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Marital rape normalisation in Egyptian narratives: Challenging popular narratives of marital rape in Egypt

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Abstract: *Marital rape is not considered a crime under the laws of 111 countries around the world (UN Women 2019). As shocking as this might sound to various populations, Egypt not only does not criminalise marital rape by law, but also the culture of victim blaming constantly prevents women from seeking help (Hussein 2021). The main argument of this essay is that dominant narratives of marital rape in twenty-first century Egypt are a vital tool of memory production that preserves the patriarchal society. Hence, legal and social change will only occur when dominant narratives are deconstructed. Marital rape is surrounded by narratives of victim blaming and systematic denial of the existence of rape within marriage. This leads to a backlash against women who speak up and activists trying to bring about justice for marital rape victims/survivors, in addition to the fact that marital rape is still not considered rape by the Egyptian society as it "does not fit the image of the stranger in the dark alley" (Abdelaal 2021). This essay is set to discuss the constructions of narratives on marital rape survivors in Egypt, particularly on different media platforms such as online/newspaper articles, films, or TV series and talk shows. On the other hand, this essay also aims to discuss the ways in which public narratives around marital rape can be changed or are – arguably – slowly changing.*

Keywords: *marital rape; narratives; media; memory; #MeToo; Egypt.*

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1. Introduction

In a country where victims of sexual violence in general are blamed for their own violation more often than not, the idea of a woman accusing her husband of rape is unthinkable; the narrative being that by signing a marriage contract the wife is supposed to "sexually satisfy her husband" and if he forces her to have sex with him it is not considered a crime (OECD et al. 2020). Thus, the construction of the Egyptian "obedient and/or disobedient wife" in public narratives are worth studying in order to understand their impact on the perpetuation of marital rape to date. In this sense, the law does not recognise the problem or respond to it, despite the fact that other forms of gender-based violence such as sexual harassment and female genital mutilation have been outlawed in Egypt, marital rape is still not recognised as a crime under Egyptian law (Tonsy 2021). As I hypothesise throughout this research, the difference in dealing with certain types of violence can be attributed to the public, media, and religious narratives regarding it.

The choice of this topic is inspired to an extent by the strong Egyptian #MeToo campaign by Egyptian women (feminist activists alongside victims/survivors of sexual violence). This campaign took place on social media in July 2020 by publishing testimonies and taking legal actions for victims of sexual abuse to raise awareness and deconstruct harmful narratives on sexual violence including marital rape (BBC News 2020). The campaign spurred an array of debates on marital rape from community members, celebrities, and religious leaders. The main case study on how public and media narratives are beginning to change in Egypt is the video of Nada Adel accusing her former husband of marital rape. Adel is a social media influencer and fashion blogger who used to be married to another influencer called Tamim Younes. In 2021 she took to her Instagram to recount her own experience with marital rape with her former husband. She cries throughout the video while steadily telling her story and encouraging women to speak up and sending support to other victims (Abdelaal 2021). This video is particularly important because it was the first of its kind to take part in the Egyptian #MeToo campaign which had previously focused on other forms of sexual violence.

The primary source to be analysed throughout this essay is "Husband's Control and Sexual Coercion Within Marriage: Findings from a Population-Based Survey in Egypt" by Kaplan et al. (2011). This choice came because it is one of the very few scholarly writings that cover sexual intimate partner violence in Egypt in an objective and inclusive manner. Additionally, a collection of secondary articles will be discussed, such as articles, footage of various media productions, social media posts, and country reports that specifically tackle marital rape in Egypt. These secondary sources are used to explore the constructed narratives on victims of marital rape; this is chiefly due to the scarcity of scholarly texts on the topic at hand. This

study aims to address the gaps in research on marital rape specifically in Egypt and propose methods to challenge its normalisation through media narratives. The analysis will include both scholarly literature and popular media portrayals.

In this sense, Kaplan et al. (2011, 1466–67) begin by highlighting the scarcity of resources on sexual violence within the domestic sphere in the Arab region in general, although studies on the topic have been expanding recently such as Magdy and Zaki (2021) and Yaya et al (2019). The theoretical basis of the study is "patriarchy and male dominance," which resonates with the Middle East and North Africa context, where the existence of such realities condones and perpetuate domestic violence within the marriage institution; the idea of subordination of the wife is prevalent and encouraged by social norms (Kaplan et al. 2011, 1466–67). The available statistics reflect the extent of the normalisation of sexual violence within marriage: one study in Egypt showed that "62.2% of women reported some form of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), with almost one fifth of these women reporting sexual abuse," while "sexual coercion" is still not considered a crime under Egyptian law (Kaplan et al. 2011, 1467). An interesting choice to highlight and explore here is the use of "sexual coercion" instead of sexual violence and forced sex instead of marital rape throughout this text. Although sexual coercion might be an umbrella term to include sexual assaults and marital rape, it might also be because the questions in the study itself did not use these terms in the interviews with participants, so the authors used "sexual coercion" and "forced sex" for accuracy. In all cases the choice of the terms and the rationale behind it are not indicated in the text, but when speaking about narratives on sexual violence, the choice of words makes an imperative difference. One cannot help but think of whether the choice of not calling this form of violation marital rape is part of the problem, because it avoids using a term that does not exist in Egyptian law.

To put matters into context, this study had a sample of 5,240 women (Kaplan et al. 2011, 1468), while Egypt's population was over 65 million in 2000, when the study was conducted, and has increased every year since then. Hence even if the percentage of sexual violence within marriage might seem low (one-fifth of the total 62.2% who are victims of IPV), the rates of marital rape in the country are much more serious if projected on a bigger scale. Additionally, Kaplan et al. (2011, 1470) confirm that their interviewees were "from slightly richer households," which is important in terms of analysing the survey results, because the authors go on to assert that "poorer women were significantly more likely to report abuse." As per Abdelaal (2021), a more recent study conducted in 2018 showed that 10% of ever-married women in Egypt have experienced marital rape; that is hundreds of thousands of women, and that number only reflects the number of women who have reported the experience. Kaplan et al. (2011, 1474) argue that underreporting is an obstacle in researching

sexual coercion and forced sex; this is firstly due to the lack of an accurate definition for the two terms in the Egyptian context, secondly because sexual coercion and forced sex are socially acceptable in Egypt, and thirdly due to the absence of a legal framework that the victims can resort to when subjected to sexual violence within their marriage.

Building on the existing literature presented above, the objective of this research is to highlight various factors leading to the normalisation of marital rape within Egyptian society and discouraging women from reporting it. Despite the continued efforts by feminist movements, the subject remains severely understudied, and the media portrayal pushes back against any efforts to challenge the mainstream narratives.

2. Media narratives and portrayal of marital rape in Egypt

2.1. Marital rape in Egyptian talk shows

The media plays a pivotal role in Egyptian society. The influence of television, movies, and talk shows can be seen within various communities, even though the extent of its influence may vary from one community to the other. Mecky (2016) confirms that the normalisation of domestic violence allows for crimes of sexual violence to persist; she quotes Magda Adly – a prominent Egyptian feminist – who confirms that "Egyptian film and television dramas include a lot of scenes of violence against women." Hence, the prevalence of violence against women in the media without it even being portrayed as an odd occurrence highlights the acceptability of violence against women in Egyptian society. Adly continues to say that narratives of women on television reinforce violence against women and that the scenes portraying the negative treatment of women are the most common and the most viewed (Mecky 2016). Additionally, Mecky (2016) interviewed Nada Nashaat – an Egyptian feminist lawyer – who affirms that, despite the recent rise in public awareness about domestic violence, there is a lack of a clear definition of domestic violence in the public sphere. For example, marital rape and verbal violence need to also be seen as forms of domestic violence. This is precisely the core of the issue, since the media is quite influential in Egypt and even when sexual violence is becoming unacceptable in media narratives, marital rape remains largely disregarded.

A clear example of the dichotomy in the public discourse between marital rape and rape by an unknown perpetrator can be found in an episode of one of the most popular TV programmes in Egypt. Throughout this episode, Nehad Abo El Komsan – Head of the National Council for Women – speaks about marital rape and its lack of criminalisation and is joined by another lawyer, Alaa Moustafa, to present the "other point of view" for objectivity purposes (Al Kahera Wel Nas 2021). Moustafa states that in the Arabic language, the word rape is defined as taking what is not

rightfully yours, which means that there is no such thing as marital rape because "a woman's guardian (her father) gives her to her new guardian (her husband) when they sign the marriage contract and thus she becomes rightfully her husband's," as opposed to rape carried out by a stranger who is taking what is not rightfully his (Al Kahera Wel Nas 2021). Such discourse promotes the idea that a woman is a man's property and if one owns something then they have the right to do whatever they want with it. Thus, this narrative is exclusive to marital rape unlike other forms of violence against women because the general rationale is that a rapist does not have the right to the victim's body; while in this narrative, a husband does have the right to his wife's body.

2.2 Marital rape in Ramadan TV series

Upon examining popular narratives, it is imperative to study some of the episodes aired during the holy month of Ramadan in Egypt; as it is famous for tens of television series that families and friends vividly follow and always discuss as they have their Iftar. During Ramadan in 2020, two particularly interesting episodes in two different TV series were aired. The first is from a series called *Melouk Al Gad'ana* (which roughly translates to *The Kings of Chivalry*), where one of the male characters rapes his wife as a way of asserting his masculinity because she was trying to escape from an abusive marriage; the viewer sees that he is forcing himself on his wife and the next scene she is just crying in her bed in silence (N. Mohamed 2021). This is never followed by any repercussions, it does not become a major event in the storyline, nor is it mentioned in any other episodes, as if nothing illegal, immoral, or even strange has happened. Unfortunately, this scene might have been too familiar or too inconsequential to the viewer that it is only the above cited article that discussed this scene, it did not even become an issue of public debate, which might be because it deals with marital rape like it is dealt with in the Egyptian reality, a normalised crime. Further to this, Kaplan et al. (2011, 1473) found that a husband's lack of control, whether within the family or in their social and cultural spheres, was indeed associated with increased sexual violence. Sexual violence, and marital rape in particular, becomes a method of asserting male dominance in a relationship, showing that men still have the upper hand, making this portrayal in the series quite accurate.

On the other hand, in another series called *Le'bet Newton* (*Newton's Cradle*), Hana, the main character, does not tell her husband that she got her divorce certificate from her former husband because she is not ready to have sex with him. In this context, Hana knows that once she has the divorce certificate, she would not have an "excuse" not to have sex with her husband. As expected, once he knows she has got her divorce certificate, he tries to make advances and when she rejects him, he explodes into a rage, beats her, and attempts to rape her (Al Monitor 2021). The difference here, is that this series was critiquing marital rape. H. Mohamed (2021a)

argues that "for the first time in the history of Egyptian drama, the marital rape scene does not pass like a normal occurrence ... the husband was shown as the perpetrator despite his inability to comprehend marital rape as a crime." This scene has spurred public debate on marital rape on Egyptian social media, and given the fact that religion plays a vital role in the Egyptian society, many attacked the mere thought that there is rape within marriage. These reactions were based on a Hadith where Prophet Muhammed supposedly once said that if a man invites his wife to bed and she disobeys him, the angels will curse her until the morning (H. Mohamed 2021a). It is worth noting that more progressive Muslims doubt that the Prophet said that or claim different explanations of the words; yet ultimately it is such narratives – which are popular within the Egyptian societies – that change the status of wives who experience sexual violence from victims to perpetrators.

Furthermore, prominent religious figures began engaging with the discussion prompted by the *Newton's Cradle* series, some of them denying the existence of a notion such as marital rape. For instance, Amna Noseir, a Professor of Islamic philosophy, claimed that marital rape can be just insensitivity/discourtesy but not rape because marriage means consent. Noseir continued to argue that it is a woman's duty to satisfy the sexual needs of her husband because men get married to preserve themselves from adultery (Saad 2021). Further to the arguments of religious figures, Abdaallah Roshdy, an Islamic preacher with thousands of social media followers, publicly argued that marital rape is a "heresy from the west." He asserted that it is religiously forbidden for a woman to refrain from having sex with her husband without having "an excuse" and if she does then her husband has the right to punish her (BBC News 2021). Conversely, according to BBC News (2021), some clergymen and Islamic scholars commented on the public discourse that condones marital rape saying that the religious verses that those so-called preachers use are inaccurate and that forcing the wife to have sex is forbidden in Islam, although they rejected the term marital rape and preferred using forced sex instead. Hence, considering the reason why Kaplan et al. (2011) decided to use the term forced sex, it now appears to be that this is a more socially accepted term by the few who actually believe that marital rape is a crime but due to social stigma are still unable to call it marital rape.

3. Changing the narratives and facing the repercussions

3.1 Nada Adel: A survivor who dared speak

Kaplan et al. (2011, 1474) point out that it is essential to understand that a major obstacle when researching sexual violence within marriage in Egypt is the lack of reporting. There are virtually no studies about the social acceptance of forced marital sex in the Middle East; however, the fact that this crime is not recognised under legal frameworks is indicative

of a wider cultural context where victims do not have the legal resources to report marital rape or seek support from their families and communities (Kaplan et al. 2011, 1474). There has been a recent indicative change in the past few months, which started when Nada Adel posted her video on Instagram and spurred enormous public debate between sympathisers and abusers who mocked her and questioned her allegations. One of her critics was her own former husband, who responded with a video on his own Instagram, denouncing her accusations and saying that he and his family had never heard of this incident before (Bassel and Abdulaal 2021). Unfortunately, such a reaction is not even surprising because her former husband is a famous person who comes from the upper class and is a man in a patriarchal society, thus, he thinks he is invincible.

A report by Raseef 22 (2021) presents the abuse that Adel has been subjected to by social media users. The report cites several tweets, comments, and stories where users posted sentences such as "how can we rape you, we cannot even talk to you," "in 2030, Hamada films himself with his wife to prove it was consensual," and "now if she got pregnant, would the baby be a bastard?" This method of adding sarcastic comments in order to discredit Adel's testimony is present in every sexual violence case, however, the sarcasm and mockery are harsher when it is a crime that is yet to become illegal. Abdelaal (2021) argues that disclosing marital rape is even more difficult in many cases due to the social stigma surrounding it and the pressure that the victim faces when speaking up because she is accused of causing "family humiliation" or of harming her children by calling their father out. This is precisely what happened when Adel posted her video: hundreds of social media users shamed and guilted her because her former husband is the father of her child, and her testimony would ruin her child's life.

An important detail that is crucial with regards to narratives of sexual violence, what they reflect and how they spread, is the fact that Younes (Adel's former husband) produced a song called "Salmonella" in 2019 that promotes sexual coercion, threatening, and blackmailing and above all mocks the idea that a women might say no (H. Mohamed 2021b). In that song, Younes explicitly says that he saw a girl somewhere and liked her, hence she has to go out with him, otherwise he threatens her to beat her, ruin her reputation, and wishes she would get salmonella and die; the chorus is "so you can learn not to say no" (H. Mohamed 2021b). The song was horrifying to the point where the Egyptian National Council for Women sent emails to Facebook, Google, and YouTube to remove it, when Younes came out in a video reiterating his utter respect for women and announcing that he will remove the song himself, claiming that it was misunderstood. Therefore, a critical analysis of Adel's case without at least mentioning her former husband's shameful public attitude towards women would be incomplete; in this case the perpetrator is echoing popular narratives about women and their right to consent, he admits

that he believes a woman does not have a right to say no (H. Mohamed 2021b). Objectively speaking, not every person who participates in destructive social narratives of marital rape is a rapist, but after the release of "Salmonella," the video of Adel's testimony did not come as a shock, when a person publicly deprives women of their right to consent, one does not get too surprised when this person is accused of raping his own wife.

3.2 Public debate and controversy over Adel's testimony

Between the support and abuse, a new light emerged for victims of marital rape in Egypt. According to BBC News (2021), public figures began supporting Adel through tweets, Facebook posts, and Instagram stories. Some TV presenters began advocating for her case and others in her position, stressing that marital rape is rape and should be treated as the crime it is. It is also important to highlight that calling for the criminalisation of marital rape is a particularly relevant response to Adel's video where she says that victims "can't complain and don't have a case because there is no [law] to protect me" (Bassel and Abdulaal 2021). It is worth noting that those who began to contest the popular narrative through the digital platforms and even on TV were the minority. Analysing this situation through the work of Kaplan et al. (2011, 1474), this could potentially mean that this support is not representative of the majority of Egyptians who do not belong to the same background and who deny wives any right to objection in marriage.

Some of the public figures whose names were mentioned amongst those who showed support were actually on the sidelines, such as Amr Adeeb who Bassel, and Abdulaal (2021) argues that he was supporting Adel. In the actual episode of his programme, Adeeb said various sentences that are too objective to say the least and at several points was doubtful of women's testimonies. For instance, Adeeb explicitly says that he will not show the video of Adel's testimony or her name or the name of her former husbands because he does not know whether this all happened or not and is unsure which side to believe (El Hekaya 2021). Moreover, Adeeb states that there must be a method for victims to report marital rape to the authorities and that social scientists and legislatures should study this problem; only to end his monologue by saying that a solution for this problem has to be done carefully because otherwise any woman can go to court and wrongfully accuse her husband of raping her without evidence (El Hekaya 2021). Pointing out the contradiction in Adeeb's words is necessary as this doubtful narrative is used by those condoning marital rape by simply saying there is no way of proving that it was rape. Abo El Komsan precisely tackled this point when talking to Bassel and Abdulaal (2021), she confirmed that "sexism encourages society to discount a wife's side of the story and believing that of her husband's." By bringing up false accusations and refusing to show the names or videos, Adeeb did exactly what Abo El Komsan highlighted as a sexist behaviour that discourages women from speaking up.

Unfortunately, Adel's video suddenly disappeared. This could be due to the backlash that her video encountered, threats from her previous husband, or pressure from her family; all of which are consequences that victims often face when reporting marital rape. After publishing her video, Adel turned her Instagram account to private instead of public and has since deactivated and reactivated her account several times. What is even more astonishing is that the videos that various initiatives and public figures posted to support Adel have also disappeared. And there is not even one shred of news covering this disappearance, it is only noticeable if a person is following the story. The only evidence that this video was actually published is the articles and TV programme episodes that are mentioned above. Bassel and Abdulaal (2021) did mention however that Noor El Gohary – an Egyptian lawyer – posted a video engaging with the public debate on Adel's case and asking lawmakers to change the law but the video was deleted, this is the only reported case of the support video being deleted. Due to the overall lack of transparency in the country, it is almost impossible to understand why or how those videos of both testimonies and support have disappeared. Nonetheless, it is evident that the victims are less likely to report marital rape because of the defamation and coercion that they are subjected to, and this is the main explanation for the disappearance of Adel's video.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the research aimed to explore the constructed narratives around marital rape in Egypt in light of the rise of the Egyptian #MeToo movement in 2020. As displayed above, the research found that there is a scarcity in academic research on marital rape in Egypt, although the few studies that are available on domestic violence in Egypt show that thousands of Egyptian women are subjected to marital rape every year. The primary source that was used throughout this essay was Kaplan et al. (2011), which provided a solid explanation to the types of violence and sexual coercion that Egyptian women face within their marriage. Although their research was more generic than the focus of this essay, it was pivotal to this essay's argument as a substitute to the gap in the literature on marital rape in specific.

In order to explore narratives of marital rape victims/survivors in Egypt, I focused on two scenes of marital rape in TV series, one in *The Kings of Chivalry* and the other in *Newton's Cradle* and the reaction towards them. Through this analysis, it became clear that normalisation of marital rape in social and religious discourse and the lack of regard for a woman's consent in the existence of a marriage contract can be one of the reasons why marital rape is still not considered a crime. The paradox can be seen in the absence of public reaction towards the first scene where marital rape does not have any consequences in the series, as opposed to the public outcry against the scene in *Newton's Cradle* which in a way was condemning marital rape.

The second is the Nada Adel case which stirred public opinion when she recorded a video recounting her experience with marital rape. By examining this case study, it was found that victims of marital rape are subjected through various types of pressure and coercion that prevents them from seeking help and/or legal action, especially in the absence of a law against marital rape. Hence, narratives do have an impact on the fate of sexual violence survivors and although change takes time, narratives of marital rapes are beginning to change in twenty-first century Egypt.

Consequently, the main recommendations with regards to this research's findings are as follows: firstly, publishing more academic research on the topic as it remains largely understudied. Secondly, increasing civil society initiatives that raise awareness on marital rape across all social classes and religious institutions. Thirdly, producing more films, documentaries and TV series that adopt a new narrative that condemns marital rape, because this is a method that has been used thus far to condone marital rape, so it is crucial to utilise it to change the narratives. And finally, working on strong advocacy campaigns to criminalise marital rape in the Egyptian constitution because the law should be the real deterrent against gender-based violence.

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