accounts of women being harassed by sexually frustrated men, for example, strengthens the abstract masterplot of sexual frustration causing harassment. Similarly, the more the masterplot of sexual frustration causing harassment is invoked and accepted, the stronger it appears as a basis for interpretation, and the more likely people are

to turn to it when seeking to comprehend specific incidents of harassment. Conversely, accounts that do not accord with sanctioned masterplots are likely to be rejected as against common sense if they encode alternative patterns of causality to those offered in accepted masterplots and are less strongly enmeshed in material coherence-granting networks of other stories.

Yet to argue that masterplots cannot change would be to “condemn people to live within the limits of their own moral imagination” (Kirkwood 1992, 32). Moreover, they clearly can and do change over time, albeit slowly. Badran (1995), for example, describes the emergence of feminist consciousness in Egypt, part of which consisted of the development of new masterplots for women’s lives which provided new models for the roles women could aspire to play and alternative understandings of gender relations. With regard to SH in Egypt, there is some evidence that a shift is currently underway. Anecdotally, activists at the Egyptian anti-harassment NGO HarassMap, for example, claim that a larger proportion of the people they speak to in street-level activism are now willing to accept a degree of male culpability than when the project was launched in 2010 (personal correspondence). Ibrahim (2012) and Abdelmonem (2015), meanwhile, discuss a shift from referring to harassment as “معاكسة” (flirtation) to “تحرش جنسي” (sexual harassment), indicative of changing attitudes to the nature, causes and consequences of SH. This suggests that, to a certain extent, prevailing explanatory masterplots have shifted from doxic to orthodox status – still dominant but now recognised as one of multiple possible explanations, even if those other explanations continue to be frequently rejected (Bourdieu 1977).

Clearly, however, there is a long way to go. As discussed earlier, Fahmy et al. (2014) and el-Deeb (2013), both of which were conducted relatively recently, strongly indicated that prejudicial SH masterplots retain widespread acceptance. On the level of legislation, Egypt passed its first law explicitly defining and prohibiting SH in 2014. This may, in itself, produce

an effect. De Fazio et al. (2015), for example, argue that the criminalization of stalking in Italy, coupled with campaign actions, has decreased sexual harassment myth acceptance amongst Italian students. Yet the text of the Egyptian law was problematic, defining SH as “when a man follows or stalks a woman and communicates sexual or pornographic content” (El-Rifae 2014). Such a narrow definition excludes many common types of SH such as one-off verbal harassment or groping, implying that such acts do not constitute genuine harassment. More worryingly, Egypt has no law prohibiting marital rape and the idea that married women have the right to withhold consent to sex with their spouses has yet to gain widespread social acceptance (Nabeel 2017). This indicates that key SV masterplots which provide the discursive resources needed to define and proscribe common sexually coercive behaviours continue to enjoy little support in Egypt from lawmakers.

In terms of changing prevailing masterplots, there are three main options. First, gender attitudes can be broadly targeted on the basis that changes in such attitudes are likely to be reflected in reduced support for prejudicial masterplots. A discussion of methods to do this, however, is beyond the scope of the present article. Second, activists can draw attention to naturalised masterplots that produce problematic outcomes, with a view to finding ways of undermining them. This approach has constituted a major component of many anti-rape programmes in the USA (Breitenbecher 2000; Bachar and Koss 2001) and has also been adopted by campaign groups in Egypt such as the Imprint Movement and HarassMap. As part of HarassMap’s 2013 campaign “Debunking Myths About Sexual Harassment”, materials were distributed offering arguments such as “if sexual frustration is the cause of harassment, why do 7 year olds harass?” and “if women’s bodies and attractions are the cause of harassment, why are children harassed?” (HarassMap, n.d.).

Assessing the impact of activities like these is, however, difficult. Given the material coherence enjoyed by doxic and orthodox misogynistic masterplots, we might assume that

logical arguments alone would be insufficient to dislodge them. Attempting to challenge existing masterplots by highlighting logical flaws or a lack of corroborating empirical evidence may also underestimate the significant role played by values, which are far less easily challenged. The available empirical literature supports this idea – although some studies conducted in the USA report reduced levels of rape myth acceptance immediately following interventions targeting this issue (e.g. Haywood & Swank 2008), longitudinal studies suggest that the effect is typically short lived and that long-term impact on SV proclivity is minimal (Kaniasty and Norris 1992; Breitenbecher and Gidycz 1998; DeGue et al. 2014).

Although no comparable short or long-term studies have been conducted in Egypt, the situation seems similar. Both HarassMap (HarassMap 2017a) and the Imprint Movement (Holman 2012) claim that their street activists are successful in convincing around “eight out of ten” of the people with whom they speak to change their attitudes towards sexual harassment. If changing attitudes were so easy, we might expect to have seen a notable reduction in the acceptance of prejudicial masterplots and the incidence of harassment in Egypt by now, given that campaign groups like HarassMap and the Imprint Movement have been in operation for some years and their activists have spoken to thousands of people. This does not, however, appear to have been the case, suggesting that the positive effect of interacting with activists is short lived, as in the American studies cited above. These issues raise doubts about the effectiveness of campaign strategies that directly question and encourage people to abandon naturalised beliefs, particularly where to do so also poses an explicit or implicit challenge to prevailing value systems.

The third option is to promote alternative masterplots rather than trying to undermine existing ones. In the second section, I argued that masterplots are not inherently prejudicial per se and that even if prevailing, harmful masterplots could be eliminated, this would be insufficient: new ones must be introduced in their stead. Activists must endeavour to naturalise masterplots

that facilitate the production of narrative accounts of SH that acknowledge the culpability of harassers and its negative consequences for the harassed. By facilitating the telling of different stories, the production of alternative meanings will also be thus encouraged.

At first, specific narrative accounts built on heterodox masterplots are comparatively likely to be disregarded as lacking material coherence if they contradict large numbers of accounts which are accepted as true. Yet although material coherence cannot easily be taken away from prejudicial masterplots, it can gradually be provided for alternatives through the simple act of telling large numbers of stories that, over time, provide support for the recurrent masterplots upon which they rest and the alternative networks of causal relations that they encode. This emphasises the importance of efforts to collect and publicise harassment narratives as seen, for example on HarassMap's interactive map (HarassMap 2017b), the Facebook pages of "I Saw Harassment" and the Imprint Movement, and the work of organisations with a broader focus such as the Women and Memory Forum (wmf.org.eg) and "Bussy" project (c.f. BuSSy n.d.). Such collections provide evidence not only for the scale of the issue, but also provide support for alternative masterplots. Personal correspondence with activists at HarassMap revealed a degree of uncertainty as to the ongoing significance of their online map, a vast repository of harassment narratives. I hope to have shown here why it is vital that this work continue.

In one sense, these collections of stories are similar to ground-breaking Western feminist works such as Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* (1975) which, in addition to theorising SV as the exercise of male power, brought together specific accounts of SV that contradicted the dominant masterplots of the period in which they were published and helped to normalise alternative ways of telling that encoded different meanings, helping to challenge prevailing understandings of SV as a 'women's issue' generally attributable to inappropriate female behaviour. The more often heterodox masterplots are used to structure specific narrative

accounts, the more likely those accounts are to be accepted and the more likely the masterplot will be invoked in future.

Alternative modes of understanding will not, however, necessarily directly replace existing masterplots. As Cohler and Hammack (2007) argue in the context of master narratives regarding the life trajectories of gay men and women in the USA, alternatives exist alongside and compete with existing narratives rather than directly supplanting them (see also Hammack 2011). For example, although attitudes towards the causes of rape have thankfully shifted in Britain, masterplots of the kind “she was asking for it” continue to be frequently invoked (e.g. Cuen 2016; Crown Prosecution Service 2017). By gradually building support for alternative interpretive frames, activists can slowly naturalise masterplots that avoid justifying SH on the basis of female behaviour, excuse it through reference to external mitigating factors, or minimise its harmful effects. In turn, by slowly changing the stories that are told about sexual violence, the ways in which SH is understood along with its perceived causes and impacts and the meanings that are attached to it will also shift, even if prejudicial masterplots are not directly confronted.

Conclusion

I have argued that the concept of the rape myth, supplemented with the notion of the masterplot, can offer useful insights into the issue of street harassment in Egypt, and by extension, other kinds of sexual violence. This approach can help us to understand the structures that undergird recurring, misogynistic interpretations of street harassment that obfuscate male agency by emphasising female provocation and allegedly mitigating external factors such as security or economic problems. I have argued that challenging the hegemony of these masterplots as interpretive frames for harassment through the promotion of alternatives can positively change the meanings commonly associated with harassment and interpretations of individual cases of harassment while contributing to the broader project of undermining patriarchal social values

permissive of sexual violence. Finally, I argued that activists are likely to achieve better results through the promotion of counter-narratives rather than efforts to undermine existing ones since it is easier to provide support for alternatives than to discredit socially accepted truths. Such change is neither easy to achieve, nor a silver bullet for ending sexual harassment in Egypt or elsewhere. SH, understood as a sub-category of SV, has diverse biological and social causes with only the latter amenable to change through activism. Moreover, prejudicial masterplots are just one of SV's many social supports. Nonetheless, promoting alternative masterplots may constitute one element of a broader strategy.

Although the work of promoting alternative masterplots is principally that of the activist rather than the scholar, there is much that academics can do to support it. There is a lack of peer-reviewed, empirical studies on SH in Egypt. Consequently, scholars are forced to rely on studies conducted in other contexts, principally the USA, and on non-peer reviewed studies, such as Hassan and Shoukry (2008), el-Deeb (2013) and Fahmy et al. (2014). Such work is undoubtedly valuable, but no substitute for scholarly work specifically focused on Egypt. The masterplots used to justify SV in the USA and Egypt appear to be broadly similar, but do the same relationships obtain in both places between accepting prejudicial masterplots, holding violence-supportive views and perpetrating acts of SV? Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the impact of the wave of anti-harassment activism in Egypt since 2010 and evaluate the effectiveness of campaigning methods. It is important for scholars to fill these gaps and equip activists with the theory and data they need and, in so doing, contribute to ending sexual violence in Egypt, in all its forms.

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