

Violence Against Women in Egypt

Through over 10 years of providing needy women with legal aid and consultation through our Legal Empowerment and Aid project, ECWR has learned that women in Egypt are often subject to violence not only from family members and community members, but also by agents of the state, including the police supposedly tasked with the protection of all citizens. In addition, women are constantly subjected to violence in the form of sexual harassment and abuse on the street, and approximately ninety-seven percent of Egyptian women are the victims of female genital mutilation. Women's right to lead a life free of violence is not widely internalized within Egyptian society, resulting in lack of reporting by victims of violence, lack of perpetrators' awareness of the criminality of violence, lack of response from police and the legal system supposedly tasked with enforcing laws prohibiting violence, and perpetration of violence by authorities themselves against women in order to pressure their male relatives.

Violence against women in Egypt can be described along the broad categories: violence committed by institutions of the state, domestic violence, female genital mutilation (FGM), and the structural violence that deprives women of equal participation and a chance to change the conditions that perpetuate the other forms of violence.

Violence Committed by Institutions of the State

Although laws prohibiting violence exist, not only is there a problem of enforcement, but there has also been a disturbing trend of deliberate violations by agents of the state. Some Egyptian police deliberately use women as pawns in their actions against male relatives suspected of crimes. One such case occurred after the October 2004 terrorist attack on the Red Sea Coast when police and state security agents arrested hundreds of people living in nearby towns. For those they could not find, they systematically subjected their female relatives to arrests, sexual and physical abuse, torture, harassment and public humiliation. Another, more high-profile occurrence was the physical and sexual abuse of women perpetrated by or without interference from security officials during the May 25, 2005 referendum vote.

This shows that not only do authorities routinely fail to enforce legal protections against violence for women, including FGM, but they also perpetrate it themselves in a systematic fashion. ECWR sees these violations as a consequence of lack of awareness of laws, concepts of human rights and authorities' role in protecting women, as well as a serious lack of oversight.

To combat this, ECWR joined with the New Woman Research Center and Arab Alliance for Women in founding the Women's Forum for Change, a coalition of NGOs campaigning against violence carried out by government agents, such as the police and state security. We have written and distributed several press releases and plan to launch a domestic and international campaign on all levels to improve awareness, enforcement and oversight.

Our May 9th 2005 conference entitled, "Stop Violence Against Women" focused specifically on violence committed by the state. Specialists and 90 participants including journalists, representatives from NGOs and researchers attended to discuss legal and social trends regarding violence against women, the psychology of the perpetrators and the effects of violence on victims, the media's role in confronting these abuses and the role of NGOs in fighting abuses of human rights, especially women's. Two case studies were presented on abuse and torture by police in which the police used inhumane methods and collective punishment against the entire family. The conference resulted in the following recommendations:

- Accurate information and statistics on violence against women at all levels should be public

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- Discrimination against women in any law should be removed, since this contributes to the occurrence of violence against women
- Procedures and laws protecting women should be encouraged and loopholes allowing violence and escape from punishment should be closed.
- Protection of victims of rape and punishment of rapists should be encouraged
- A unified strategy to confront social, organizational and individual violence should be employed
- All laws preventing freedom, such as the emergency law, should be eliminated
- Women's human rights should be discussed in international organizations, especially research and media organizations, in order to find culturally appropriate solutions to ending violence
- The contact information of organizations working on human rights should be published and their goals explained and made available to all women
- NGOs should cooperate with journalists to address issues of violence and mobilize public opinion
- Fighting all forms of discrimination against women is the only way to stop violence
- Civil society and all NGOs, especially women's organizations, must make a concerted effort to confront all forms of violence against women, especially organizational violence perpetrated by authorities who are supposed to protect the safety of citizens

Domestic Violence

ECWR has learned from our work with women that despite the existence of laws protecting women from violence, these laws are often not well known either by citizens or authorities, contributing to a lack of reporting of violations, a lack of enforcement or lenient sentencing for those convicted. Some cultural values that imply that violence against women is the prerogative of husbands or fathers contribute to this problem, as does the accepting portrayal of violence against women in the media. Another factor preventing women from reporting violence is a general fear of engaging with the police, the legal system and the government.

Also, current Egyptian media treats violence against women as acceptable and legitimate. This has a strong effect on millions of Egyptians, men and women alike, and contributes to cultural barriers that seriously impede actions aimed at reducing the incidence of violence against women, legislation and enforcement. Raising journalists' awareness about the issue of violence, women's and human rights and their role and responsibilities in stopping it, is critical to changing the societal perspective on violence that will either facilitate or inhibit programs to eliminate it.

Although there is a huge amount of work left to be done, ECWR's Legal Empowerment and Aid project has been successful in raising women's awareness of their rights, convincing them to report violations and bring their cases to court, training them to do this independently in the future and to help other women, and training community NGOs to do this work as well. We are also planning a wide-scale public awareness campaign including continued trainings and conferences as well as establishing a hotline, materials on the issue of violence, publicity materials advertising the hotline, and a special outreach to the media about their vital role in bringing their power to influence cultural change to ending violence.

Female Genital Mutilation

FGM in Egypt is reported to affect 90-97% of women. The practice ranges in severity from small cuts to the more rare complete removal of external genitalia followed by stitching of the vaginal opening. The origins of FGM in Egypt predate the arrival of both Christianity and Islam and are not part of the requirements of either religion. However, due to deeply ingrained cultural practices and its linkages to tradition, FGM has taken on religious dimensions in addition to its complex social function and association with purity, chastity and marriageability.

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Efforts to fight FGM in Egypt have been in force for decades but received a boost in profile following the UN Conference on Population, held in Cairo in 1994. During the conference, graphic footage of a circumcision being performed in Egypt was aired, shocking the world and eliminating the ability of the Egyptian delegation to continue its claims that the practice is out of date or not practiced in Egypt.

Since then, NGOs as well as the Egyptian government have been fighting, with limited success, to find a way to eliminate this violent and unnecessary practice. Despite the government's legislative efforts to ban FGM, enforcement has lagged and the slow improvement in FGM's incidence has led the NGO community to seek out new methods to confront it. Currently, ECWR is working in the community to end FGM through trainings, discussion groups, conferences, seminars and public awareness. We also join with other NGOs working on the issue to pressure the Egyptian government to enforce and strengthen laws prohibiting FGM.

Through our experience we have found that the most successful technique for convincing people to abandon the practice is approaching the issue from the religious and medical perspectives. Our participants have responded much more enthusiastically to religious experts than any other argument. Another method that has had successful results is the "positive deviant" approach developed by CEDPA.

ECWR's recent activities tackling FGM include:

- "Trends in Female Genital Mutilation: Causes and Consequences" – June 29, 2005 conference at the Association of Industrial Housing in Shobra El-Khema
- "Gender and Development" - June 19 – 20, 2005 workshop for 23 urban health workers in North Giza to raise awareness about the issue of female genital mutilation.
- "Trends in Female Circumcision: Causes and Dangers" - May 4, 2005 workshop for 21 women in El Mataria and Ezpet El Nakhl
- "Legislative and Religious Campaign Against the Crime of Circumcision" – March 2005 conference attended by 180 participants including both women and men, members of local councils, representatives from the social affairs administration, doctors, rural and health workers and teachers of literacy

Structural Violence and Barriers to Women's Political Participation

Structural violence in the form of discriminatory laws and enforcement practices continue to be a problem in Egypt, despite a constitutional guarantee of equality. Perpetuating this condition, women have little access to or influence on the political sphere. Extremely low representation of women and their interests leads to a lack of change in discriminatory legislation and new laws that are against the interests of women.

ECWR is focusing a significant portion of our recent work on improving women's unequal access to political participation with the goal of increasing their influence over policy-making and thus securing their interests in the public sphere. The activities that are part of our Women in Democratic Transition project, Legal Reform for Women and Women in the Professional Syndicates are aimed at ensuring that women have a voice in the democratic reform process that is moving quickly in Egypt. We train women to be informed, independent voters and also train women candidates in leadership skills and running a successful campaign. Public awareness, media outreach, gender sensitive election monitoring, outreach to political parties and professional syndicates and advocacy are our main foci.

**For more detailed information on violence against women in Egypt
or ECWR's activities, please see our websites:
www.ecwregypt.org, www.fourliteracies.org and www.awfarab.org
or contact us at ecwr@link.net.**

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