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Statement submitted by Liberal International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The Egyptian state increases its control over civil space by attacking women's rights.

Today, many authoritarian leaders, whether they are nationalist, religious, or just conservative, wage a war against women. By using so called "traditional values" or "family values" as an excuse, they limit the freedom of women and make them victims of violence.

Liberal International remains concerned by ongoing policy and tactics used by states to attack and marginalise women's organisations, feminist groups, and women human rights defenders. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis there is increased urgency in putting women and girls at the centre of recovery efforts. As the United Nations Secretary General said in April 2020, "Limited gains in gender equality and women's rights made over the decades are in danger of being rolled back due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We must push back against the push-back."

In Egypt, like elsewhere in the world, the rates of domestic violence have soared during the lockdowns introduced to manage the spread of the coronavirus. This has left women even more vulnerable, as they often have nowhere else to go. The spread of the virus has also resulted in difficulties to access shelters for victims of domestic abuse.

In Egypt women are put in prison for posting dance videos.

On April 23, 2020, the Egyptian government started targeting women using the social networking site TikTok. Cairo University student Haneen Hossam was arrested on charges of "threatening the values of the Egyptian family". Soon after, eight more women were arrested on similar charges.

According to the Egyptian authorities, a short video clip on the social networking site TikTok, in which a woman dances or sings, can be considered incriminating evidence that requires trial and punishment through restricted freedom. Nobody knows exactly what Egyptian family values have been violated by these nine women.

In Egypt women are put in prison for speaking out against sexual harassment.

In 2018, Amal Fathy had enough of the sexual harassment Egyptian women meet in everyday life. She posted a video on Facebook decrying sexual harassment and criticising the Egyptian authorities for failing to protect women. She was sentenced to two years in prison. Even though she is now released, she must report to the police station every two weeks, always running the risk of not being allowed to leave.

Another, more recent, example is the treatment of the witnesses of the Fairmont case. For six years, the witnesses did not dare to speak out about the cruel gang rape they saw, which was recorded on video. However, in 2020 some of them spoke up, and in August the prosecutor finally initiated an investigation. The witnesses are now being charged, not the rapists. Not only does the authoritarian regime choose to prosecute the witnesses, but they have also interrogated them in inhumane ways and are conducting a smear campaign against them.

The message from the Egyptian authorities are chilling: If you report sexual violence, you risk going to prison.

In Egypt it is legal to hit and rape your wife.

Being a woman in a country that has not yet passed a law to criminalise domestic violence means that you are at risk most of the time. Being a woman in Egypt, while not belonging to a privileged social class that can protect you, means that you are under constant suspicion.

In Egypt women human rights defenders are regarded as terrorists.

Female human rights defenders have different experiences and face specific challenges and violations compared to their male counterparts. Just like male human rights defenders, they are considered terrorists and charged under terrorist legislation. However, women human rights defenders are also victims of sexual violence and moral blackmail based on their gender identity. They face gendered threats, stereotypes, harassment, stigmatisation, and attacks, including gender-based violence from state and non-state actors, sometimes even from their families and peers.

Additionally, several women human rights defenders who have so far managed to stay out of prison are anyway restricted in their movements. We especially note the situation of Mozn Hassan (Nazra for Feminist Studies), Azza Soliman (Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance) and Hoda Abdelwahab (Arab Centre for Independence of Judges and the Legal Profession).

These women are all banned from travelling since more than six years, and some of them have also had their assets frozen. Together with the other defendants in case 173/2011, they have appealed to have their travel bans lifted, but in June 2020, courts rejected the appeal.

In Egypt women risk dying in prison.

Liberal International notes the continued detention of women human rights defenders Mahienour el Massry, Sanaa Seif, Esraa Abdelfattah, Solafa Magdy, and Hoda Abdelmoinem. We call on the Egyptian authorities to drop all charges against them and immediately release them from custody.

Egypt's prisons and detention facilities are often overcrowded, unsanitary, and suffer from a lack of resources. Detainees are routinely denied access to adequate medical care and treatment.

Liberal International shares the concerns of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights, who in April 2020 addressed the risk of rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus among the country's more than 114,000 inmates.

Liberal International calls:

on the Egyptian authorities to strengthen their work to achieve Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls), including limiting violence against women both in the public and private sphere;

on the Egyptian authorities to stop using "family values" as an excuse to put women in prison, and to release those who are detained because of their political and/or human rights work;

on the Egyptian authorities to release those convicted of non-violent offences and those who are in pre-trial detention, as demanded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, to reduce the risk of spreading the Covid-19 virus among inmates in crowded prisons;

on the Egyptian government to stop putting human rights defenders in prison, and to immediately release those unjustly imprisoned, including the women human rights defenders Mahienour el Massry, Sanaa Seif, Esraa Abdelfattah, Solafa Magdy, and Hoda Abdelmoinem;

on the Egyptian authorities to drop all charges under case 173/2011, including the travel bans against Mozn Hassan, Azza Soliman, and Hoda Abdelwahab;

on the Egyptian authorities to cease punishing and detaining victims and witnesses of harassment when they bravely speak out against abuse;

on the international community to condemn Egypt's unlawful imprisonment and harassment of human rights defenders;

on the international community to stop supporting Egypt's military financially, and to cease all weapons' export to the country.
