

*Sexual Violence in Algeria: A Daily Struggle or an Imaginary Threat?*

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For centuries, women around the world have fought the patriarchy in the hopes of changing societal norms that consider them as secondary to their male counterparts with little or no agency over their lives. As a result of the unethical reign of men over women, a prominent issue has risen: the increase of sexual violence worldwide. Although applicable to all genders and to many other Arab states, the focus of this paper will be on sexual violence against Algerian women. I have chosen this focus because of the gravity of this phenomenon for women in comparison to their male equivalents in the Algerian society. This paper will tackle the research question: how does gender play a role in perceiving sexual violence in Algeria? I argue that Algerian cis-gendered men have little or no tendency to perceive acts of sexual violence against women, while women consider their experiences of sexual violence a constant struggle—one that they must face on a daily basis.

Sexual violence “is defined as: any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work” (WHO, 2014). This definition includes acts such as sexual assault, sexual harassment, forced abortion, marital rape, human trafficking for sexual purposes, etc. In Algeria, sexual harassment and sexual violence are normalized in favor of the patriarchy and masculine societal norms. In other words, incidents of sexual violence, of which the victims are mostly women, tend to end in victim blaming instead of holding the harasser accountable. Nour, an Algerian woman, said that “sexual violence has become part of women’s experience in Algeria.” She added, “I am reminded on a daily basis that the public sphere does not belong to me. It is a male property. My existence in it is temporary, and thus, I should fight it.” Women like Nour experience sexual violence in both public and private spaces in Algeria. They believe it is crucial to fight it. Meanwhile, men like Mohammad, an Algerian man, believe that “the discourse around sexual violence is a western import” that was negatively amplified “by the so-called feminist agenda.” Hence, many men who do not experience sexual violence first-hand disregard the existence of such a phenomenon in their communities even when at the same time, the sexual harassment and violence against women increase drastically. Analyzing Mohammad’s response, and even untrue, it seems as though knowledgeably rehearsed to be a response to anyone who might question men’s justification of sexual violence against women.

In October 2020, a teenager from the Algiers suburbia was lured to an empty gas station by her ex-boyfriend, who had raped her in 2016 and sought revenge after being sentenced to prison for two years. The victim, Shaima, was kidnapped, beaten up, raped, and then set on fire. Afterwards, many people poured into the streets to show their support for Shaima and her family. Nevertheless, many other people on social media chose to blame the victim for the way she was dressing and for her unveiled hair instead of holding the rapist (and, in this case, also the killer) accountable. Even though the government has adjusted the constitutions to protect women’s rights, “it is doing the bare minimum,” Nour said. For example, “while a husband is legally obligated to provide for his children after a divorce [...] many men fail to fulfill this obligation,” because the government lacks the wherewithal to enforce these measures. (Freedom House, 2005) “In situations in which the court system works to address this problem,” the financial benefits are usually barely enough to meet women’s living expenses. (Freedom House, 2005)

In Arab countries like Algeria, marital rape still exists and is not prohibited nor considered abnormal. Mohammad believes that “no matter what happens within the household, matters should stay between the couple.” He added, “Women are supposed to listen to their husbands and if the men want to be satisfied sexually, where else would they go?” Such statements justify sexual violence against women and reproduce patriarchal norms in a manner that ensures the subordination of women in the Algerian society.

In the same way, sexual harassment, with the smallest example of catcalling in the Algerian streets, is normalized to the point where Algerian men feel entitled to get a response from the women that they approach. For example, some Algerian men gather in the Grande Poste square in Downtown Algiers and wait to catcall and approach women, at whom they scream and shout when rejected. On the one hand, Nour struggles daily with catcalling, even when she goes for a short walk to the supermarket. She says, “I feel disgusted when a man catcalls me. They would expect a reaction from me so that when they aggressively shout at me, it will be justified.” On the other hand, Mohammad considers it a game of “the survival of the fittest,” in which he catcalls and approaches women for the sake of satisfying his playful “animal instincts.” As a result, this game of the “survival of the fittest” exceeded fulfilling men’s desires to justify the voluntary killing of women just like in the case of Shaima.

As a response to Shaima’s tragic death and the government’s idle stand against sexual violence against women and femicides, the Association Des Actrices Algeriennes (Association of Algerian Actresses) released a controversial video on their social media titled “Algerian Actresses Against Femicides,” in which they recited phrases that are commonly said to women in a sarcastic and satirical manner such as, “your place is in the kitchen,” “what are you doing outside at this hour?” “don’t run, women are not supposed to run,” among others. The video attempted to challenge the status quo and to show that these phrases, which are frequently said to women from a very young age, are in fact very oppressive to them and their status in the society. After the release of this video, the Algerian public (and virtual) sphere was divided onto two unequal parts. The smaller part liked the video and believed that it is an important step towards reaching gender equality and ending sexual violence in Algeria. The larger part found this video to be offensive to the Algerian community and to its religious beliefs and traditional principles.

In some of the comments on this video, men were quick to judge, claiming that “these actresses do not represent the entirety of Algerian women.” One man accused them of “going against religion and how a Muslim woman should be and behave.” Surprisingly, even though many women found this video to be representative of their daily experiences, they still disagreed about women speaking up about this matter. One commenter put it succinctly, “Even though I do agree with you that we live in a patriarchal society, I strongly disagree with the fact that women should have an opinion especially in the public sphere, because her femininity would fade away.” Another woman said that the video spreads “false demonic propoganda that plays with women’s minds” and makes them demand their rights. These comments written by women stem from what is known as internalized misogyny, which “is a phenomenon in which individuals within a marginalized or discriminated group [in this case women] adopt externally impressed ideals to enforce upon

themselves or other members of their group” (David, 2014). Women in this case deploy the misogyny that is exercised on them onto other women, too.

Most comments focused on how the women were unveiled and accused them of “wanting to spread the Western agenda in a ‘Muslim’ country.” They claimed that women already have their rights and that they did not understand what was lacking in women’s rights, which is what Mohammad claims, too. For him, “Women already have rights,” and he does not “understand why feminists exist in Algeria.” He added, “what more rights do they want? Bouteflika [the former Algerian president] gave them all the rights.” When asked what kind of rights women had, Mohammad failed to answer. In contrast, Nour believes that women have no rights in Algeria. She said, “They always say women have rights, women have rights, but I have never felt like I did. I cannot go out whenever I want, wearing what I want, or say what I want. What kind of rights do I have?” Mohammad is one of many Algerian men who believe in the unfairness towards their ‘male’ rights and the threat to their masculinity and the stability of the society; a stability that prioritizes his needs as a man over any right of his female counterparts.

The subjects’ opinion about this visual art piece differed drastically. Reacting to the video, Nour said, “I feel this is a very important step towards ending femicides in Algeria because at least now, we are talking about them. Before that, people were afraid to mention anything that might destabilize the society’s peace – especially after the Black Decade in the 1990s. Everyone knows that women are being killed but nobody does anything.” Such a statement is due to the victim blaming that occurs in the society, in which they accuse the victim instead of considering or identifying the root of the problem, which is the inherently patriarchal nature of the Algerian society, and the Arab world at large. Contrarily, Mohammad said, “The video represents nothing of the Algerian reality. Yes, women are being killed but it is not a problem that is recurrent and the whole point of that video is to spread a Western feminist agenda that would shake the Algerian society with its conservative family values.” Thus, the fear of the dissemination of an *imaginary* Western agenda makes it hard for Algerian feminists to further any feminist agenda that they plan. In addition, this *imaginary* threat justifies most men’s descent towards feminists in general, and feminist reforms specifically.

Sexual violence is a very prominent issue in the Algerian public sphere but not one that is being tackled by the government. In the meantime, too many women have fallen victim to such a horrendous phenomenon, which not only victimizes them on a daily basis but also maintains both the patriarchal nature of the society and the masculine attitudes towards approaching the topic of women’s rights and feminism. As long as the issue is not tackled from its roots, through abolishing the patriarchy, the issue of sexual violence will continue to exist.

Works Cited

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