

## ARAB PERSPECTIVE: WOMEN, THE WORK PLACE, AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

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[n\\_gharaibeh@yahoo.com](mailto:n_gharaibeh@yahoo.com)**Abstract****Objective**

This article attempts to evaluate the magnitude of the problem of sexual harassment at the workplace among Arab women. The article draws parallels between Arab and Western societies regarding sexual harassment of women at the workplace in order to have educated estimates about impact on women and society. The article also examines future directions and potential areas of research on the subject.

**Method**

Indexed databases and non-indexed Internet-accessible articles were searched for the subject of sexual harassment of women at the workplace in the Arab world. Hypotheses were formulated using composite figures of Arab and non-Arab origin about the magnitude of the problem. Arab governments' efforts on the subject were reviewed. Questions to be tested in future empirical studies were posed.

**Results and Conclusions**

There are no reliable figures on the magnitude of the problem of sexual harassment of women at the workplace in the Arab world. I estimate that 34 million Arab women may have faced at least one form sexual harassment at work between mid-2003 and mid-2005. A best-case-scenario estimate put the number at 8.6 million. There are significant barriers to studying sexual harassment in Arab societies; the field is fertile for empirical research to find out a better estimate of the magnitude of this problem, and to raise awareness, improve prevention, management and treatment of the psychological consequences of work-related sexual harassment of Arab women. There is evidence of progress in the Arab world in the area of labor legislation as well as awareness of the issue of sexual harassment.

**What is sexual harassment?**

Similarities and differences exist between the Arab perspective on sexual harassment (*al-Mudhayaguh al-Jinsyyeh*—my translation) and the "Western" perspective. Despite the culture-bound variation in details, there are cross-cultural similarities in the "general" guidelines of what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable code of conduct towards women at the workplace (and elsewhere as well).

The Federal U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defines sexual harassment as: "Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment." (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) The commission considers sexual harassment a form of sex discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. (US Department of State)

The State of Connecticut defines sexual harassment in similar terms as: "Any unwelcome sexual advances or requests for

sexual favors or any conduct of a sexual nature when (1) submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment, (2) submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual, or (3) such conduct has the purpose or effect of substantially interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment." (Connecticut General Statutes)

An Algerian definition from Law No. 04-15, which amended the Penal Code to create the offence of sexual harassment is: *Sexual harassment is defined as abusing the authority conferred by one's function or profession in order to give orders to, threaten, impose constraints or exercise pressure on another person for the purpose of obtaining sexual favors.* A person convicted of this offence is subject to imprisonment of two months to one year and a fine of 50,000 to 100,000 Dinars. (United Nations Population Fund) (Italics added).

The following is a Tunisian definition from Tunisia's enacted Law No. 2004-73, amending the 1913 Penal Code to criminalize sexual harassment and certain offences "against morality." The

The provision relating to sexual harassment defines the offence as “persistent harassment of another person through humiliating or offensive actions, words or gestures that are intended to cause the victim to submit to one's own sexual overtures or to those of third party or to weaken the victim's efforts to resist those overtures.” (Loi n° 2004-73 du 2 août 2004, modifiant et complétant le Code pénal concernant la répression des atteintes aux bonnes moeurs et du harcèlement sexuel. Journal officiel, 2004-08-06, n° 63, p. 2234) (French text) (International Labor Organization) (Italics and quotation added).

Since most of the time concepts and terms are better recognized than defined, these are illustrative examples of Sexual Harassment from the training manual for the employees of the State of Connecticut:

- Whistling at someone
- Making sexual comments about a woman's body
- Telling sexual jokes or stories
- Making sexual comments about someone's clothing
- Making kissing sounds
- Staring at a woman or a woman's body part
- Winking, licking lips, throwing kisses and making suggestive visuals
- Touching a person's clothing, hair, or body
- Brushing up against somebody, hugging, kissing, patting, or stroking
- Displaying nude pictures, or sexually suggestive pictures

#### Empirical/Statistical Difficulties:

MEDLINE and PSYCHLIT have more than one thousand articles on sexual harassment, but none on sexual harassment among Arab women at the work place. It is unknown how frequent do Arab women face sexual harassment at work. Although sexual harassment can be directed towards either sex, it is largely an offense committed by men against women, an expression of women's traditional and inferior role in the labor force and in society. (Charney *et. al.*, 1994).

Arab researchers will find that statistics/figures are extremely difficult to come by regarding the magnitude of such a problem in Arab societies--as is the case with other problems relating to the very sensitive areas of sexual conduct, perceptions, conceptions, beliefs, and attitudes. The reasons for the difficulty with quantitatively estimating this problem are many and multifaceted:

1. In comparison with Western/Westernized cultures, the Arab culture views sex and sexuality as more sensitive, more personal and very private issues to divulge even in a hypothetical anonymous survey. One expects self-censorship to be the culprit if such a hypothetical survey took place.
2. Family-censorship is expected to be the next hypothetical barrier. A surveyor and his/her team going to peoples' homes to conduct a survey and ask sensitive questions even if assured about confidentiality is likely to have low response rate.
3. A hypothetical surveyor and her/his team are likely to face the typical (or stereotypical) Arab's mistrust of authority. Even in a self-report written survey, the participants may be tempted to not mention anything that could be perceived as incriminating or demeaning because of mistrust of the assurances of the confidentiality and/or anonymity of the

process.

4. The data is already scarce due to the bias of standard literature databases. In researching this subject I had to resort to the Internet search engines since Medline-indexed article were very scarce (I suspect because Journal Editors and Reviewers tend to find certain articles not worthy of publication because they are considered “of local concern only” especially that the standard databases are mostly in European languages—to a very large extent in English). This poses significant problems for Arab clinicians and researchers who rely on the standard searchable/indexed databases to review the literature for relevant data/information on a subject of “local” concern.
5. Politicized area: There is no escape from politics when approaching sensitive issues such as sex, workplace, labor laws and general laws. The following hypothetical questions are to illustrate how “serious” or even “dangerous” pursuing statistics in the realm of sexuality may be:
  - A. What is the percentage of veiled women in Egypt (population 75 million)?
    - a) Less than 1%
    - b) 5-10%
    - c) 20-25%
    - d) 50-60%
    - e) More than 75%
  - B. What is the percentage of women who have had sexual intercourse before marriage in Sudan (population 41 million)?
    - a) Less than 1 in 1000
    - b) 1-2%
    - c) 5-10%
    - d) 20-40%
    - e) More than 50%
  - C. What percentage of girls reported being raped between ages 13 and 18 in Algeria (population 33 million)?
    - a) 1 in 10,000
    - b) 1 in 1000
    - c) 1%
    - d) 10%
 (Attempting to find a reliable answer based on reliable surveys is likely to result in a very polarized political whirlwind)
6. Labor laws and practices may be divorced from each other in the reality of the Arab workplace.
7. Self-censorship by researchers out of fear.
8. Finding the data if in fact it becomes available may prove to be another challenge either due to government censorship or due to lack of interest by indexed Journal editors and reviewers.
9. It is only reasonable to assume that there are differences from an Arab country to the other and from one region to another within the same Arab country. Not only that, but it is reasonable to find differences in the same region depending on educational and economic status.
10. Methodological difficulties having to do with sampling, response/return rates, difficulties with agreement on definitions in the local dialects, and regional norms of behavior.

#### Attempt at Informed Estimates:

To attempt an educated estimate it is helpful to look at other countries' figures until we have our own.

- A- A study examining sexual harassment among Arab boys and girls in public schools in Israel revealed that 33-50% of Arab boys and 11-23% of Arab girls (ages 12-17) reported at least one act of sexual harassment against them in the month before the survey. (Zeira et al, 2002)
- B- In the US, the most reliable figures (due to very large sample size) are from the third and most recent survey conducted in 1994 by the US Merit Systems Protection Board (the two previous surveys were in 1980 and 1987). The 1994 survey revealed that 44% of women respondents and 19% of men respondents experienced sexual harassment at the workplace in the 2 years prior to the survey. (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1994)
- C- Among nurses in an Ankarah, Turkey 75% of respondents reported sexual harassment (44% by physicians). (Kisa, 1996)
- D- A US survey of 2,064 public school students in 8th through 11th grades 83% of girls and 79% of boys report having ever experienced harassment. (American Association of University Women, 2001)
- E- A survey in Pakistan found 58% of nurses and doctors interviewed admitted being sexually harassed, usually at the hands of other doctors, nurses, attendants, patients and visitors. Domestic servants suffer even more, 91 % disclosing they'd been victims of some sexual abuse. There were stories of domestic servants being fondled, beaten and raped by men in the houses where they work. In some cases they are even sold to strangers for the night. For women working in fields and brick kilns the problem is even more acute, with a staggering 95 percent having faced sexual harassment of some form (including rape and torture), many facing it on a regular basis. The harassers are usually landlords, munshies, contractors and co-workers. (Pakistan's Alliance Against Sexual Harassment)

The mid-2005 estimate of the Arab population was 321 million, and the projection for mid-2010 is 356 million. (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division) The percentage of working-age (14-64 years) population according to a 2003 estimate was 59% for both sexes. (UN ESCWA) This puts the number of working-age Arab women at an estimated 94 million in mid-2005 and an estimated 105 million in 2010. The unemployment rate average for Arab women was estimated in 2001 at 17 % (ranges from as low as 2.5 % in a 1999 UAE estimate to as high as 32% for Bahraini women in a 2001 estimate). This puts the estimate of working Arab women at 78 million in mid-2005, and 87 million in 2010. If we assume that the rate of sexual harassment exposure for Arab women to be similar to the US (44%), then one estimates the number of Arab women subjected to one form of sexual harassment or another at 34 million in mid-2005 and 38 million in 2010. A best-case-scenario (using the 11% figure in the Israeli study) puts the estimated number at 8.6 million Arab women subjected to workplace sexual harassment in 2005 ( 9.6 million by 2010).

#### Arab countries' Governmental Efforts:

Although there is at time a wide schism between statement or written laws and actual facts on the ground, these examples illustrates the "official" stance—if any—on the matter of sexual harassment of women at the workplace:

Algeria (see above).

Egypt:

"Although Egypt has some surveys and statistics concerning

violence, they do not accurately reflect the true situation, as many acts of violence are not officially reported. Moreover, in addition to sexual and physical violence, violence against women includes all forms of behavior that demean or disparage women, affirm their dependence and prevent them from asserting their identity in a natural way." (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women)

Jordan (population 5.6 million):

Sexual harassment in the workplace is not explicitly defined or forbidden in Jordanian legislation. Women workers are told to file complaints of sexual harassment with the Family Protection Department, as the ministry of labor does not document such complaints. There are no statistics on sexual harassment in the workplace and no specific records at the family protection department on this matter. (Abu Hassan)

A recommendation of *al-Markaz al-Watani li-Hoquooq al-Insaan* (the National Center for Human Rights, (NCHR)) in its 2005 publication was: "Providing protection against sexual harassment to working women by introducing a legal text that punishes perpetrators of such offences." (National Center for Human Rights). The same report indicates that "The Family Protection Directorate is keen on addressing cases of sexual harassment and rape of maids and provides medical examination and investigation services without any discrimination." This seems to have prompted by complaints of expatriate women workers of sexual harassment and rape.

Lebanon (population 3.9 million):

"... endeavors to promote and publish field studies and research on violence against women, sexual harassment, honor crimes and other manifestations of violence against women." (from *UN archives of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*)

Libyan A. Jamahiriya (population 5.9 million):

"No statistical data were available, but violence against women did not constitute a dangerous phenomenon in the country." (from *UN archives of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*)

Morocco (population 31.7 million):

"Women workers at the Manufacture du Morocco, a textile plant in the suburbs of Rabat, have been on strike since Nov. 10 [1995] because of the violence and extreme sexual harassment company officials used against one of their union leaders. The Democratic Association of Moroccan Women has been organizing a support campaign for these striking women. The women point out that this strike against sexual harassment is a first in Morocco and indeed in the Arab world. Khadia Khaireddine, secretary general of the union at MDM, was arbitrarily fired and then attacked in front of the plant gates by the company supervisor. Workers at the plant, who have been insulted and sexually harassed constantly, walked out and began a sit-in in front of the plant gates." (Dunkel, 1995)

Tunisia (population 10.1 million):

Examining 118 cases of battered women in 1998, the violence to which women are subjected was essentially marital violence in 64 per cent of cases and family violence in 14.5 per cent of cases. The report also brings to light two cases of rape, two cases of violence at work, one case of sexual harassment and nine cases of verbal or social abuse (in a public place). (from *UN archives of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*)

United Arab Emirates (population 4.9 million):

Gulf News' YouGov asked 605 female UAE residents the following question: "Have you personally ever experienced sexual harassment at your current place of work?" 14% said yes. (Gulf News). Although this is not a "scientific" study, it does give us some general idea of the possible magnitude of the problem.

#### Conclusion and Future Directions:

The area of sexual harassment of women at the workplace in Arab countries is not well studied. There is evidence from studies in the USA, Turkey, Pakistan, Israel, and a news survey in the UAE that sexual harassment may be common, under-recognized, and underreported among working women. The exact number of working women in the 22 Arab countries is not known and the prevalence of sexual harassment among Arab women at the work place is unknown.

I used population and labor force figure from the Arab world and calculated the magnitude of the problem assuming that the rate of sexual harassment exposure for Arab women to be similar to the US (44%). The estimated number of Arab women subjected to one form of sexual harassment or another: 34 million in mid-2005 and 38 million in 2010. Another best-case-scenario estimate (assuming that sexual harassment happened to only 11% of the women as in the Israeli study of Arab girls) puts the estimated number at 8.6 million Arab women subjected to workplace sexual harassment in 2005 ( 9.6 million by 2010).

Given the growing importance of the Arab woman in the workforce, and given the significant psychological and financial adverse effects of sexual harassment, this problem needs more light to be shed on it in the Arab world. A best-case-scenario estimate put the number at 8.6 million.

There is fertile ground for future directions for research to bring forth a more reliable estimate. Some of the questions worth pursuing are:

- A- How common is sexual harassment among women in the Arab workplace?
- B- Is there variation among the different Arab countries?
- C- Is it affected by conservative customs and dress?
- D- How protective and how practical is segregating men and women at the workplace?
- E- What are the psychological costs for these women?
- F- How often do victimized women report harassment?
- G- What is the proportion of those who quit their jobs because of it?
- H- What are the financial costs to the working women in reduced income or loss of employment and income?
- I- What are the financial costs to society in lost productivity and mental health care expenses?
- J- What preventive measures can be put in place in an Arab context?

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