An application of the ecological model to the causes and prevention of sexual harassment in informal areas of Greater Cairo

1. Background

Sexual harassment in public spaces is a widespread problem in Cairo and throughout Egypt that has profound impacts on the lives of young women. Based on the 2014 Survey of Young People in Egypt (SYPE), almost 40% of women (aged 13-35) were subjected to sexual harassment within the six months preceding the survey interview. Sexual harassment – primarily different forms of sexual harassment – was more common in informal urban areas (62%) compared to formal urban areas (48%) and rural areas (33%) of the country (Roushdy and Sieverding 2015). Sexual harassment or fear of exposure to sexual harassment has multidimensional impacts on women and girls whether physical, sexual or mental. It also confines their mobility within public spaces, including schools, workplaces and public transportation (UNFPA 2016; HarassMap 2014; Egyptian Center for Women's Rights 2008). Although a 2014 law specified sexual harassment as a punishable offense, since the passage of this law, very few cases of harassment have ever been prosecuted (Hassan and Sieverding 2016), and many women are reluctant to report due to fear of stigma and the strong belief that it is useless to report because no action will be taken (HarassMap 2014). Developing interventions to address the root causes of sexual harassment, fear of reporting and the weak enforcement of the sexual harassment law is therefore needed to create safer public spaces for women in Greater Cairo.

This study presents the results of formative research carried out in two informal areas of Greater Cairo as part of a project to develop a community-based intervention to combat sexual harassment in public spaces. In order to identify the root causes of sexual harassment in these communities, from the perspective of community members themselves, we apply the ecological model to identify and categorize the drivers of sexual harassment based on qualitative data and secondary analysis of survey data. The ecological model has been widely used in public health research to theorize the different levels of influence on human behavior, from the individual, interpersonal, community to societal levels (McLeroy 1988). Adaptations of the ecological model to the case of gender-based violence have made the important step of integrating gender theory, and particularly theories of patriarchy, into the model (Heise 1998). However, most applications of the ecological model to gender-based violence focus on intimate partner violence (Heise 1998; Abu Sabbah et al 2017), which may have different determinants than sexual harassment in public spaces.

The objectives of the study were therefore to (1) Adapt the ecological model to the case of sexual harassment in public spaces of informal Cairo; (2) Analyze the root causes of sexual harassment, as perceived by community members, according to the levels of the adapted ecological model; and (3) Develop a proposal for a context-specific intervention to combat sexual harassment that addresses multiple levels of influence on behavior.

2. Data and Methods

We adopt a mixed-methods approach to understanding the causes and consequences of sexual harassment in informal areas of Cairo. In order to examine the prevalence of sexual harassment, the types of harassment that occur, and women's responses to harassment, we rely on data from the 2016 Survey of Young People in Informal Urban Areas of Greater Cairo (SYPE-IGC). The SYPE-IGC is the most recent and comprehensive survey of youth characteristics and outcomes in informal areas of Cairo, covering a representative sample of 2,942 young people aged 15-29 from 2,991 households located in about 164 informal urban areas in the three governorates of Greater Cairo region (Roushdy et al. 2016).

In addition to descriptive analysis of the SYPE-IGC, near the end of 2017, the Population Council conducted a qualitative companion study in two purposively selected informal areas within Greater Cairo (Arab Ghonem, Cairo governorate and Ard El Lewa, Giza governorate) where the interventions are planned to take place in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of drivers of and perspectives on sexual harassment in these communities. Collaborating with a local NGO in each area, qualitative data collection was carried out with three different groups of respondents. In-depth interviews (IDIs) were carried out with 48 young women and men aged 13-29. During the IDIs, participants were asked what they consider to be sexual harassment, its prevalence in their areas, its drivers, the likely perpetrators and its effects on women. Participants were also posed several

vignettes about cases of harassment and reporting. Eight focus group discussions (FGDs) were also held with parents of youth aged 13-29 and who were living in the two selected slum areas. We aimed to include parents with different characteristics in order to collect a diversity of attitudes towards sexual harassment, reactions towards their daughters' reporting of sexual harassment in public places and whether they put constrictions on their daughters' movements to avoid sexual harassment. Finally, two FGDs were conducted in each area with community stakeholders. All IDIs and FGDs were recorded, transcribed in Arabic, and analyzed thematically in Dedoose.

3. Preliminary Results
3.1 Experience of harassment in slum areas

From the SYPE-IGC, 49% of young women reported experiencing harassment in the six months prior to the survey. Experience of harassment was higher among the youngest age group of girls (59% among 15-17 year olds). About 45% of young women who experienced harassment reported that it occurred in the street, while about 12% reported experiencing harassment in public transportation and almost 3% reported experiencing harassment at school. Young women interviewed in the qualitative study also experienced frequent sexual harassment, particularly in the form of being followed by someone and hearing inappropriate comments.

> *My father wanted to let me leave the school, he always asking me to stay at home because he always afraid if we get harassed, we were dropping some classes and during the exam he was asking my mother to go with us and waiting until finishing our exams (young woman, Arab Ghonem, 13-15)*

Meanwhile, some young men interviewed in the informal areas acknowledged that they engaged in harassing girls verbally, and through ogling or facial expressions.

> *We just catcall the girls in our neighborhood by saying (ya gameel) that you are very beautiful, and laughing,,,One day when I was walking with a friend he grabbed a girl's breast, but she couldn't do anything, she only said shame on you and walked away. When I blamed my friend, he said that she wants that, maybe he knows something I don't know about her. (young man, Arab Ghonem, 19-29)*

3.2 Perceived drivers of sexual harassment along the levels of the ecological model
a- Individual and interpersonal factors

Individual factors can refer to the individual's knowledge, skills, attitudes, or other factors that shape behavior, both in terms of risk factors for being a victim of harassment, and the likelihood of harassing girls (being a perpetrator). In the qualitative study, the majority of respondents, both men and women, perceived that there were individual factors related to the behavior of a girl or woman that made her more likely to be harassed. The majority of respondents agreed that girls/women who are harassed deserve it if they are dressed provocatively, and said that a woman's dress, eye contact, or way of walking in the street led the man to think she wanted to be harassed.

In contrast, many individual factors were mentioned that might make men harass women. The majority of these factors were also related to moral judgments about the individual, particularly the use of drugs and alcohol which was perceived to be widespread among young men in the slum areas. Several respondents also mentioned that sexual desires, including feelings of inferiority and not being respected, being unmarried and unemployed, were causes of men committing sexual harassment in slum areas.

> *It is related to the parent's upbringing, they let their girls wear clothes that show parts of their bodies, if they asked them from the beginning to wear decent clothes, nothing will happen (young man, Ard El Lewa, 19-29).*
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> *Boys imitate the older men, when they see the old man harassing the girls, they will do the same (young man, Ard El Lewa, 16-18)*

Similarly, at the interpersonal level, we found that the majority of youth respondents in the IDIs, and the parents and community leaders in FGDs, attributed acts of sexual harassment to lack of proper upbringing that led to poor moral behavior

both among young women who are harassed and young men who carry out the harassment.

b- Community

In a contrast with many studies that argue that the neighborhood plays a fundamental function in informal social control, particularly in Egypt, the qualitative results showed that the majority of young women in both slums areas reported that they feel unsafe in their neighborhood because they are threated every time they go out by sexual harassment and bullying. In FGDs, parents concurred that girls feel unsafe in their community, which they attributed primarily to the spread of drugs.

In contrast to this majority opinion, some young women in both areas mentioned that they feel safer in their communities. They believed that people in their neighborhood would always protect them if they were exposed to any kind of sexual harassment.

> *In my neighborhood all the people know me, no one will think to harass me even verbally, and if any one does so, people will protect me. But outside my neighborhood no one knows me and it is easier to get harassed. (young woman, Ard El Lewa 19-29)*

c- Societal and policy

Culture and norms played a fundamental role in placing the blame for sexual harassment primarily on women. Based on SYPE-IGC, among women who experienced harassment in the six month preceding the interview, only 0.2% reported it to the police, 14% talked about it to a family member, and 3% told a friend or someone else.

> *The norms and traditions prohibit girls from reporting sexual harassment. Your relatives and the neighbors will talk about this girl, they will blame her and say that she has to keep silent rather than creating a scandal in her community. People will never stop talking about this girl. (young woman, Ard El Lewa)*

Similarly, although most respondents in the qualitative were accepting of the idea of a girl reporting sexual harassment to the police, they also said that there were many barriers to reporting. Among those barriers were being ashamed, parents' or families' opposition to reporting due to reputational fears, and fear of being blamed, not believed or mistreated by the police. Young people, community leaders and parents alike believed that the lack of law enforcement plays an important role in the speared of sexual harassment.

> *Police officers never help anyone, my niece was in preparatory school and when she was in her way back from school, 3 boys harassed her and took off her shirt and her scarf and ran away,... at this time, we went to the police to file a report but the police officer asked us to leave because she was not assaulted or raped. [He said] only in such cases the police may take an action (community leader, FGD, Arab Ghonem)*

4. Discussion

Our mixed-methods analysis suggests that there are multiple drivers of sexual harassment in informal urban Cairo along the different levels of the ecological model. Although respondents tended to place the direct blame for harassment on the individual and interpersonal levels, primarily in terms of moral shortcomings of both women who are harassed and men who harass, it was clear from their discussions that broader community- and societal-level factors also contributed to insecurity for young women in their communities. There were very mixed views among respondents about the degree to which community-level dynamics protected or made girls more vulnerable to harassment. Many viewed their neighborhoods as unsafe, and the at least tacit acceptance of harassment by bystanders who would not intervene contributed to this sense of insecurity, along with other perceived social problems such as drug use. At the societal and policy levels, gender inequality reinforced victim-blaming within the community and the police, such that many young women were afraid to report any experiences of harassment and both they and their community members were convinced that such reporting would be ineffective. In this broader context, educational or awareness raising interventions that address individual behaviors are unlikely to be effective in combating harassment, which is widely acknowledged to exist and to be a problem. Rather, interventions to increase

confidence in the harassment law and encourage a broader sense of safety and security in informal neighborhoods are needed in order to address the drivers of harassment at the community level.

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