

Gruesome Attacks on Egyptian Women Spawn Helmeted, Volunteer Protectors

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The very same night in February 2011 that former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak fell from power, CBS correspondent Lara Logan was brutally assaulted by a group of at least 200 men while covering the demonstrations in Tahrir Square.

"For an extended period of time, they raped me with their hands," Logan said later in an interview with *The New York Times*. "What really struck me was how merciless they were. They really enjoyed my pain and suffering."

Scores of Egyptian women experienced similar assaults during the Arab Spring revolution, and it wasn't the last time women there would find themselves targeted during protests. In the ongoing unrest since the election of president Mohammed Morsi, political demonstrations in Egypt have turned nightmarish as masses of men claw at women with impunity.

Speaking at the recent Oslo Freedom Forum in Norway, Egyptian activist Soraya Bahgat played a video clip in which a female protester was mobbed by a cluster of assailants during a nighttime demonstration.

"Three or four hands are inside her pants, and three to four are inside her shirt," a voice-over said. "Ten men are pulling at her from every direction." The video ends when the woman is whisked to the safety of a nearby shop, which one of the men then tried to break into.

"It's a circle of hell," explained Soraya Bahgat, a human resources manager who joined the protests two years ago. "It starts with just a few people and turns into a full mob."

Bahgat felt paralyzed with fear as she headed to Tahrir Square, so she founded a group that she hoped could rescue women from danger and help prevent attacks. Tahrir Bodyguard began as a one-woman Twitter call-out and grew to a team of 200 helmeted guardians clad in bright neon vests, wading regularly into protest hot-spots. At first, only men did the protecting, but soon women began volunteering, and later Bahgat herself joined in.

When it comes to sex crimes, it's not just frenzied male protesters who are the problem -- authorities have done little to prevent the attacks, and in some cases have themselves become the perpetrators. In December 2011, a video of military forces tearing off a woman's veil, exposing her blue bra, and [stomping on her](#) sparked outrage from Internet users and policymakers all over the world.

During the revolution, [17 women were forced](#) to undergo humiliating virginity tests. Today, Tahrir Square and other protest areas remain no-go zones for women after dark. Female activists are still regularly detained without warrants.

Mubarak's ubiquitous [police forces](#) kept a lid on sexual assaults in public, but some activists say women's rights in general are slipping under Morsi. A recent UN report found that nearly every Egyptian woman (99 percent) [has experienced](#) some form of sexual harassment. Only two women were chosen for the government's [new, 36-member cabinet](#) in April. A male actor [who walked through downtown Cairo](#) dressed as a woman recently found that men followed him in fancy cars, propositioning him through their windows.

In the wake of one particularly gruesome assault, Muslim Brotherhood lawmakers chided protesters for [failing to segregate](#) by gender at the rallies.

"Sometimes," [said](#) Adel Abdel Maqsood Afifi, a police general, lawmaker, and Islamist, "a girl contributes 100 percent to her own raping when she puts herself in these conditions."

Activists have made some gains in pushing the government to protect women's rights, such as a new, [government-organized](#) an initiative specifically aimed at preventing violence against women. (Still, [a UN document](#) on sexual violence was also recently decried by the Muslim Brotherhood as destroying "Islamic ethics and seek[ing] to demolish the institution of the family.")

Tahrir Bodyguard has since evolved to fight sexual harassment in Egyptian society more broadly -- offering [free self-defense courses](#) and pushing for greater police accountability. Bahgat has since left the organization in order to focus on larger gender equality campaigns.

"Egyptian women are empowered," she said. "Right now, it's a difficult transition period, but they have what it takes."