
Contentious and Prefigurative Politics: Vigilante Groups' Struggle against Sexual Violence in Egypt (2011–2013)

Mariz Tadros

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the drivers, mobilizational tactics and manoeuvrings of informal, youth-led initiatives that emerged in post-Mubarak Egypt to counter the growing threat of sexual violence against women in public spaces. The findings are based on empirical research into youth-led activism against gender-based violence during 2011–2013. The approach adopted is a case study of three initiatives, Bassma (Imprint), Shoft Taharosh (Harassment Seen) and Opantish (Operation Anti Sexual Harassment). Informal youth-based initiatives in the context of the post-January 2011 uprising have generally been criticized for their lack of sustainability, organizationally and politically. However, the examination of activism against gender-based violence through the lens of prefigurative politics shows the inherent value of experimentation and its contribution to innovations in public outreach. The value of the initiatives studied in this article also lies in their mobilizational power which inadvertently produces 'repertoires' of knowledge, skills and resources to engage the citizenry and capture their imagination. In the long run, such repertoires may allow for the emergence of organized and sustained forms of political agency. The article suggests that a cross-fertilization of prefigurative and contentious politics offers a framework for understanding temporally- and spatially-bound forms of collective political agency.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the emergence and cyclic mobilization of a number of collective actors in Egypt that emerged to counter gender-based violence in public spaces during 2011–2013, a critical juncture in the history of the country. After President Mubarak's thirty-year reign over Egypt, a people's uprising led to his ousting in February 2011. The army, which backed what popularly came to be referred to as the 25 January Revolution, assumed power via the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF). The SCAF ruled

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up until June 2012 when the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi won the presidential elections. He governed the country until June 2013, when millions took to the streets and the military intervened to topple him from power on 3 July 2013.

This article examines the significance of informal youth-based initiatives that emerged to counter sexual violence against women in public spaces, specifically at the time of the protests. The questions that inform this article are the following. Why and how did people organize collectively to address women's exposure to sexual assault in public spaces? Who were the individuals behind the collective initiatives? What did they endeavour to achieve and in relation to whom? Does it amount to a social movement? The article concludes with considering the future of these initiatives, post-June 2013.

The objective of the article is not to examine the effectiveness of these collective actors' interventions or the gender transformative dimensions of their agency, that is, the multiple and shifting notions of masculinity their activism entailed. While these issues are important and merit in-depth analysis, they are better addressed elsewhere. The focus of this article is on the nature of the dynamics of contention and the cycles of collective action of three informal initiatives. This first part of the article introduces the political context in which the study was undertaken, the epistemic approach and methods of research followed, and the units of study. The second part discusses the conceptual framework that informs the critical analysis of the empirical data. The third part consists of a discussion of the micro-dynamics of the emergence and mobilization of the three informal initiatives selected. The fourth part further reflects on the interface between elements of prefigurative politics and contentious politics as they play out in the trajectories of youth groups focusing on gender-based violence in public spaces. The final part of the article examines how, conceptually, a cross-fertilization of prefigurative and contentious politics is analytically useful for understanding the ways in which forms of youth agency can contribute to other forms of sustained political activism at a later phase.

Empirical data for this study were collected by the author and a group of experienced Egyptian researchers from October 2012 to January 2013.¹ An inductive approach was followed which involved grounding the unfolding empirical phenomenon in theory. This methodological approach was informed by a number of factors which influenced both the data collection and its analysis. First, the unit of analysis was the informal youth-based actors that emerged to counter gender-based violence. Informal here refers to their legal status, at the time of the research, as entities that were not registered as organizations with the Ministry of Social Solidarity. 'Youth' refers to the bulk of their membership which falls in the age range of eighteen to thirty

1. See Tadros (2013a and 2013b) for details of the methodology.

(as per the official definition of youth in Egypt).² About forty-five in-depth interviews were held with individuals from the three different initiatives, in addition to several other interviews with informants and veteran women's rights activists. It was critical to situate these informal youth-based initiatives along a broad spectrum of political actors that arose roughly in the same period. Second, it was important to understand the political trajectory of the founders of these initiatives prior to their establishment. This is informed by the view that insight into prior repertoires of political activism sheds light on current initiatives/collective actors. Third, the focus of the research was on the interface between structure and agency in these initiatives' evolution in a highly dynamic political context. Fourth, the researchers were sensitive to the critical juncture at which the study was being undertaken, one associated with high political volatility; it began in 2011 and was completed at the end of 2013. Repertoires of collective agency are by nature constantly evolving (Tilly, 1997: 63), thus longitudinal studies are needed to capture changing dynamics of such initiatives on the ground.

CONTEXT, APPROACH AND METHODS

Since the methodology was influenced by the contingencies of a highly volatile political setting, contextualization is first needed. While revolutions cannot be predicted, regime ruptures nevertheless do not occur in a vacuum. Well before the Egyptian uprising of January 2011, there had been simmering discontent regarding governance policies of the Mubarak regime, as well as mounting expressions of dissidence, whether from organized movements or via spontaneous citizen agitations.³

The uprising that led to the fall of Mubarak opened the floodgates to civic activism in Egypt. Dalacoura (2012: 74) notes that 'the profound depoliticization of Egyptian society over a period of decades seemed to be spectacularly reversed in 2011'. Evidence of a marked shift in the political

2. See Ahmed Abdel Hay's (2009) study of youth policy in Egypt for definitions of young people. In several interviews with the author, members and leaders of these initiatives made reference to themselves as *shabab* (the youth). In some ways, this study contributes to the growing body of literature that contests viewing young people as 'in transition to adulthood'. It challenges the tendency to overlook young people's leadership in social and political movements and the lack of recognition of their full political and social agency. Also see Azzopardi (2013), in particular chapter four, on youth and social movements.

3. For an excellent overview of collective and citizen forms of mobilization prior to and during the 2011 revolution, see Bayat (2013) and Abdel Rahman (2013). For a comprehensive coverage of youth-initiated forms of mobilization, see Ezbawy (2012) and Sika (2012). For an in-depth engagement with workers' movements, see Beinun and Vairel (2011) and El Mahdi (2011), and for a discussion of the precursors to the revolution involving street protests organized by judges, workers and members of Egypt's Christian minority, see Ali (2012).

culture was manifest both in scope and intensity: political discussion became widespread in large sections of the population, also among the youth. Political talk shows and news analyses became a main staple of television channels. A wide range of political practices, whether through liberal democratic procedures (such as participating in elections and referendums) or through street activism, thrived. The political actors, with youth as a main constituency, who had mobilized prior to and during the revolt against Mubarak found themselves carrying the new label of revolutionaries. They were, however, unprepared to shape the new power configurations, while others who were more organized, such as the Islamists, were positioning themselves to spearhead the shaping of the transition phase (Abdel Rahman, 2013).

SCAF countered opposition to the army with repression and ruthless crackdowns, while chaos reigned in the country as the police force withdrew from maintaining law and order, and politically and criminally motivated violence increased. Nevertheless, a political culture in which citizens refuse to heed red lines in speaking out and demanding their rights became more entrenched. A culture of open contestation of authority became more widespread as more and more citizens of different geographic locations, classes and political orientations participated in protests, sit-ins, marches and public gatherings.

Women reached the pinnacle of their political activism during the eighteen-day revolt against Mubarak. When they congregated in Tahrir Square within days of his ousting, to commemorate International Women's Day (Sholkamy, 2011), they were told to go back home to cook for their husbands. It was on the same day that the first case of collective assault on protesting women was witnessed, although reports of individual cases of sexual assault in Tahrir Square had already been made during the eighteen days of the revolution (Amar, 2013). An intense backlash against women's political agency followed the ousting of Mubarak which became manifest in highly regressive discourses about women's sexuality and an attempt to control it via misogynist discourses and practices including violence.

Feminists, human rights activists and youth groups identified a combination of factors to explain the increase in gender-based violence in public spaces after January 2011. These included lax security, the use of sexual assault by political actors, rising criminality in society, the absence of the rule of law and a discourse that supporters of political Islam embraced which blamed women for making themselves vulnerable to assault (see Tadros, 2013a).

It is important to note that Egypt had a long history of sexual harassment well before the 2011 revolution. Indeed, sexual violence has been a persistent problem in Egypt for many years (Amar, 2013). The 2005 Demographic Health Survey indicated that a third of Egyptian women had experienced spousal abuse (El Zanaty, 2006). Violence against women in Egypt manifests itself in various forms of physical, psychological and/or sexual abuse.

A nationwide study by the United Nations prior to the 2011 revolution reported that 96.5 per cent of women had experience of sexual harassment in the form of touching, 95.5 per cent had experience of verbal sexual harassment, and a shocking 30.3 per cent reported having been raped (El Dabh, 2013).

While sexual violence reflects entrenched patriarchal societal norms and values (regarding women's worth), sexual violence in protest spaces has an added political dimension in that it is an attempt to intimidate and prevent women from publicly voicing their opposition through active political participation (Amar, 2013; FIDH et al., 2014; Scholz, 2014; Shash, 2013; Tadros, 2015). During Mubarak's rule, the security apparatus used sexual assault as a means to terrorize women and prevent them from participating in public protest, either through the use of their own forces or through hired thugs.⁴ On 25 May 2005, for example, when citizens gathered in front of the Press Syndicate to call for a boycott of the referendum on constitutional reform, a group of women protestors and a female journalist covering the event were sexually harassed — violations which were caught on camera and video (FIDH et al., 2014). The targeting of protest spaces and political dissidents and evidence of commissioning of these acts, along with a constellation of other factors, point to the explicitly political nature of sexual violence between 2011 and 2013 (Tadros, 2015). Some acts of sexual violence were committed by the army under the leadership of SCAF; those of 9 March and 14 December 2011 having been the most extensively documented. In the first incident, the military police arrested and detained at least eighteen women, seventeen of whom were held for four days during which time they were beaten, subjected to electric shocks, stripped of their clothes; some of whom were forced to undergo virginity tests and threatened with prostitution charges (Amnesty International, 2012). The military admitted to these violations; one military spokesperson stated that since they did not want to be accused of raping the women, they needed to check which of the women were not virgins (Zaltsman, 2012). In the second incident of 14 December, as the military was forcibly clearing Tahrir Square from protestors who were objecting to SCAF's undemocratic governance of the country, a soldier was captured on videotape stripping a woman of her veil and black abaya (long robe covering the entire body), and revealing her underwear in what became known as 'the sexual assault of the blue bra woman' (FIDH et al., 2014).

In other incidents, the Muslim Brotherhood was also implicated in acts where multiple perpetrators were involved in sexual assaults on protesting women, the most well-documented of which was in December 2012. Two women from the leftist movements were physically and sexually assaulted

4. For an excellent documentation of the use of psychological, physical and sexual violence by the security apparatus against women during Mubarak's era, including the politically motivated, see El Nadim (2004).

when ‘captured’ during the confrontations with the pro-Morsi factions in front of the presidential palace (FIDH et al., 2014; Shash, 2013).

There was a string of incidents in Tahrir Square in which women were brutally sexually assaulted by multiple perpetrators whose identities were unknown but where limited evidence suggests that they were politically motivated. In interviews conducted for the documentary ‘Sex, Mobs and Revolution’, some of these men admitted that they had been hired to assault women, but they would not disclose who had commissioned them (Channel 4 TV, 2012). In the absence of conclusive evidence of the identity of the perpetrators, the activists that fought against sexual harassment in protest spaces held the governments in power (SCAF, then the Muslim Brothers) accountable for their failure to investigate, identify and bring the offenders to account.

The increase in the sexual harassment of women after 2011 has been intensely debated in feminist circles, with the intention of revealing the interconnected nature of the workings of power at various levels. Nadje Al-Ali argues that the acts of sexual violence post-2011 are linked to broader structures of constraint that include other forms of sexual violence, issues of economic redistribution and the systematic marginalization of women by state and non-state actors (Al-Ali, 2014: 122). Nadine Naber relates sexual violence and repression to the global workings of power which require an examination of state and military practices, the global economy and US foreign policy (Naber, 2011: 13). Deniz Kandiyoti views the resurgence of violence as a manifestation of a masculinist restorative project associated with the struggle to reassert male authority at a critical juncture where it has been destabilized: ‘The recourse to violence (or the condoning of violence) points not to the routine functioning of patriarchy or the resurgence of traditionalism, but to its threatened demise at a point when notions of female subordination are no longer securely hegemonic’ (Kandiyoti, 2013).

The body as site of struggle is central to understanding power relations manifesting in gender-based violence. Sholkamy (2013) talks of women’s activism feminizing public spaces through their presence; it is a profoundly embodied form of contestation since it claims spaces previously largely occupied by men. Commenting on the incident of the blue bra woman, Hafez (2014: 22) reflects:

In Egypt’s ongoing revolution, women’s bodies invert disciplinary power and destabilize patriarchal gender tropes just as they are also regulated and disciplined. They emerge as sites of resistance and transformation that both mediate and destabilize state violence and disciplinary power. As women protest in Tahrir and other squares across Egypt demanding democracy and social justice, they negotiate a variety of sociopolitical factors that repress and discipline their bodies, on the one hand, but also become sites of resistance on the other.

This embodied form of resistance was waged not only by women but also by men. Instead of vacating protest spaces and turning to some other mode of contestation, citizens went back to the very areas where the assault occurred.

In doing so, they were aware that they were making their bodies vulnerable to further assaults. The emergence of initiatives to combat gender-based violence in Tahrir Square liberated the issue from being siloed as a woman's issue and made it a social issue. It also represented a challenge not only to hegemonic femininities (as described by Hafez above) but also hegemonic masculinities (see Tadros, 2014). For example, the question of whether patrol groups and rescue operations should be all-men or mixed was initially discussed among volunteers in terms of 'security'; however, the discussion was essentially about challenging hegemonic masculinities that ascribe a paternalistic protective role for men towards women. How this matter was negotiated had a striking impact on the practice of prefigurative, contentious politics, as will be shown below.

In a context of 'thick mobilization', that is, intense citizen street activism, the researcher sought to capture the organic forms of activism around gender-based violence that evolved. Triangulation helped identify the most important actors that emerged to counter violence against women in public spaces (for further methodological details including criteria applied, see Tadros, 2013a). It was found that those most active in countering gender-based violence in public spaces post-Mubarak were collective actors who happened to be informal, youth-led and engaged in street activism. Within that cohort of informal actors, through a process of corroboration of evidence and triangulation of methods, it appeared at that time that the three most influential initiatives were Shoft Taharosh (Harrassment Seen), Bassma (Imprint) and Opantish (Operation Against Sexual Harassment). A case study approach was followed to examine these three initiatives, involving semi-structured interviews, oral histories of some of its founders, informal focus group discussions and observation in the field. In terms of chronological order of establishment, Bassma and Shoft Taharosh emerged at about the same time in the autumn of 2012, with Opantish following shortly after, in November 2012. Bassma began through the mobilization of individuals, Shoft Taharosh involved the mobilization of individuals and organizations closely connected in their identities and work, while Opantish drew together leaders from Bassma and Shoft Taharosh as well as other initiatives and individuals. While all three attempted to rescue women subjected to sexual violence, the methods, activities and relationships through which they sought to do this differed, as will be discussed in detail in the third part of this article.

CONTENTIOUS POLITICS IN A REVOLUTIONARY CONTEXT

The dynamics of collective formation, mobilization and manoeuvring of the Bassma, Shoft Taharosh and Opantish (and other) initiatives resonate in many ways with the dynamics of contentious politics formulated by McAdam et al. (2001). Contentious politics is defined as 'the interactions

in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties' (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 4). This is particularly relevant to the study of informal youth-based initiatives concerned with gender-based violence in Egypt, where the appeal was made to women's right to bodily integrity in public spaces, particularly protest spaces. By doing so, these initiatives were making claims on both the ruling authorities and social and political movements who sought to circumscribe women's presence in public spaces.

Key to understanding processes of contentious politics are Tilly and Tarrow's (2007) twin concepts of contentious repertoires as 'arrays of contentious performances that are currently known and available within some set of political actors', and contentious performances as 'familiar and standardized ways in which one set of political actors makes collective claims on some other set of political actors' (ibid.: 11). In contentious politics, diffusion involves the 'spread of a form of contention, an issue or a way of framing it from one site to another' (ibid.: 31). There was a diffusion of ways of engaging the public among initiatives countering gender-based violence which involved men and women engaging in highly visible, coordinated public actions.

Political opportunity, in the sense of political openings occurring as a consequence of seismic shifts in the regime or people's perception of heightened threats (ibid.: 59), captures some of the elements that led to the emergence of collective initiatives to counter sexual violence in post-Mubarak Egypt. This political opportunity or responsiveness to threat through a dynamic structure—agency synergy is well captured by the reflections of Fathi Farid (from Fouada Watch and Shoft Taharosh) on men's interest in becoming active in anti-sexual harassment initiatives after the Egyptian revolution. Prior to 2011, many men were aware of sexual violence against women but they did not have the opportunity to act because the political culture did not encourage activism. This changed after 2011:

The revolution did not necessarily create the interest or the awareness [in addressing sexual violence], but the spaces for political activism that opened afterwards, in addition to the rising rate of harassment, encouraged people to join in [anti-sexual assault initiatives]: before the revolution of 25 January 2011 there were men working against harassment . . . [but] they didn't know where to direct their efforts. After the revolution, when they found initiatives emerging and after the blatant harassment of girls in the square, the virginity tests, the violation of women in the streets, and girls being stripped, people felt compelled to take action and work. That really made young men look for people who were doing work on the ground, to join them. (Interview with Fathi Farid, December 2012)

Some initiatives can be considered offshoots, or in the words of McAdam 'spin-offs', from other social movements that emerged in the period around the ousting of President Mubarak. In essence, anti-sexual harassment initiatives inherited the repertoire of ways of engaging in street politics and

of building networks online and offline. Some of these individuals who joined the movements against sexual assault were also involved in broader revolutionary struggles against the SCAF. As Levine (2013: 198) notes: 'revolutionary liminality does not merely revolve back to everyday life. Those undergoing such transformations are not reintegrated into the fabric of community in their changed state; rather their changed state becomes the impetus and vehicle for the initiation of the broader transformation of society'.

In many ways, they were informed by a commitment to maintain the moral economy that had emerged in Tahrir Square, which in essence was about a series of tacit obligations and commitments between various actors on what types of behaviour were acceptable and what not. It was an unwritten code of ethics. Moral economy is used here to denote consensus about the practices that represent the minimum requirements of co-existence. For example, Steinberg's study of Spitalfields silk weavers in England shows how 'general societal notions of a moral economy were useful in asserting a conception of the trade as a community that joined masters and journeymen, manufacturers and weavers within a web of reciprocal obligation' (Traugott, 1996: 6). In the same way, Tahrir continued to be a space for mobilization, particularly for the crowds that believed that *al thawra moustamera* (the revolution continues), and in a sense these groups' activism was about protecting the sacrosanct status that Tahrir had acquired. The emergence of these groups was a response to the growing threat of assault on the morale of those people who participated in the revolution, but they acted also out of a political obligation to stop the cycle of sexual assault against women.

The formation of these groups was thus both instrumental (a response to the threat to the revolution) but also born out of a commitment to the cause itself (an affirmation of women's right to bodily integrity). It is important to note that while the groups sought to transform public spaces, they themselves were being transformed by their street activism. Conceptions of masculinity associated with paternalistic notions of women's need for protection, gendered divisions of labour and the superior ability of men to ward off violence were being challenged in fundamental and unexpected ways. Initiatives such as Opanish that operated exclusively in these spaces reflect the spin-off movement prompted by political opportunity and informed by revolutionary consciousness.

However, not all of the founders of and participants in the new anti-sexual harassment initiatives had a history of revolutionary activism, nor were they necessarily partisan to a particular political party or movement. While they had not participated in the earlier revolutionary movements, namely those that had organized around the 25 January Revolution, they nevertheless endorsed the revolution and wished to play an active part in 'building a new Egypt'. Collective actors engaged in a number of contentious performances including demonstrations and marches. However, as will be shown below, the level of innovation characterizing the work of collective

actors against sexual violence on the streets of Egypt went beyond the conventional performances.

Some of the unpredictable and unruly dynamics of contentious politics can be understood in terms of prefigurative politics. Prefiguration is a term originally coined by Carl Boggs in his critique of the static nature of Marxist analysis (Boggs, 1977). While it used to be associated with anarchist discourses, it has more recently gained in popularity in the analysis of new social movements and new forms of collective action (Yates, 2014). Prefigurative politics involves a political act, practice, movement, moment or development in which certain political ideals are experimentally actualized in the 'here and now', instead of being something that is hoped to be realized in the distant future. This becomes manifest in particular democratic practices witnessed during the eighteen days of protest against Mubarak in which people had to abide by the principles of tolerance of difference that may run counter to their own values — for example, in accepting women's full and active participation in the protests or accepting members of the country's religious minority (Christians) assuming leadership roles. Thus, in prefigurative practices, the means applied embody or mirror 'the ends' one strives to realize (Van De Sande, 2013).

The emphasis of prefigurative political theory on experimental ways of organizing and enacting change is useful in shedding light on aspects of contention that are not predetermined by the participants (Brissette, 2013; Van De Sande, 2013; Young and Schwartz, 2012). In contentious politics, innovation receives a lot of attention. However, experimentation is an important means through which innovation emerges on the margins. It is through trial and error that new repertoires are created and perfected. In examining the micro-dynamics of contentious politics aimed at addressing gender-based violence in Egypt, it will be shown below that a high level of experimentation was involved in engaging with organized forms of sexual assault in protest spaces, which led to multiple innovations in the repertoires of counter-resistance.

Prefigurative politics is also useful in understanding the non-linear modalities of activism. Maeckelbergh (2011) points to the importance of the unfolding process and its horizontality as a key feature of prefigurative politics. Some collective actors emerge as a consequence of doing (rather than becoming then doing). In the case of one initiative, described below, individuals spontaneously intervened to stop the harassment. It was only afterwards, when they shared their experiences of incapacitation that they decided to form a collective entity.

In prefigurative politics, there is an emphasis on the process being the enactment of the desired change, rather than it being an instrument to put pressure on power holders so as to bring about policy change (Brissette, 2013; Maeckelbergh, 2011; Sancho, 2014; Springer, 2014). This is a critical dimension of the patrol groups that sought to create a social reality in which women

were free to exercise their right to voice their political opinions without fear of assault. They did not act in order to call upon the government to change its security practices, rather they self-organized to create safe spaces for themselves.

COLLECTIVE AGENCY AND CONTENTIOUS MANOEUVRINGS

In order to analyse the dynamics of contention and prefiguration involved in the emergence of these informal collective actors more closely, this section focuses on the three initiatives which informed the case study. Bassma emerged in the aftermath of a protest in Tahrir Square in June 2012 where a young woman named Nihal was sexually assaulted and her friend gang raped. Nihal wrote a blog about her experience which was widely read by online users.⁵ Several men and women wrote to her suggesting they form a group that would act to counter sexual assault on the streets of Egypt. They met, and agreed to form Bassma/Imprint as an initiative that would address a number of social ills (such as street children), not only sexual violence. While they had not known each other before they communicated via the internet, the way in which they coalesced into a group resonates strongly with the concept of homophily (the tendency of people to associate with others who are perceived to have similar traits). They were mostly young, highly educated, and mostly middle class women and men living in Cairo.

The group's first activity was a rally against women's exposure to sexual assault which they chose to hold in the spot where Nihal and her friend were sexually assaulted. Many of Nihal's friends responded, and through their friends and their friends' friends, a group formed and gathered at the site of the protest. However, as dusk fell, the lights in Tahrir Square suddenly went out, the protesters were hit with water, mobs broke through the human chain, and sexually assaulted several women. From this experience the group learnt that they were embroiled in a battle that they had to be extremely well prepared for.

A core group of twenty to thirty volunteers founded Bassma. While its activities varied, Bassma became known for its highly regimented 'security patrols' involving a group of young men in uniform surveying the hotspots where assault could potentially take place (crowded areas, protest areas). The group became known for its high level of discipline and synchronization. Nihal Zaghloul explained:

If we are fifty people, we don't ask each one about his/her opinion [on what to do]. It is waste of time. We should have one purpose for the patrol. There should also be a leader. If the leader told any member that s/he should jump, this person should respond without discussion. In such critical times, a girl is at stake, so it is pointless to engage in discussions. . . . I am

5. <http://zaghaleel.wordpress.com/2012/06/04/evil-vs-good/>

convinced that this methodology is the secret of Bassma's success. Bassma is still functioning while the other two groups aren't. (Interview with author, Cairo, November 2012)

It is important to note that this particular way of operating was a reaction to their experiences on the ground of trying to rescue women from mob assaults. They had encountered incidents at the beginning where their presence as individuals (rather than a collective) was of no consequence in keeping the crowds at bay. One leading member in the security patrol recounted an incident that took place in the vicinity of Tahrir Square:

We were patrolling the Square and at the entrance to the Metro [subway] station close to Kasr el Nil street, which was very badly lit, we learnt that there were two women being assaulted there. We arrived as a group. Those trained to intervene went in to shield the women while some of the other members were tasked to convince the crowds to leave, since half the people who congregate on any one occasion are spectators. The rest of us circled the women, formed a chain, and announced that anyone who tried to cross that line would be beaten – but since there was a fence over us, they got on top of the fence and started jumping into the circle in order to get to the women. We realized that if we were pushed inside the metro [subway], we would lose control of the situation. A member of the team went and fetched an ambulance and got it to open its doors at the back right where the women were. We pushed them inside and blocked the doors to prevent the mobs from going after them until the ambulance was able to move away. (Interview with author, Cairo, November 2012)

The advantage of the tightly knit patrol group is threefold. First, among the other actors, they developed a reputation for being organized, able to move swiftly and intervene in a timely manner in highly chaotic situations. The second advantage is the power of numbers. Since assault cases in crowded spaces often involve mobs, sometimes heavily armed, individuals acting on their own can be beaten or even sexually assaulted by the mobs. Unless there is a collective intervention that is highly synchronized the crowds cannot be held off sufficiently. The third advantage of walking in a group is the image it conveys to the public of a powerful group to be reckoned with, a characteristic of contentious performances where coordinated action is intended to convey messages that attract the public's attention (Tarrow, 1998; Tilly and Tarrow, 2007).

Shoft Taharosh emerged in the course of events that occurred at the time of the religious feast of Sacrifice (Eid el Adha), on 26 October 2012. Since 2006, downtown Cairo had become notorious for the frequency and intensity of sexual harassment incidents during Eid, which occurred at certain hot spots involving dense crowds. The formation of the collective Shoft Taharosh was preceded by thwarted interventions. Individuals had patrolled crowded areas and tried to intervene in incidents where women were being harassed, but they found it very challenging. In sharing their experiences, they realized that when operating individually they were likely to be overpowered by the mobs, so they decided to organize collectively.

The initiative was composed of members working in six pre-existing initiatives: (1) Fouada Watch (an informal initiative using popular film and culture to address gender issues); (2) ACT (a company specializing in com-

munications); (3) Heya (an NGO using culture as an entry point for social change); (4) Sharia' Wa'i (an informal collective of young men working on citizenship issues); (5) Etkesfoh (an informal collective focusing on sexual harassment); and (6) Shabab al-Mahrouseh (an informal revolutionary group). This coming together to form a separate collective entity was facilitated by the strong relations that existed between the different initiatives on account of friendship, previous collaborative work and the fact that many of them had multiple affiliations. Several of them were already active in both Fouada and ACT.

A core group of fifteen to thirty-five members led the intervention operations on the ground. Shoft Taharosh had two types of field members: those who worked on awareness-raising campaigns and those who were involved in rescue operations. The group that intervened to rescue women from harassment was exposed to high levels of violence, and except for a few women, the team consisted of men.

Shoft Taharosh has played a central role in rescue interventions and in supporting groups that provide on-the-spot care and emergency assistance to women who have been assaulted. It has done so often as part of the broader umbrella of another initiative called Opatish. Shoft Taharosh members have also led awareness campaigns, taking advantage of the large crowds that gather in open spaces to disseminate messages, recruit volunteers and connect with the public. They tailor their messages to their audience. Janet explained that they would talk to young men and women about the right of women not to be violated. To the women, they would say, 'No one should lock you up in the house on the [day of] the Eid because you're afraid of being harassed', and of the men they would ask why they do it, explaining the psychological effect it has on girls.

The mission of Opatish [Operation Anti Sexual Harassment] was very clear and specific: to respond to the phenomenon of multiple perpetrator assault on women in protest spaces, in particular in Tahrir Square. The group formed in November 2012 after realizing that the mob attacks were pre-orchestrated and politically motivated. That is, the attacks were clearly intended to discourage women from demonstrating and to make their families fear the consequences of allowing female members to take part in street activism. The nature of mob assaults convinced the group that they needed to counter this violence with a collective response.

Opatish consisted of three groups that worked together. These groups were positioned differently on the square, depending on their function. First, there was the confrontations group (*ishtebaak*) consisting of approximately ten people responsible for rescuing the victim(s) by entering the circle of the harassers through direct confrontation and physical force. Second, there was the safety group responsible for delivering the victim to a safe place such as her home, an ambulance or hospital. Third, there was the operations management group that ran the control room. They were responsible for coordinating the work between the two other groups, receiving help

calls from sites where assault incidents were taking place and planning the interventions strategically.

Opantish was composed not only of individuals but also of initiatives such as Shoft Taharosh and Bassma which were formed prior to its establishment. Mohamed Zaghloul recounted his experience of participating in marches and suddenly finding women protestors targeted with assault which prompted him and others to be better organized in future: 'We tried to form a cordon around our [female] friends so we could move them towards the closest safe place. In the end we managed, but after great strain, because we were not prepared, we did not know the techniques of rescue operations or crowd management' (interview with author, Cairo, November 2012). The planning process started on the day that marches and protests were scheduled to take place. They hired a room overlooking the square in order to be able to have an overview of the area. Groups patrolled the square and handed out flyers with the hotline number for reporting incidents. Intervention/rescue groups would be informed by the operation room of the exact whereabouts of women at risk and briefed on the shortest routes to take. The scenes were often violent, and members of the intervention groups themselves were sometimes sexually assaulted and physically injured (including being stabbed) during rescue operations.

THE DYNAMICS OF CONTENTIOUS PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS

This section analyses ways in which these initiatives engaged in hybrid forms of contentious and prefigurative politics. The formation of Bassma, Shoft Taharosh and Opantish suggests an ever-expanding number of concentric circles. Friends, acquaintances and colleagues formed a number of small separate groups that led to the creation of Bassma and Shoft Taharosh. Shoft Taharosh and Bassma then joined Opantish as the overarching umbrella, thus expanding the circle. At every stage of the circle widening, groups endeavoured to preserve their separate identity while committing to the greater collective and mobilizing around focused interventions (like rescue operations).

The dynamics of contentious politics are particularly visible in the spiral build-up of cycles of collective action. However, it is neither a linear nor teleological process; it does not always follow a pattern of 'becoming' then 'doing' but also becoming as a consequence of doing, as was the case with Shoft Taharosh. Shoft Taharosh was not an initiative that was established and which then chose to act. Individuals and various groups acted, and in the process, they chose to become a type of collective. Thus it was the repertoire of social protest that brought these initiatives into being. Unlike Bassma and Opantish, they did not will to become a collective, then act; they acted, then they chose to form an initiative. The different groups combined represented

a nascent social movement during the eighteen months of sustained activism between 2011 and 2013.

According to Tilly and Tarrow (2007: 202) one of the core pathways through which social movements seek to bring about change is through campaigns. These campaigns are characterized by a sense of worthiness of cause, unity among the supporters, large numbers and a commitment to sustained activism (WUNC). As mentioned above, the sustained revolutionary activism immediately prior to and in the aftermath of Mubarak's overthrow generated spin-off social movements. They sustained their campaigns for over a year and a half, they had a large volunteer base, they were able to unite at critical junctures to intervene to rescue women from assault, and they succeeded in convincing many power holders such as influential media broadcasting stations and the press of the worthiness of their cause.

While individuals engaged in the initiatives bore multiple identities, their involvement in the struggle against gender-based violence in public spaces led to the formation of a political identity. This political identity was relational, it was 'activated' as part of a collective body, and in relation to specific spatial and temporal qualifiers associated with the revolutionary juncture Egypt had reached.

The unqualified commitment to protect and rescue women from assault on the streets of Cairo became the dominant unifying principle in the political identity that emerged across the different groups. This is not to be taken for granted as a pre-existing ideological commitment among all those who became involved in these initiatives. For some men and women, it came about as a consequence of what they experienced during the course of their activism. From some interviews with men, in particular from Shoft Taharosh and Bassma, it transpired that in the beginning a number of them were not entirely convinced that the women were not sometimes partly responsible for the attacks as a result of their clothing. For some, it was through witnessing fully veiled women being harassed mercilessly that they came to realize the power dynamics underlying the assaults on women. For others, it was witnessing the extreme psychological distress that the women experienced as a result of the assaults that enabled them to view gender-based violence as a form of social injustice that should not be tolerated.

By and large, they were all groups that believed strongly in the 25 January Revolution and its aims. However, in terms of political orientation, there were stark differences between them. During the year in which they were particularly active, when President Morsi was in power (July 2012–June 2013), the political orientation among the groups/collectives varied. Members of Bassma adopted a position of non-partisan engagement, and insisted that their struggle was not against the regime but against the policies and practices which allowed sexual violence against women to continue. They said that a non-partisan position allowed them to appeal to a large cohort of Egyptians, including those with political Islamist sympathies. Shoft Taharosh was adamantly against the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood and actively

participated in events against the status quo organized by the political opposition. Opantish sought to maintain a position of non-alignment with any political group and asked its team members not to mix their political party identity with their non-partisan work on the group. This non-partisan, non-alignment position allowed individuals to engage in contentious politics without compromising the multiplicity of their identities because of a common political identity associated with the struggle against assaults on bodily integrity.

The vigilante groups' patrolling of protest and crowded spaces were contentious performances because of the highly coordinated manner in which they addressed a taboo topic (sexual harassment), their conspicuousness in doing so and the role they were assuming by substituting for the police. Members wore characteristic uniforms of fluorescent jackets and tee shirts which identified them as the anti-sexual harassment corps. They moved in a highly coordinated fashion, often distributing material to civilians, handing out stickers with the hotline number, and explaining their work and what they were trying to achieve. In the case of at least one group, if you replaced the fluorescent coloured vests with a kaki uniform, you would think they belonged to the army. The group gave the impression of a highly masculinist militaristic troop. Should this be considered a hegemonic performance of men protecting women? The composition of the patrol and rescue groups was a contentious matter that was the topic of intense debate in the groups that patrolled the streets. Members of Bassma were unanimous in their opinion that there needed to be a division of labour in the rescue operations. They believed it necessary, first, so that women volunteers would not be exposed to sexual assault (which had happened), and second, so that rescue operations would not be derailed (men having to look out for the women members while trying to rescue the women being assaulted). They therefore argued that while the movement was led by women and men equally (the co-founder was a feminist woman), and men were not there to rescue women, from a personal safety point of view, the patrol needed to be carried out exclusively by men.

Shoft Taharosh and Opantish, on the other hand, rejected this gendered division of labour, regarding it as patronizing towards women. Their patrol operations included both women and men, and both performed the function of keeping the streets safe. In Opantish, arriving at such a modality of operation involved a direct challenge to the hegemonic masculinist notion that women's physical attributes make them more vulnerable. Maya, one of the founding members of Opantish, remembered one of the first meetings where, when the male volunteers arrived and noticed that the room was packed with women, they asked: 'What are the girls doing here?'. The women in the meeting made it clear that they were fighters, and insisted that men who objected to women's involvement in rescue operations were not allowed to join Opantish. Most of the men agreed but some found it difficult to accept and joined other groups. Though not widely publicized,

women insisted on a quota in terms of female representation in rescue operations. Rescue operations and patrols were therefore not only about stopping harassment, but about the process of doing so in a gender sensitive way. The patrols in which women featured tended to break the homogeneity of male bodies operating in synchronization.

McAdam (1995: 226) notes that 'initiator movements encourage the rise of latecomers not so much by granting other groups increased leverage with which to press their claims, but by setting in motion complex diffusion processes by which the ideational, tactical, and organizational "lessons" of the early risers are made available to subsequent challengers'. This is particularly relevant to the gender-based social movements which benefited from earlier forms of street politics in the phase leading up to and after the rupture with Mubarak. This diffusion of ideas on how to engage the public from the 'earlier generations' of youth-based movements to the 'newer generations of youth-led activism' that focus on gender-based violence occurred through a number of important channels. All three initiatives (Shoft Taharosh, Opantish, Bassma) had witnessed first-hand how social media was used for outreach and mobilizational purposes in the struggle against the Mubarak regime. They were able to adapt this earlier use of social media as a channel for their own campaigns against sexual harassment. McAdam (1995) notes that late-comers to social activism benefit from the diffusion process set in motion by their predecessors, as it exposes them to the use of cultural artefacts by means of which they can engage their audience.

McAdam (*ibid.*: 236) also notes that repertoires are 'among the key cultural innovations whose diffusion gives the protest cycle its characteristic shape and momentum'. The main repertoire of contention associated with the revolutionary struggle of 2011 was the occupation of key squares, most notably Tahrir Square through mass demonstrations that became commonly known as the *millionnyas* (million person turnout). However, the distinctly new movement that emerged to counter gender-based violence can be recognized for another repertoire: the formation of vigilante groups that patrolled public spaces to defend women's bodily integrity.

Opantish refined and developed its tactics from the experiences it had accumulated in protest spaces. This is perhaps where the experimentation element of prefigurative politics is particularly interesting in understanding the development of new repertoires of contentious politics. Ahmed Awney, a member of Opantish, recalled the tragic day of 25 January 2013, when a number of horrific sexual assaults were committed in the square. He explained that in the early days they would patrol the square as a group but did not have a plan of what to do if a woman was being encircled and assaulted. Often when they caught sight of such assaults, they would try to reach the women through individual, non-coordinated efforts. By the time they were able to reach the women who were assaulted, they would have sustained extreme physical injury and require hospitalization themselves.

Thus they learnt that they had to devise a plan of how to go about intervening in the event of an assault. Once they started strategically planning their interventions, they were able to divide up quickly into smaller groups and rescue the women with much greater speed.

Due to their early painful experiences, they developed a number of tactics and strategies of intervention that involved high levels of coordination within the rescue team. For example, they developed a division of labour between those members tasked with fighting the crowd and those responsible for infiltrating the ring in order to reach the person being assaulted. Innovations emerged from experimentation, for example, how to approach the crowds gathered around the woman being assaulted, how to create a safe passage out or how to reach an ambulance, etc. One of the most important repertoires created concerned the use of weapons to protect themselves and the women being rescued in situations characterized by high levels of violence. Many men and women who joined these initiatives and who had participated in the eighteen days of revolutionary struggle against the Mubarak regime, were not familiar with this repertoire of contentious engagement. While the revolution was not without violent and bloody conflict (El Mahdi, 2011), a common response to violence in Tahrir Square was the cry *selmeya!* (peaceful!). The use of violence, though not an openly publicized repertoire, formed part of the rescue operations purely for the purpose of self-defence.

The use of weapons for self-protection and in rescue operations carried out by these initiatives needs to be understood in the broader context. According to Della Porta and Diani (2006: 197), the role of the police in protests is critical in understanding how political opportunity affects collective actors. They argue that the police will affect the evolving dynamics of mobilization, whether coercive, repressive or relaxed. In the case of Egypt in the period 2011–2013, the police were for the most part completely absent from the scene of protests in Tahrir Square. They stayed away on account of not wanting to enter into confrontation with the protestors, but they were also not welcome, since they were deeply mistrusted by the protestors (Langohr, 2013). However, in order to create an alternative social reality, the function of keeping people safe needed to be performed and these groups' patrols represented an attempt to perform such a role. This speaks to Judith Butler's (2011) analysis of the relationship between demonstrators occupying public spaces and the police. She argues that when the police have been associated with complicity in criminality, or when they have been seen as supporting criminal regimes, demonstrators sometimes clear the space of police.

While vigilante groups aspired to substitute for the police in Tahrir, they did not have the power to uncover the identity of the perpetrators or hold them to account. They could rescue women but they were unable to stop the assailants since they were not authorized to enforce the law. For example, while Shoft Taharosh sought to catch the perpetrators, they were unable to uncover the identity of those who were responsible for commissioning politically motivated acts of sexual assault. Mohamed Abd el Wahab, a member

of the initiative Shar'I Wa'I and founding member of Shoft Taharosh, described how in one instance at Gam'et al Dowel al Arabiyya (the Arab League Building), which is close to Kasr el Nil Bridge and Tahrir Square, his team reached a number of women surrounded by assailants, and helped to prevent the ambulance doors from being forcefully opened by the crowds until the vehicle departed. In the middle of this ordeal, he discovered that many of the perpetrators responsible for sexually assaulting the women and attacking him and members of the rescue team were actually wearing tee shirts bearing the name of a non-Islamist political party (interview with author, November 2012).

Shoft Taharosh persisted in trying to find out how a political party that was actually responsible for keeping Tahrir Square safe could be involved in the sexual assault of the women it was supposed to protect. They managed to catch one of the men who confessed that he was paid to go to Tahrir Square to sexually molest women. When the political party announced that it needed volunteers to keep Tahrir Square safe he received orders to volunteer. It was impossible to establish with certainty who was behind the attacks on the women as too many political actors could have commissioned such acts. The suspects included the Ministry of the Interior which had built up a reputation during Mubarak's reign for deploying thugs to sexually assault and terrorize women to prevent them from participating in protests (Amar, 2013); the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist actors who have also been caught using sexual assault in protest spaces (FIDH et al., 2014); and other remnants of the old regime.

Opantish and other groups' inability to uncover the actors and networks behind some of these assaults shows the limitations of assuming the role of a police force but lacking its power and authority. In press statements they urged the government to take action but were never able to collect the evidence needed to name, expose and shame the guilty parties. One member said that trying to uncover the identity of the organizers would have put individuals at risk of retaliation.

CYCLIC SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE FUTURE OF PREFIGURATION THROUGH CONTENTIOUS REPERTOIRES

The political trajectory of the collective actors who emerged to counter the sexual assault on women typically follow the cyclic nature of social movements. Tilly and Tarrow (2007), Kriesi et al. (1995) and Della Porta and Diani (2006) suggest that protests go through cycles of contention involving mobilization, escalation to peak activity and demobilization. Their political trajectories in the aftermath of the protest cycle may vary from institutionalization, radicalization, disintegration or the acceleration of larger processes of mobilization, for example, civil war or regime overthrow. With respect to the Egyptian context, these initiatives reached the height of their

mobilization in the period November 2012–July 2013, when President Morsi was ousted via military intervention. In the aftermath some of the smaller initiatives that had emerged in 2012 dissolved. Shoft Taharosh, Bassma and Opantish continued to thrive although the level of mobilization was weaker.⁶ The new regime tightened controls on street activism, for example, through a new protest law which was enacted in November 2013 which restricts citizen action in public spaces, effectively prohibiting it without prior permission from the Ministry of Interior (see *Al-Ahram*, 2013 for translation of law). Polarization became entrenched between those who saw the post-2013 context as a return to authoritarian rule and those who saw the new order as liberating them from the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. This deep polarization also split the ranks of the groups fighting gender-based violence. The elements that Tilly and Tarrow (2007) identified as essential for successful movement mobilization — worthiness of cause, unity among the ranks, having substantial numbers and sustaining commitment (WUNC) — had been weakened. Unity was lost amidst political fragmentation, worthiness declined as the cause was subsumed under broader political struggles, the numbers dissipated as people found the masses not as sympathetic to street activism as before, and people's commitment varied within and across the group. Several of the loosely knit networks working on gender-based violence and other gender-related issues became inactive.

Political analysis of the failure of youth activism to influence the political trajectory of Egyptian politics in the phase after the ousting of Mubarak regarded the absence of sustainable organizational forms, the pursuit of utopian ideals and the focus on the 'here and now' as strategic weaknesses (Abdalla, 2013; Abdel Rahman, 2013; Dalacoura, 2012; El Mahdi in Saleh, 2014). Abdel Rahman (2013: 570) notes that the revolutionary initiatives that emerged around the time of the ousting of Mubarak's regime were informally organized, and while their informality may have been strategically beneficial at the time of their formation, it was counterproductive in terms of their sustainability.

Reflecting on the political predicament of the revolutionary youth two years after the January 2011 Revolution, Shafik (2013) observed that these activists hung onto 'their premises of Utopian rebellion'. Abdalla's (2013) analysis of the political failure of the revolutionaries also points to the role of informal, non-hierarchical forms of political engagement. Abdalla's analysis of youth who joined newly formed political parties in Egypt showed that they rarely held leadership positions within these party structures. She identified similar underlying issues as those highlighted by Abdel Rahman and Shafik: 'They still refuse to accept adherence to formal structures and hierarchical decision-making. Political education of the youth would help to establish a balance between internal democracy and discipline within new

6. However, by 2015, Opantish had dissolved, some of its members joining other anti-harassment initiatives.

parties. It would also help to form future youth leaders with progressive and realistic political views rather than merely revolutionary and sometimes utopian visions' (Abdallah 2013: 11).

Rabab el Mahdi, one of the influential leaders of the January 2011 Revolution, attributed the lack of organizational skills to the political climate the youth had been exposed to. 'Criticism of the youth did not take into consideration that they came to age in an era when there was no politics and no organisation, and accordingly they need time' (El Mahdi cited in Saleh, 2014). The political engagement of youth-led initiatives has been criticized on account of their focus on creating an alternative political reality, the horizontal and fluid nature of their mobilization and organization processes, and their emphasis on enacting the kind of political change they desired, irrespective of whether micro or macro policies had been altered.

A cross-fertilization of prefigurative and contentious politics may provide insight into how, contrary to appearances, initiatives may be pathways for the generation of repertoires of contention for the future. The youth's engagement with gender-based violence in public spaces illustrates the opportunities that prefigurative politics present for innovation. Through prefigurative processes contentious repertoires for political action were generated, new ways of doing collective action were enacted and new ideas were transmitted and diffused. While the initiatives were under strain, they gained experience in working collectively. At the height of their activism, participants in these initiatives were able to collaborate to sustain rescue operations, issue joint position statements and press releases, and attract allies and supporters. Across the broad array of initiatives (not just the three presented here), a capacity for coordinated, highly synchronized activism was displayed which could be reignited if the political opportunity and timing were right. Shoft Taharosh and Bassma adapted to the increasingly restrictive political environment by reverting to their former repertoire of carrying out patrols during religious feasts when sexual assault is rampant in crowded public squares. Bassma also adapted by broadening its outreach by engaging students on university campuses whilst continuing its patrols of the metro stations.

As remarked earlier, the objective of this article was neither to evaluate the nature of the youth's interventions nor their effectiveness in achieving their objectives, whether on a macro or micro level. The focus of this article was the predicament of political activism expressed through a particular type of political agency, namely one that is informal, fluid and experimental. Innovative repertoires in public outreach have the potential for attracting constituencies while avoiding government crackdown, especially if complemented with existing repertoires of knowledge, networks and innovative practice. A longitudinal study is required to examine what is to become of these initiatives in the long term. Will they freeze their activities, join stronger movements/non-governmental organizations, or reconfigure their strategies of engagement to adapt to a changing political context? Another possible outcome is that members of these initiatives will employ and adapt

the public outreach skills they have acquired to support causes other than sexual harassment. Though prefigurative politics is focused on the here and now, it may have the unintended long-term consequence of transforming politics via contentious repertoires that are generated, developed, transmitted and diffused in innovative ways.

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Mariz Tadros (e-mail: m.tadros@ids.ac.uk) is the co-convenor of the Power and Popular Politics cluster at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. She works on unruly politics, the politics of gender, religion and development with a particular focus on the Middle East. Her publications include *Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt* (Routledge, 2012), *Copts at the Crossroads* (American University in Cairo Press, 2013) and *Women in Politics* (Zed, 2014).