

## A Multidimensional View of Legal Cynicism: Perceptions of the Police Among Anti-harassment Teams in Egypt

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In Egypt in 2012, several anti-harassment groups were established to respond to an increase in sexual violence in public spaces and to the failure of the state to tackle the issue. Anti-harassment groups organized patrol-type intervention teams that operated during demonstrations or public celebrations to stop sexual assaults. This article examines how activists perceived the police in five anti-harassment groups between 2012 and 2014, and the role these perceptions played in groups' decisions about cooperating with the police, and on-the-ground strategies of action. I argue for a multidimensional view of legal cynicism that conceptualizes legal cynicism as composed of three dimensions: legitimacy (a sense that law enforcement agencies are not entitled to be deferred to and obeyed), protection (a perception that the law fails to protect rights and provide public safety), and threat (a perception that the law represents a threat). This approach helps uncover the various meanings that legal cynicism takes for different actors in different contexts, and how actors justify their strategies of action based on their specific perceptions of the police's legitimacy, protective role, and threat.

**I**n 2012 in Egypt, a year into the revolutionary wave that led to the downfall of Mubarak and ushered in a period of political instability, new activist groups were established to combat sexual violence against women in public spaces. Activists created “anti-harassment groups”<sup>1</sup> to respond to a stark increase in the frequency and severity of sexual violence in public spaces, and to the failure of the state to tackle the issue (El-Nadeem Center,

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<sup>1</sup> The groups worked on combating all types of sexual violence, from verbal harassment to physical assaults and rape. I use “anti-harassment groups” as a translation of the Arabic *majmū'at mukāfahat al taharush*, as this is the term that activists used to define their groups.

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Nazra, and New Woman Foundation 2013; Nazra 2012; Nazra et al. 2013). Anti-harassment groups organized intervention teams of 15–30 volunteers that were dispatched to Tahrir Square during large demonstrations and to downtown Cairo during public holidays to stop cases of sexual violence, and in particular mass sexual assaults by large groups of men (Boutros 2017; Hollemeyer Taylor et al. 2014; Langohr 2013; Zaki and Alhamid 2014). This article examines how activists in five anti-harassment groups perceived the police, how these perceptions changed depending on the context, and what role different perceptions of the police played in decisions about strategies of collective action.

Scholars define legal cynicism as “a cultural orientation in which the law and the agents of its enforcement, such as the police and courts, are viewed as illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill equipped to ensure public safety” (Kirk and Papachristos 2011: 1191). They argue that people who are “cynical about the law” are less likely to cooperate with the police and more likely to use violence to resolve conflicts (Carr et al. 2007; Kirk and Matsuda 2011; Kirk and Papachristos 2011). While most studies of legal cynicism have examined what behaviors are more prevalent in places where legal cynicism is widespread, we know little about how people who are cynical about the law choose between different possible strategies of action (Bell 2016).

To examine this question, I argue for a multidimensional view of legal cynicism that goes beyond asking whether people distrust law enforcement, and asks; what, about law enforcement, do people contest, and why. The findings suggest that there are three dimensions through which people view the police; legitimacy (a sense that law enforcement agencies are not entitled to be deferred to and obeyed), protection (a perception that the police fail to protect rights and provide public safety), and threat (a perception that the police represent a threat). A multidimensional view of legal cynicism helps reveal the various meanings that legal cynicism takes for different actors in different contexts, and how these meanings matter for strategies of action. Existing studies have mostly examined how legal cynicism shapes individual strategies of actions, but little attention has been given to strategies of collective action (Hagan et al. 2016). This article extends legal cynicism theory by examining how legal cynicism, in its various meanings, matters for social movement organizations.

Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with activists in five anti-harassment groups, the findings suggest that all groups shared a generalized distrust in the police, but they viewed the police’s legitimacy, protective role, and threat differently. Differences in these perceptions across groups and in different intervention contexts help explain why groups adopted

different policies regarding police cooperation. Further, the different intervention strategies that anti-harassment groups developed were influenced by their specific brand of legal cynicism; depending on which dimension of legal cynicism they emphasized (lack of legitimacy, failure to protect victims' rights, failure to maintain public order), anti-harassment groups elaborated different intervention approaches.

### **Theoretical Framework: A Multidimensional View of Legal Cynicism**

The concept of legal cynicism emerged in the late 1990s as part of a line of criminological research that sought to challenge subcultural theories of crime. Arguing against the idea that criminals have a higher tolerance of deviance than the law-abiding majority, scholars contended that people's feelings of injustice, or cynicism about the legal system, could explain violence (Hagan and Albonetti 1982; Matza 2010; Sampson and Bartusch 1998). Studies in American urban neighborhoods showed that distrust in the law and legal system—legal cynicism—is more prevalent among racial minorities and the poor, and in disadvantaged neighborhoods where people are more likely to have negative experiences with the police (Carr et al. 2007; Hagan and Albonetti 1982; Kirk and Papachristos 2011; Sampson and Bartusch 1998).

The most comprehensive conceptualization of legal cynicism was elaborated by Kirk and Papachristos, who define legal cynicism as “a cultural orientation in which the law and the agents of its enforcement, such as the police and courts, are viewed as illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill equipped to ensure public safety” (Kirk and Papachristos 2011: 1191). Building on sociological theories of culture (Lamont and Small 2008; Swidler 1986), they conceptualize legal cynicism as a cultural frame that filters people's perceptions of the law and constrains individuals' options for resolving conflicts (Kirk and Papachristos 2011: 1197). Thus, legal cynicism does not cause specific behaviors but rather makes them possible or likely.

A burgeoning scholarship attempts to understand the consequences of legal cynicism. This line of research has mostly focused on American urban neighborhoods and examined two consequences of legal cynicism: rates of violence and rates of cooperation with the police. Quantitative and qualitative studies show that people who are cynical about the law are less likely to involve the police when faced with a problem, preferring to resolve it by other means (Kirk and Matsuda 2011; Kirk and

Papachristos 2011; Slocum et al. 2010). One study found that higher rates of legal cynicism in a neighborhood were correlated with higher rates of homicide violence (Kirk and Papachristos 2011), suggesting that, where legal cynicism is prevalent, people are more likely to resolve conflicts by using violence.

Most studies of legal cynicism show correlations between legal cynicism and behavior within a specific neighborhood. However, we still know little about the process by which people who distrust the law make decisions about dealing with problems or about police cooperation. A recent study by Bell addresses this question. It seeks to explain why African American mothers who distrust the police may nevertheless sometimes rely on them (Bell 2016). The author argues that, “although distrust of the law—‘legal cynicism’—predominates among this population, alternative cultural orientations, or frames, emerge under particular circumstances, triggered by structural and situational dynamics” (Bell 2016: 316). For example, mothers may hold cynical views about the police as an institution but consider individual officers who they know as trustworthy; or they may see the police as effective for issues occurring in specific domains (inside or near the home) but not others (street crime). Bell calls for a situational approach to legal cynicism that examines how conceptions of the police and police reporting vary depending on contexts and events.

This article builds on Bell’s insights and examines variations in perceptions of the police among people who are cynical about the law. In addition to analyzing how perceptions vary depending on the situation, I analyze the various meanings that distrusting the police take for different actors. I argue that, to better understand actors’ distrust in the police and its consequences, we need to go beyond a binary view of legal cynicism—do people trust the police or not?—and examine the multiple dimensions through which people assess the police—what, about policing, do they contest, and why? An interpretive approach based on the observation of unfolding social processes, rather than on correlations and comparative statistics, helps uncover the variable processes that occur in similar situations (Joseph et al. 2007; Tilly 2006).

### **Toward a Multidimensional Concept of Legal Cynicism**

To study legal cynicism empirically, existing studies measure people’s perceptions about the law. Both quantitative and qualitative studies have operationalized legal cynicism in a way that lumps together perceptions about the law’s illegitimacy, unresponsiveness, and inability to provide public safety into one variable. Quantitative studies have used survey questions on each of those dimensions to create a unique measure of legal cynicism

(e.g., Hagan et al. 2016; Kirk and Papachristos 2011), and qualitative studies have relied on interviews to elicit narrative data on people's general dispositions toward the police (e.g., Bell 2016; Carr et al. 2007). Implicit in the way legal cynicism is measured in those studies, is an assumption that legal cynicism is a coherent frame in which illegitimacy, unresponsiveness, and inability to provide public safety, go together. Yet, the same studies suggest that legal cynicism may include internal contradictions. For example, people may hold cynical views of the law yet favor tougher law enforcement as a crime control solution (Carr et al. 2007), suggesting that a perception that the police are ineffective may coexist with a perception that they have a legitimate role to play in ensuring public safety. Or people might generally distrust the police, but consider that the police are responsive in some situations, or legitimate to intervene in specific domains (Bell 2016).

Thus, when people say they do not trust the police, they may mean different things. My research findings suggest that there are three dimensions that people consider when assessing the police: their legitimacy, their capacity and willingness to provide protection, and the threat they represent. Unpacking the dimensions of legal cynicism empirically helps gain a better understanding of decision-making processes among groups that distrust the police.

### *Legitimacy*

The meaning of legitimacy remains contested in sociology (Beetham 1991; Tankebe 2013; Tyler 2003), but the most commonly used definition in legal cynicism studies is Tyler's, which defines legitimacy as people's sense that authorities are entitled to be obeyed (Tyler 2003). "This feeling of obligation is not simply linked to the authority's possession of instruments of reward or coercion, but also to properties of the authority that lead people to feel it is entitled to be obeyed" (Sunshine and Tyler 2003: 514). In other words, people's perceptions of legitimacy do not stem purely from instrumental considerations, but also reflect a "normative, moral, or ethical feeling of responsibility to defer" (Sunshine and Tyler 2003: 514).

In existing studies of legal cynicism, empirical measures of perceptions of legitimacy rely on questions asking people whether they think the laws should be obeyed (Hagan et al. 2016; Kirk and Matsuda 2011; Kirk and Papachristos 2011; Sampson and Bartusch 1998). Yet, people may think that laws should be obeyed because they feel a normative obligation to defer to legal authorities, or because they fear sanction or feel powerless to resist existing authorities (Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tankebe

2013; Tyler 2003; Tyler and Fagan 2008). Measuring whether people think the laws should be obeyed may thus conflate perceptions of legitimacy with fear of authority. Therefore, I suggest distinguishing between perceptions about the legitimacy of the law, and perceptions about the threat of the law.

By “legitimacy,” I refer to a sense that law enforcement agencies are entitled to be deferred to and obeyed (Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tyler 2003). Perceptions about the law’s legitimacy are neither absolute nor binary. Rather, actors contingently assess the legitimacy of specific legal actors, on specific issues, at specific times and places.

### *Protection*

By “protection,” I refer to assessments of the extent to which laws and agents of their enforcement protect people’s rights and preserve public safety. Protection may be understood as the protection of people’s rights (right to life, liberty, safety) or the protection of public order. An assessment that the law fails to provide protection may stem from perceptions that the legal system is under-equipped to do so effectively (capacity), or from perceptions that there is no willingness on the part of the system or the individuals composing it to provide protection (willingness). Like legitimacy, perceptions of the law’s protective role are not binary but rather perceptions of degree, and they can change depending on the legal actors, the issue, and the time and place.

### *Threat*

The first two dimensions align with Kirk and Papachristos’ (2011) definition of legal cynicism. I add the dimension of threat to the concept of legal cynicism because distrust in the laws and legal institutions may stem not only from perceptions that the law fails to stand up to its promises of protection, but also that it represents a potential threat (e.g., Orloff et al. 1995; Salcido and Adelman 2004). This is especially true for social movement organizations, for which the law can be both a potential tool to protect people’s rights and a potential tool of repression (Earl 2011; McCann 2006; Merry 1985, 2014; Porta 2008; Rosenberg 1991; Scheingold 2004). There are different types of threat. One is the risk of being arrested, detained, charged, or convicted with criminal offenses. For social movement organizations, the threat may be that their members are arrested for their activism, or that the constituencies for which they are mobilizing are criminalized. Another type of threat is the risk that legal professionals would mistreat victims, suspects, or witnesses. Like the dimensions of

legitimacy and protection, assessments of the threat of the law are continuous and contingent upon the situation.

### **Legal Cynicism and Collective Action**

Scholars argue that legal cynicism is “augmented and solidified through communication and social interaction” (Kirk and Papachristos 2011: 1192). Yet, little analytical attention has been given to the strategies of collective action that may be driven by legal cynicism. A notable exception is a study by Hagan and his colleagues on the role of legal cynicism in the Sunni insurgency in Iraq (Hagan et al. 2016). They argue that the US invasion and the removal of Ba’athists from state employment undermined Sunni’s perceptions of the legitimacy of Iraqi state institutions, which led to an escalation of the Sunni insurgency. Their study thus suggests that legal cynicism can shape collective action. While Hagan et al.’s quantitative methods reveal correlations between legal cynicism and collective action, my qualitative approach aims to analyze *how* legal cynicism shapes collective action. To answer this question, insights from studies of social movements are helpful.

Social movement scholars argue that social movements produce negotiated shared meanings—collective action frames—that shape their strategies (Gamson 1992; Snow and Benford 1988). These frames are both diagnostic and action-oriented, that is, they are meanings through which social movements understand a problematic condition, attribute blame, and articulate a set of actions (Benford and Snow 2000). This suggests that, for social movement groups, legal cynicism involves the diagnosis of a problem (the failures of the law and their causes) and the development of solutions and plans of action (what should be done to remedy the failures of the law). This article analyzes how legal cynicism contributes to the development of social movement organizations’ vision for social change, and in particular their conceptions of what needs to be done to remedy the failures they attribute to the law.<sup>2</sup>

In sum, this article argues for conceptualizing legal cynicism as a multidimensional cultural frame, composed of three dimensions; perceptions about the legitimacy of the law, perceptions about the law’s protective role, and perceptions about the threat of the law. Examining legal cynicism as multidimensional and contingent means asking why and how much actors distrust the

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<sup>2</sup> I do not mean to imply that all social movements organizations are cynical about the law. The Egyptian anti-harassment groups’ actions were driven by their distrust in the law, but some organizations may believe that the problem is cultural rather than legal or political (for e.g., Kostiner 2003).

law, in specific situations. This approach helps uncover the various meanings that legal cynicism takes for different actors in different contexts and reveals how actors justify their strategies of action based on their specific perceptions of the police's legitimacy, protective role, and threat.

### **Policing Public Spaces in Egypt: Repressing Protest and Condoning Sexual Violence**

The police are central to the maintenance of authoritarian power in Egypt, and are notorious for their systematic use of torture, arbitrary arrest and detention (Amnesty International 2012; Human Rights Watch 2011, 2014). The police in Egypt control not only law and order issues; they also monitor and manage religious, political, economic, and cultural activities (El-Ghobashi 2011; Ismail 2015). One of the most visible roles played by the police is their management of public spaces, which includes managing religious or ritual celebrations, and policing political protest (Singerman 2011).

The 2011 revolutionary mobilization dealt a temporary blow to the police's power to manage public spaces. But after Mubarak was ousted in February 2011, and during the military and then the Muslim Brotherhood governments that followed, the police gradually reasserted their power over public spaces (Ismail 2015). By 2012, when the anti-harassment groups emerged, the police entered into regular clashes with protesters, killing and injuring hundreds (Amnesty International 2012). Yet, until the 2013 military coup, they also tolerated a certain level of political mobilization in public spaces. In particular, the police were not officially present in Tahrir Square during large demonstrations and let the protest organizers secure the square themselves. They only came in when they sought to disperse sit-ins (field observations).

At the same time as they actively policed political protest, the police remained consistent in their failure to provide protection to women against sexual violence (Amnesty International 2015). By 2012, more and more survivors were coming forward with stories of mass sexual assault, in which dozens of men attacked a woman, tore her clothes, touched her body and penetrated her with hands and objects (El-Nadeem Center, Nazra, and New Woman Foundation 2013; Nazra 2012). While this type of violence had been documented in Egypt since 2006, in particular during Eid celebrations, in 2012 they became increasingly visible (Zaki and Alhamid 2014). Feminist activists and human rights groups documented a rise in these assaults—activist groups documented up to 46 mass assaults in one day (Kingsley 2013; Nazra



et al. 2013); survivors' testimonies increasingly circulated on social media; and the mainstream media started covering survivors' stories (El-Nadeem Center, Nazra, and New Woman Foundation 2013). Yet, the police systematically failed to intervene either to protect women or to bring perpetrators to justice. In fact, the whole justice system turned a blind eye to the increasing frequency and violence of reported cases of sexual assault. Not only did law enforcement agencies fail to take action to prevent or investigate crimes of sexual violence, security officials (police and army) were also some of the main perpetrators of sexual violence. Human rights organizations documented a long list of instances in which security agents sexually assaulted female demonstrators (EIPR 2013), forced arrested female protesters to undergo virginity tests (EIPR 2012), or raped and sexually assaulted political prisoners (EIPR 2014a).

It is in this context that activists started establishing anti-harassment intervention teams. Activists did not trust the state's institutions, and in particular the police, to address the rising rates of sexual violence, and in fact many believed that the state was complicit in the surge in violent mass sexual assaults. They explained that their distrust in the law and law enforcement led them to take matters into their own hands. Anti-harassment groups established intervention teams that operated in Tahrir Square during large protests and in downtown Cairo during Eid celebrations. The teams, composed of 15–30 volunteers, mostly men, were posted in the streets and intervened in cases of sexual violence to stop sexual assaults. Depending on the group and the space of intervention, the interventions focused on rescuing victims from mass sexual assaults, or on deterring perpetrators (Boutros 2017).

On 3 July 2013, responding to massive popular mobilization, the military overthrew the elected Muslim Brotherhood government and engaged in a violent crackdown of opposition protests, killing hundreds and putting a brutal end to the massive mobilizations that had marked Egyptian streets since 2011 (ECESR 2013; EIPR 2014b). The police regained control of Tahrir Square and only allowed progovernment rallies to take place there. After the coup, while the anti-harassment groups continued operating during Eid, they stopped interventions in Tahrir Square during protests. The analysis therefore examines anti-harassment teams' work in Tahrir only until the coup of July 2013.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In June 2014, the government passed a new law on sexual harassment and launched a national campaign against street sexual harassment. How the law changed the anti-harassment groups' strategies is outside the scope of this article.

**Table 1.** Anti-harassment Groups' Characteristics

Group	Intervened during	Founders' background	Collective identity	Intervention teams
Imprint	Demonstrations & Eid	Limited previous activism	Apolitical	Men only
I Saw Harassment	Demonstrations & Eid	Feminist activists*	Feminist	Men and women
Harassing the Harassers	Eid	Revolutionary activists**	Revolutionary	Men and women***
Tahrir Bodyguards	Demonstrations	Limited previous activism	Apolitical	Men and women***
Opantish	Demonstrations	Feminist activists*	Feminist & Revolutionary	Men and women

\*Feminist activists are men and women who had been previously involved in feminist activist groups or NGOs.

\*\*Revolutionary activists are men and women who had been actively involved in the revolutionary mobilizations that started in 2011 against Mubarak's regime, and continued after his fall.

\*\*\*The groups started with men-only intervention teams, and after being criticized for it, allowed the inclusion of women.

## Methods and Data

The study relies on participant observation and in-depth interviews with activists of five anti-harassment groups: Tahrir Bodyguards, Imprint, I Saw Harassment, Operation Anti Sexual Harassment and Assault (Opantish), and Harassing the Harassers. All of these groups were established during the second half of 2012 to organize anti-harassment intervention teams during Eid in downtown Cairo and/or during demonstrations in Tahrir Square. Except for I Saw Harassment, which was the initiative of an NGO, the anti-harassment groups were volunteer-based and not formally structured as NGOs at the time of the research. Within each group, a small group of core members—between 5 and 20 depending on the group—made decisions about when, where, and how to intervene, and released a call for volunteers for each intervention day. Volunteers' numbers varied widely across time and could be anywhere between a dozen to more than a 100 per intervention day. Anti-harassment groups worked in cooperation with NGOs to refer victims of sexual violence to legal aid and psychological support services. While some of the anti-harassment groups engaged in other kinds of action (e.g., awareness-raising campaigns, documentation), my analysis is restricted to the tactic of intervention teams during the first 2 years of the groups' emergence (2012–2014). There were many debates and disagreements between group leaders about strategies and intervention tactics. Table 1 gives relevant descriptive data about each group (for more information about anti-harassment groups, see Langohr 2013; Tadros 2014).

In 2012, when the groups emerged, I had been working in Cairo as a human rights researcher, and until September 2013,

when I left Cairo, I observed the emergence of the anti-harassment groups and witnessed many of their debates about tactics. In 2014, I went back to Cairo for 2 months to conduct 34 in-depth interviews with activists involved in five groups. Twenty-nine respondents were current or former members of anti-harassment groups. I interviewed all of the founders of the five groups, as well as volunteers from the core group who had been involved in a sustained manner in each group (between four and eight interviews per group). Each interview lasted between 1 and 2 hours. Interviews were semi-structured; I started by asking them to narrate how they came to be involved in this work, and their experiences during interventions, then asked them more specific questions about their experiences, their groups' strategies, their interactions with the police or other legal professionals, their political and ideological identities and their visions for change. I also asked activists about the disagreements and debates among them, both within each anti-harassment group and across groups, as instances of disagreement within social movements bring to the fore meaning-making processes (Ghaziani 2008). In addition, I conducted seven interviews with representatives of three NGOs that support these groups (two respondents overlap: they are both employed by the NGO and volunteers in an anti-harassment group). The NGO representatives allowed me to corroborate the information I received from group members with information from outsiders who worked closely with them. They also helped provide more information about the policing and justice systems within which the groups operated. I coded the interview transcripts using Atlas.ti in two phases (thematic coding and analytical coding).

To recruit respondents, I started with my contacts within anti-harassment groups and NGOs, and then used snowball sampling to recruit other respondents, thus making use of the existing networks among the population studied. Because I was interested in understanding how groups made decisions about tactics, I aimed to reach those members who had been most involved in each anti-harassment group. Toward the end of the fieldwork, respondents mostly recommended that I talk to people I had already interviewed, which suggests that I had reached saturation.

The sample of respondents includes 13 women and 21 men. The gender imbalance is due to the fact that, within the anti-harassment groups, women were a minority. Nevertheless, I made sure I interviewed women in each of the groups (as long as the group included women). Respondents were aged 18–36; all but one was college educated; and all lived in middle-class or upper-middle class neighborhoods. The age and class characteristics of interviewees were also representative of the broader

composition of these groups. All the names of interviewees have been changed to safeguard their anonymity.

### **How Anti-harassment Groups Perceived the Police: The Three Dimensions of Legal Cynicism**

Existing studies conceptualize legal cynicism as a binary variable; people are deemed to either trust or distrust the law. This approach is helpful to test causal hypotheses, but it tells us little about what, about the law and law enforcement institutions, they distrust, and why. In this section, I argue that a multidimensional view of legal cynicism helps reveal the various meanings that legal cynicism can take for different actors in different situations. People may share a general distrust in the police but hold very different views about police legitimacy, their role in providing protection, and the threat they represent.

All members of Egyptian anti-harassment groups expressed distrust in the police to adequately deal with the surge in sexual violence assaults in public spaces. However, interviews revealed that their distrust in the police was not uniform. The way activists perceived the legitimacy of the police, the capacity and willingness of the police to provide protection, and the threat they represented varied between different anti-harassment groups. Groups' perceptions of each of those dimensions also varied depending on the context of their action; Tahrir square during demonstrations or downtown Cairo during Eid.

#### **Legitimacy**

When discussing the role of the police in addressing sexual violence, one issue that came up repeatedly was police legitimacy. While all interviewees agreed that, since the start of the revolution in 2011, the police had lost at least some legitimacy, especially when it came to policing protests, their assessments of the degree to which the police should be deferred to in dealing with sexual violence in public spaces varied. For some groups, the revolution meant that the police had lost all legitimacy and should no longer be considered to hold a monopoly over the use of legitimate violence and should not be deferred to for any issue. Other groups made the distinction between Tahrir square, where they deemed the police illegitimate, and other spaces, where they believed the police had a legitimate role to play in addressing sexual violence.

For example, the group *Harassing the Harassers* believed that the police had lost all legitimacy, not only in Tahrir but everywhere in Egypt. Amir explained that, since January 2011,

the police had lost its monopoly over the use of legitimate force and others were now legitimate in claiming the right to use violence in public spaces, as long as the violence was “just.” “The main key to me is that once the use of violence is not viewed as being legitimate, the monopoly on violence crumbles.” To activists in this group, the illegitimacy of the police extended to the issue of sexual violence in public spaces. The police, they argued, were complicit in the surge of sexual violence and could therefore not claim any legitimacy to combat it. Salah explained:

*This group comes out of the revolution; we know each other from the revolution. We are convinced that the police are sons of bitches, and that they will never change. The police are a cause in the appearance of the idea of harassment, and if they are not a reason in the appearance, at least they didn't combat it. One officer once told us in Eid, “just let the kids have some fun”. So we see that the police will never change, no matter what happens, they will not change, so I don't want to cooperate with them.*

Harassing the Harassers therefore believed that the police should not be deferred to when it came to dealing with sexual violence, and that activist groups that tackled the issue should take over this task without any kind of cooperation with the police.

At the other end of the spectrum were activists who believed that the police should still intervene to address sexual violence cases in public spaces. Imprint and I Saw Harassment viewed the police as doing a bad job at dealing with sexual violence, but they also believed that dealing with sexual violence should be the police's responsibility and that they should be pressured to improve. Farida described the mission of I Saw Harassment as follows: “I pressure the government to enact a law, I pressure the government to implement intervention tools, this is a pressure group to eradicate this phenomenon”. Youssef from Imprint explained: “The police are part of the solution. So are the judges who need to activate the law. I can't enforce the law alone, I have no authority”. To these groups, the police and justice system remained the legitimate authorities to deal with the problem of sexual violence, and the role of activists was to pressure the government to make the necessary reforms to adequately address this issue.

This did not mean that they believed police authority to be wholly legitimate. In particular, many expressed feeling uneasy dealing with an institution that was known for its violent repression of protests. However, these activists distinguished between the role of the police in repressing demonstrations, and the role

of the police in providing protection to women against sexual violence. For example, Hani from Imprint said:

*We have our reservations of course, but I want a solution, so I must find a solution. This solution has different aspects, one of which is the state. I have to work with them, whether I like it or not. Even if all of them [police] killed people there [during protests], this doesn't mean they can't do something right over here [in relation to sexual violence]. We learned that this issue [the killings] is a lost battle, but that issue [sexual violence] is a battle that is just starting. So why would I make him my enemy in something where he could be an ally?*

Even though they viewed the police as legitimate to deal with the issue of sexual violence in regular spaces, these same groups viewed Tahrir as an exceptional space in which the police had lost all legitimacy. All anti-harassment groups that intervened during demonstrations believed that in Tahrir square, the police had no authority. Shereen, from Tahrir Bodyguards, explained: "They were not even in Tahrir. They were not part of our planning. We can't forget that [the revolution on] January 25 happened on National Police Day because of police brutality; and they harass women big time." During large demonstrations, civilians, not the police, were the ones organizing security inside the square via informal security committees. Abdallah from Opanish put it this way: "[In Tahrir], we are the government, we are the ones playing this role." Thus, for Tahrir interventions, all anti-harassment groups agreed that the police had no legitimacy to intervene in that space, including when it came to dealing with sexual violence incidents.

### **Protection**

During interviews, activists also talked about the failure of the state in general, and the police in particular, to provide adequate protection to women in public spaces. While all anti-harassment groups agreed that the police did not provide women with protection from sexual violence, they held different views about the causes of this failure. Some blamed the police's lack of willingness to address the issue; others emphasized their lack of training and equipment.

In downtown Cairo during Eid, where policemen were present in the streets, anti-harassment groups developed different understandings of the causes of the police's failure to protect women. Volunteers in I Saw Harassment and Harassing the Harassers believed that the police were unwilling to protect women from sexual violence. Many recounted hearing policemen

justifying sexual violence by normalizing the behavior of the perpetrators and blaming the victims. For example, Sherif from Harassing the Harassers explained that, while intervention teams were actively stopping cases of sexual violence, policemen on the streets were “just sitting on their chairs sipping tea.” When the volunteers tried to get them to take action, volunteers told me, the policemen responded that the women “were asking for it.”

Rather than emphasizing the police’s unwillingness to address sexual violence, volunteers at Imprint tended to argue that the police were poorly trained and under-equipped to deal with cases of sexual violence. For example, Sarah from Imprint told me that her first experience trying to combat sexual violence was in the Cairo metro with a couple of friends. The metro police chief called them into his office and told them to leave because “there is no harassment.” But when they engaged in a conversation with the metro police officer, they realized that his inaction might be due to his working conditions:

*One thing he [the policeman] told us, a very basic thing, is that his salary is very low. Secondly, he doesn't have health insurance, so if he tries to intervene and something happens to him, he will have to stay home. And it happened to one of them, after getting attacked by someone at the ticket office, he was injured in the arm and had to stay for a whole month at home. And he has kids, so he said, that's it, I won't intervene.*

For activists at Imprint, the police’s failure to combat sexual violence stemmed, at least in part, from their poor working conditions rather than solely from an unwillingness to help.

Thus, while some activists interpreted the police’s failure to protect women as the result of intentional neglect, others emphasized that policemen’s working conditions made it difficult for them to take action. The same activists sometimes expressed both perceptions that the police as an institution were unwilling to protect women, and that individual police officers, even when well-intentioned, were under-equipped to deal with sexual violence adequately. For example, Farida from I Saw Harassment believed that the police and prosecuting authorities were unwilling to help victims of sexual violence, but she also told me about a well-intentioned police officer her group encountered, who, despite his good intentions, could not help the victim for lack of equipment:

*A police officer came to us and said: “Please give us an electric taser, we don't have anything to work with”. It was a harassment case in front of the cinema, and we are trying to disperse it, and the police*

*are trying to disperse it too, but they don't know how to do it. They're not trained on how to do this, they have no idea how to make way to get in and get her. Suddenly, the officer asked Karim for his electric, so Karim gave it to him. They don't have tools. Neither are they qualified physically. They don't know what to do.*

Like her, many other activists I interviewed believed that, while the institution as a whole was unwilling to address the issue of sexual violence, some individual officers wanted to intervene to stop those assaults but were under-equipped to do so effectively.

In Tahrir during protests, police absence meant that the police did not intervene to deal with internal security issues and did not provide any protection in the square, including protection against sexual violence. Even on the rare occasions when the violence was so bad that some activists sought the help of the police, the police refused to enter the square or intervene. For example, Mahmoud from Opatish explained that, after trying to intervene in several particularly violent mass sexual assaults in Tahrir Square on 30 July 2013, he passed by a police checkpoint close to the square.

*We went in and told them, 'This is what's happening in the square. What are you doing standing here?' The police were standing on the other side of Kasr el Nil bridge. The officer simply told us: 'Go to the station and file a complaint'. Are you serious? What complaint? You have left us! What are you doing? You are standing outside of the square and the whole square is left alone. What are you doing? Nothing?*

Thus, all groups reached the same assessment; in the self-policed space of Tahrir, the absence of the police meant that they provided no protection from sexual violence. Considerations of willingness or capacity did not come up.

### **Threat**

When discussing the police, another recurrent theme was the threat that the police represented. Anti-harassment groups' perceptions about the threat of the police differed depending of the space in which they intervened; in Tahrir the threat of the police was low and distant due to the absence of the police in that space; during Eid interventions it was high. Different groups also emphasized different types of threat, to activists, victims, and perpetrators.

In downtown Cairo during Eid, all anti-harassment groups considered that their members faced the risk of arrest for their



participation in intervention teams. They were aware that, by organizing teams of civilians that took it upon themselves to intervene in cases of sexual violence, they were challenging the power of the police in public spaces, and that the police would have no difficulties finding an excuse to arrest them. Indeed, on the first interventions, those that had not sought prior permission from the police got arrested, taken to the police station, and threatened with a charge. All the groups operating downtown therefore knew that their volunteers could potentially be arrested. However, they had different perceptions of the severity and resilience of the threat. *Imprint* and *I Saw Harassment* both believed that cooperating with the police significantly reduced the threat of arrest, while *Harassing the Harassers* thought that even if they cooperated with the police, the threat of arrest remained strong (more on this point in the next section).

Many activists also considered another type of threat of the law; the risk that offenders or victims would get mistreated by the criminal justice system. They feared that police and prosecutors would mistreat victims of sexual violence as they were seeking justice, by refusing to register their complaint, or treating them in a humiliating way. And they worried that harassers would get tortured or beaten in the police station. When developing strategies of action, they also took into account this threat.

During *Tahrir* interventions before the coup, the absence of the police meant that activists did not perceive an immediate risk of arrest for their volunteers. The risk of getting arrested or charged with a crime, in a space where the police refused to intervene, was low and distant, and interviewees rarely mentioned it.

### **The Multidimensional Nature of Legal Cynicism**

The findings show that, when talking about the police, activists consider several dimensions: they evaluate the legitimacy of the police, for specific issues at specific times and places; they assess the protective role of the police, and the causes of a deficit in protection; and they discuss the various threats that the police represent, in different spaces. Behind a shared distrust in the police, interview data show that groups disagreed over issues such as; to what extent should the police be deferred to, to deal with sexual violence in specific spaces? Are the police failing to provide protection because they are absent from the public space, because they are unwilling to, or because they are under-equipped? What kinds of threats do the police represent, and how strong are they in specific spaces?

The multidimensional view of legal cynicism uncovers the range of meanings that legal cynicism can take. People may distrust the police because they are deemed unwilling to provide protection, because they are seen as under-equipped and poorly trained, because they are perceived as illegitimate, because they are viewed as a threat, or because of a combination of those reasons. Moreover, these perceptions change depending on the situation. These distinctions are important because actors justify their strategies of action based on their specific perceptions of the police's legitimacy, protective role, and threat. The next sections examine how different dimensions of legal cynicism matter when activists make decisions about cooperating with the police and elaborate approaches for on-the-ground collective action.

### **Legal Cynicism and Cooperation with the Police**

Studies of legal cynicism and confidence in justice have examined how trust in the police—or lack thereof—impacts rates of cooperation with the police. A common argument is that people who are cynical about the law are less likely to cooperate with the police (Kirk and Matsuda 2011; Slocum et al 2010; Tyler 2003). This does not mean that people who are cynical about the law never cooperate with the police (Bell 2016). In this section, I examine the decision-making process of anti-harassment activists when deciding whether and when to cooperate with the police. The findings suggest that without examining activists' specific perceptions of the police's legitimacy, protective role, and threat, one cannot adequately understand why, despite sharing a common perception that the police fail to protect women from sexual violence, some groups cooperated with the police but not others, why the same groups cooperated in some spaces but not others, and why some groups cooperated for certain issues but not others.

In the context of mobilization and collective action, cooperation with the police can take various forms. Existing studies often examine cooperation in terms of calling the police when witnessing a crime or cooperating during criminal investigations (Kirk and Matsuda 2011; Slocum et al. 2010). For social movement actors, another common form of cooperation with the police is seeking authorizations to organize collective actions in public spaces. For Egyptian anti-harassment groups, the issue of cooperation with the police included both the question of seeking authorizations prior to interventions and the question of cooperating with the police to help fight crime (e.g., helping victims file complaints, handing over harassers to the police).

### Seeking Authorizations from the Police Before Interventions

In Tahrir, the question of seeking prior authorizations was not an issue the groups considered; it did not make sense to seek an authorization from the police to organize actions within the police-free revolutionary space. By contrast, during Eid intervention, anti-harassment groups operated in spaces where the police were present, and interactions between anti-harassment groups and the police were inevitable. The question of seeking police authorizations prior to interventions was widely debated among the groups. Activists discussed whether seeking authorizations would protect them from arrest, and whether such authorizations would contribute to legitimating the police's authority.

Two groups—Imprint and I Saw Harassment—decided to seek authorizations in order to protect their volunteers from arrest. Hani from Imprint explained that whoever held power in the place in which they were operating could hurt them, and that keeping the police on their side was essential for the group to minimize the risks their members faced. He said: “I learned from the first intervention in Tahrir that [to protect my members] I need to coordinate with the authority in the place. The authority in the place could be the formal authorities [during Eid], or normal people [in Tahrir during demonstrations].” Youssef from Imprint further explained that they ran the risk of arrest if they went to the police station to hand over a harasser without having prior contacts with the police. “The harasser will say I assaulted him, or that I stole something from him. If there is no victim [present], then it's his word against mine. Previous coordination with the police makes a big difference, because they know us and they know what we do.” Similarly, founders of I Saw Harassment explained that cooperation was important to avoid arrest, and because the activists sometimes needed allies within the police force to help with individual cases, for example, to ensure that a victim of sexual harassment would not be mistreated at the police station.

Leaders of both groups believed that building a relationship with the local officers, as well as with the ministry's hierarchy, was key in protecting their team members from the risk of arrest or street confrontations with the police. Both groups adopted a method of two-level cooperation with the police. Before each intervention day, they would get permission from the Ministry of Interior to operate in specific streets. Moreover, the groups made contacts at the level of the local police station, to ensure that the policemen on duty know them. Their experiences confirmed that this strategy protected their volunteers from arrest; both groups reported that none of their members had ever been arrested

during an intervention.<sup>4</sup> Volunteers of I Saw Harassment recounted one story in which a policeman stopped a volunteer for carrying a stick. The volunteer was not arrested, however, since the group leaders told the officer that they were in touch with high officials of the Ministry of Interior, who had given them authorizations, and that an arrest would reflect badly on him.

Harassing the Harassers, on the other hand, refused to seek authorizations from the police before intervening, and justified this refusal based on their claim on the illegitimacy of the police. As Amir explained, “my main disagreement to deal with the police [is that] everything has to happen through them, but they’re not legitimate to start with.” He explained that the police attempt to pressure anti-harassment groups to cooperate with them, but “it’s not going to help because they’re abusing their authority.” In other words, they believed that cooperation would legitimate the police, and they refused to contribute to legitimating what they deemed an illegitimate institution. Harassing the Harassers were aware that refusing to seek authorizations increased the risk of arrest for their volunteers, but they refused to compromise on their principle of non-cooperation with an illegitimate authority. Moreover, they believed that the police could not be trusted to refrain from arresting activists, even if there was prior cooperation. As Salah explained, “[cooperation] is not a protection for me, he could come at me at any time, if he gets orders to arrest me, even if he had coordinated with me, he will arrest me.” Members of their intervention teams got routinely arrested, and they reported that between two and five members ended up at the police station every time they intervened. They spent significant time, resources, and personal connections with journalists and activist lawyers, to secure their release without charge every time.<sup>5</sup>

In sum, when anti-harassment groups explained their decisions about police authorizations, they relied on their perceptions of the legitimacy and threat of the police. In Tahrir, where the police were deemed illegitimate and where the threat they represented was low, the question of seeking authorizations was barely considered. However, during Eid interventions, where activists

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of the interview in the summer of 2014.

<sup>5</sup> At the time of the interviews. Data on the arrest of anti-harassment volunteers stem from my interviews with activists and from social media content analysis. I do not have data on the police rationale for conducting these arrests. However, it was relatively easy, during Eid, for the police to distinguish between groups, since those that cooperated were in contact with the local police officers, and groups wore different outfits that made it easy to distinguish them.

faced the threat of arrest and where police presence rendered the question of police legitimacy salient, the issue of authorizations was widely discussed. Some groups emphasized the threat of the police and sought prior authorizations as a strategy to protect volunteers from arrest. Another group emphasized the illegitimacy of the police and refused, as a matter of principle, all forms of cooperation with the police, even when it meant taking the risk of arrest.

### **Cooperating During the Criminal Justice Process**

One of the most debated issues within anti-harassment groups was whether they should hand over harassers to the police and/or help victims file complaints at police stations. To agree on a policy, groups discussed whether cooperating with the police during the criminal justice process would increase protection from sexual violence, and how the perpetrator, the victim, and the activist, would likely get treated at the police station.

A common concern was what would happen to the offender, in a country where sexual violence in public spaces was normalized and offenders often went free,<sup>6</sup> but where police stations were also known for their systematic torture practices. As Hussein from Opatish argued; “we don’t trust the police, we know that if we hand over perpetrators to the police they will either not bring them to justice or they will torture them. In both cases, that’s not what we want.” Further, activists feared that they themselves might get in trouble with the law if they handed over harassers to the police. Mohamed from Tahrir Bodyguards told me about an instance where an anti-harassment group had handed over a harasser to the police:

*The police arrested the activists and let go of the harasser. They told them, ‘This is not your job. What is your evidence? Why are you giving yourselves the power of arrest?’. And I think the police are right, if anyone can go and give themselves the power of arrest and say ‘this is a harasser’, it won’t work.*

In Tahrir during demonstrations, there were initially disagreements over the question of handing over harassers. However, the high levels of violence in the square and the very dense crowds made it difficult to identify the perpetrators and to hold

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<sup>6</sup> At the time of the interviews, a new law criminalizing sexual harassment for the first time had just passed, and the government was launching a national anti-harassment campaign. It was too early for the activists to say whether the new law would change policing and prosecutorial practices. The quotes in this section refer to their considerations before they could gauge whether the new law changed practices.

on to them all the way to the nearest police station, and all groups eventually dropped the idea (Boutros 2017).

In downtown, where it was sometimes physically possible to hold on to the harassers, groups adopted different strategies. I Saw Harassment decided not to hand over harassers to the police, despite the fact that they cooperated with the police to seek authorizations. They reasoned that handing over harassers would either result in the police releasing them or torturing them (or both). Karim said:

*We did it [handing over a harasser] once or twice but it was not effective. Because there is no law. We took them to the police, the harasser would get a beating. Of course you don't supervise the torture at the police station but this what usually happens. Or he would go to the prosecution and the prosecutor would take his side. Plus, it was impossible to get the woman to agree to file a complaint. If I take him without a complaint from the girl, I'm taking him to someone who has an excess of power to take out on him, but that's it.*

Thus, for this group, handing over harassers was not useful because it would not help improve the police's protective role toward women, and it would increase the risk of torture.

Harassing the Harassers, like I Saw Harassment, believed that handing over harassers to the police was useless. Sherif, one of the group's leaders explained that on their first intervention, some volunteers insisted that they should deal with the police:

*So I decided not to insist on my opinion and go with the opinion of the majority. We caught the first case, the second case, the third case, and we handed them over to the police. Then we discovered that the police let them go. When we went to talk to them, they told us 'you are giving us a headache, leave them alone, anyway the girls came here for this'. It was not a shock to me but a lot of people were shocked that the police did this. So I told them, see, the police won't do anything, so now we will work without them.*

To leaders of Harassing the Harassers, the police intentionally refused to intervene to protect women from sexual violence and willingly let go of the perpetrators. Since they deemed the police unwilling to prosecute offenders and protect victims, they assessed that handing over harassers to them would be a waste of time.

By contrast, Imprint handed over harassers to the police whenever they could. Leaders of this group explained that the police should be dealing with sexual violence, and that by handing over harassers to them, the activists were seeking to activate the police's role. They made an agreement with the police that they would hand over the harassers they catch. Hani explained:

“The arrangement with the police was that I will bring you someone, and we will testify. I know he will be let go of once he goes there, but just do what you need to do. And this is what happened. Anyone that went to the police station stayed for one night and was let go of.” Activists at Imprint explained that, while not ideal, this arrangement was “better than nothing” and it meant that at least there was some reaction from the authorities against harassers, which would be a deterrent. In the absence of an effective enforcement tool, they argued, “let’s activate what’s already there.” Because this group tended to emphasize the police’s lack of capacity to deal adequately with sexual violence, and because they wanted to reinforce this capacity, they believed that handing over harassers was a step in the right direction.

In addition to the question of handing over harassers, some groups, especially those that focused on supporting victims, considered whether they should encourage and help victims file complaints at the police station. Out of experience, they did not believe that victim complaints would result in prosecutions; and they feared that victims would get mistreated at the police station if they went alone. They knew that women who went to file complaints for sexual violence were often pressured into dropping the complaint and humiliated by police officers. Therefore, they decided that they would not try to encourage victims to file complaints, because it did not help improve protection against sexual violence, but for victims that wanted to, volunteers or lawyers would accompany them in order to ensure they do not get mistreated at the police station.

In sum, when it came to deciding whether and how to cooperate in reporting crime, activists considered whether cooperating in the criminal process was likely to improve the protection of women in public spaces. Most groups believed that handing over a harasser to be beaten up and then released did not improve protection for women, except one group that argued that it was a deterrent. Moreover, groups considered the threat of the police to offenders and victims. Some activists distinguished between cooperating to help the police catch offenders and cooperating to help victims file complaints; their concerns about the threat to offenders (risk of beatings or torture) discouraged some to hand over harassers, but their concern that the victim might be mistreated at the police station encouraged them to accompany victims wishing to file complaints.

### **Dimensions of Legal Cynicism and Police Cooperation**

The data show that, when considering whether and when to cooperate with the police, anti-harassment groups relied on their

perceptions of the legitimacy, protective role, and threat of the police, and they considered the impact cooperation would have on police actions. Although the present case study does not allow me to make generalizations about the causal effect of various dimensions of legal cynicism on decisions to cooperate, it shows that these decisions are based on groups' considerations of specific dimensions of legal cynicism, rather than on a binary trust/distrust logic. Moreover, the findings suggest that different dimensions of legal cynicism matter differently for different kinds of cooperation with the police. When cooperation involved building an ongoing official relationship with law enforcement agencies, activists were more attentive to the issue of legitimacy; activists who did not recognize the police as legitimate refused, on principle, to seek authorizations and cooperate with local officers; and activists who built cooperative relations with the police only did so in the spaces in which they believed the police held some legitimacy to deal with sexual violence. When it came to reporting a crime to the authorities, activists' considerations focused more on the protective potential of such cooperation, and less on considerations of legitimacy; an important consideration when deciding whether or not to hand over harassers was whether it would increase protection from sexual violence. Considerations about the threat of the police, to activists, victims and offenders, played an important role in discussions about both kinds of cooperation; cooperation and non-cooperation were, depending on the context, seen as strategies to mitigate the risks on social movement actors and their constituencies.

### **Legal Cynicism and Collective Action Strategies**

The existing scholarship often examines legal cynicism as a cultural frame that constrains possibilities of action. For example, previous research found that legal cynicism leads people to avoid relying on the legal system to resolve grievances (Kirk and Matsuda 2011; Kirk and Papachristos 2011). This section examines how legal cynicism can also produce visions for new possibilities of action. I argue that, while all anti-harassment groups shared a cynical view of the law, different groups emphasized different aspects of the failures they attributed to the police and justice system, on the basis of which they elaborated a different vision of what needs to be done to make up for these failures. Some groups emphasized the police's lack of legitimacy, others the police's failure to protect. How salient each dimension of legal cynicism was for a group at a specific time and place, shaped the form that their interventions took on the ground. For purposes



**Table 2.** Legal Cynicism and Collective Action Tactics

Groups	Salient dimension of legal cynicism	Intervention team approach
Harassing the Harassers	Illegitimacy	Citizens police public spaces
Opantish	Lack of protection of victim's rights	Victim-centered
Imprint	Lack of protection as order-maintenance	Order maintenance

of clarity, this section analyzes a subset of my sample: I analyze three groups that exemplify the three main types of strategies I encountered; Harassing the Harassers, Imprint, and Opantish (see Table 2).

### Emphasizing the Illegitimacy of the Police: Creating Alternative Civilian Policing Models

Harassing the Harassers emphasized, in their critique of the legal system, the illegitimacy of the law to deal with sexual violence. This group was started at the initiative of young men who had been heavily involved in the revolutionary mobilizations of 2011; they had participated in protests and sit-ins in Tahrir and had been at the frontlines of clashes with the police. A central aspect of their collective identity was an anti-police stance. To them, the police had no legitimate role to play to prevent or intervene in cases of sexual violence because they were part of a system that encouraged these crimes, provided immunity for perpetrators, and because policemen were some of the main perpetrators of sexual violence.

Leaders of this group described their goals as twofold. “We work to create a custom in society, that people confront sexual harassment [by themselves], and to expose the state that is not doing its job” (Sherif). They sought to create a separate policing mechanism that would rely on ordinary people standing up against sexual violence in public spaces. Their men-only teams<sup>7</sup> displayed a threatening attitude in the street that was meant to deter potential perpetrators and encourage other men to stand up against sexual violence. Their deterrence strategy relied on publicly shaming perpetrators in the street. Sherif explained their tactics thus:

*[We] catch the harasser and spray on his back ‘I’m a harasser’. The idea came because I heard that in the old days, they would catch*

<sup>7</sup> Only in 2014, after much criticism from feminist groups, did Harassing the Harassers include women in their intervention teams, but there were only two per team and they were confined to specific tasks like spraying the harassers.

*harassers and shave their hair. So I tried to take on this idea. Since there is no law and no state that protects from this, then at least it can go back to being something that is [policed] by the people.*

They also believed that violence was needed to deter potential harassers. For example, Salah told me: “I am one of those who believe that harassment can only be dealt with violence. I can’t pat him on the back and tell him ‘don’t harass anymore darling’.” Thus, while they rejected the police, they adopted methods of violence and intimidation common in the Egyptian police’s repertoire of action. The main difference, they argued, was that their interventions were led by laymen whose legitimacy derived precisely from the fact that they were not policemen and acted with “just” goals. Thus, the group’s strategy challenged the police’s claim to a monopoly over the use of legitimate force in public spaces. This led to regular confrontations with the police. Activists from this group told me about numerous incidents where their volunteers and policemen got into verbal or physical confrontations, and every time they intervened some of their volunteers got arrested and taken to the police station. They spent a significant amount of energy trying to get people out of police stations without a charge, which they managed to do using personal connections and social media pressure.

### **Emphasizing Lack of Protection of Victims’ Rights: A Victim Centered Approach**

Opantish, a group that identified as feminist, explained why they distrusted the legal system by emphasizing the failure of the laws and law enforcement to provide victims of sexual violence with adequate protection. For them, sexual violence was the symptom of a larger problem, namely a patriarchal system that marginalized women and limited their access to public spaces and political participation. They viewed law enforcement as being at the core of this patriarchal system, because the police failed to protect women from sexual violence, policemen were some of the most common perpetrators of sexual violence, and even when they intervened, they focused on catching perpetrators but neglected the victims’ needs. In other words, their legal cynicism emphasized their assessment of the failure of the police to protect victims’ rights. As a consequence, they elaborated strategies that prioritized addressing the needs of victims of sexual violence.

Their on-the-ground tactics were constructed based on the experiences of some of their female volunteers who were

survivors of mass sexual assaults. For example, Ingie told me, after recounting the mass sexual assault she survived in Tahrir:

*Because I was lucky to have someone with me [as I was assaulted], I felt that if at least I can reach the woman who is inside, to make her feel that there is someone, that she is not alone, at least I will have done something. It will not be enough at all, but you will have reduced the harm a little bit, prevented harm. Plus, I saw that if it's not women who confront something like that, with our own bodies, we will have been defeated.*

Opantish developed intervention tactics that were aimed at reducing the harm suffered by victims of sexual violence. They did this by placing the priority on bringing victims to safety as fast as possible, even if this meant less effort was spent on catching perpetrators. Prioritizing the victim also meant that they trained intervention team members in how not to increase the trauma of the victims as they rescued them. Opantish sought to ensure that only female volunteers would touch the victim of the assault as the teams were rescuing her; their interventions attempted to make a circle around the victim to give her enough breathing space; and one volunteer carried a “safety bag” in which they kept extra clothes, slippers, and first aid for the victim. Furthermore, they ensured that victims would receive the care they needed after getting out of the assault, by offering to accompany them to hospital, to drive them somewhere safe, and by providing contacts with NGOs that provided psychological support to survivors of sexual violence.<sup>8</sup>

While everyone at Opantish agreed that the victim should be their priority, they disagreed over whether they should also try to “catch” the perpetrators. After many discussions, they reached the conclusion that their intervention teams would not deal with the perpetrators. They reasoned that if the intervention teams prioritized their efforts on the victim and her needs, they had no capacity to also try to deal with the perpetrator. For example, Tarek said: “Believe me, if we had the capacity to have intervention teams with 50 volunteers not 25, the we could be concerned with catching the perpetrators... But what counts for me is the girl.” The volunteers were also concerned that using violence against perpetrators might put them at risk of even more violence, which would end up distracting them from the goal of

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<sup>8</sup> Opantish were the ones championing a victim-centered approach to interventions, and other groups ended up adopting some of the strategies they advocated for (safety bag, NGO referrals) for Tahrir interventions where assaults were more violent.

rescuing victims. Their strategy was to focus on what the criminal justice system, in their view, failed to do—supporting victims.

### **Emphasizing Deficient Public Order Maintenance—Organizing Police-like Units**

Leaders of Imprint talked about the shortcomings of the police by emphasizing the failure to effectively maintain public order. When I asked about the goals of the intervention teams, Ahmed from Imprint replied: “I’m trying to impose order in a place in which the government of my country is not managing to impose order; or is not managing to impose order in the form that we want.” In other words, their legal cynicism emphasized law enforcement’s failure to protect, but in the sense of maintaining public order, rather than in the sense of addressing victims’ needs. As a result, their goals were to develop better order maintenance and deterrence strategies.

Their intervention tactics sought to impose their authority on the streets and squares, by training their volunteers to maintain a quasimilitary discipline that would deter potential perpetrators. Hani from Imprint described their intervention teams as purely military, “it’s a battalion,” he said half-jokingly. Depending on whether the interventions were in Tahrir or downtown during Eid, volunteers had strict instructions about how to behave. Further, the teams had to strictly follow orders from the team leader, and the team leaders adopted a harsh attitude toward any deviation from the rules. For example, Hani, one of the team leaders, told me:

*We have a very strict presence, [team members] don’t talk at all with anyone. Even among us, the communication is through gestures. We don’t shout, we don’t run, no matter what... And they only move when I say they move. If I want to turn right, the whole formation comes behind me this way. This is part of the influence you make in this space, it has no other purpose. It was very strict. If someone looks to the right [against the instruction that everyone should keep their gaze straight ahead], and I see him, I can kick him out, and I would shout at them and insult them. I apologize for years afterwards, I’m not like this at all, but we need to act like this.*

The team’s appearance was also meant to convey the image of an authority that one should not mess with. They wore fluorescent vests and patrolled the streets in a tight formation to “scare those who might be thinking about doing something.” The uniform was also a way for bystanders to recognize them and for team members to recognize each other in the middle of the crowds. Moreover, female volunteers were not allowed in intervention teams, for fear that they might be targeted by harassers

during interventions. The men-only teams reinforced the image of a battalion-like authority on the street.

Since Imprint cooperated with the police when they operated downtown during Eid, their tactics sought to avoid any conflict with the police on the ground. When the group sought authorizations, the police gave them one condition, that they do not use violence or create trouble in the streets. They developed their tactics accordingly: "So our patrols, in their design, we don't use violence at all. We use our numbers and our appearance, the uniforms, the formation. We control the situation until we reach the police station" (Hani). As they saw it, the police did not have sufficient capacity, in terms of training and equipment, to address the issue of sexual violence adequately. They saw their role as complementary to that of the police, and unlike *Opantish* or *Harassing the Harassers*, they did not develop an alternative system but rather worked in cooperation with the police to help improve public order maintenance.

In sum, this section shows how legal cynicism operates not only to constrain possibilities of action, but also to produce visions for new strategies of action. The actions of Egyptian anti-harassment groups were all motivated by their members' lack of trust that the legal system adequately dealt with sexual violence in public spaces. However, depending on what dimension of legal cynicism they emphasized, they elaborated different visions about what needed to be done. Among the three groups presented here, *Harassing the Harassers* emphasized the lack of legitimacy of the police; their actions were geared toward creating alternative policing models in which ordinary citizens enforced norms of behavior. *Opantish* emphasized the failure of the legal system to provide adequate protection to victims' needs and rights; their actions were therefore focused on making up for this failure by prioritizing support to victims. *Imprint* emphasized the failure of the police to preserve public order, and their strategies aimed to complement the police in securing public order maintenance. Thus, while all anti-harassment groups' strategies were driven by their legal cynicism, the multidimensional view of legal cynicism allows an analysis of the specific shortcomings groups attributed to the law and law enforcement, and thus leads to a better understanding of how each group's legal cynicism contributed to producing a reimagined vision of what protecting women from sexual violence in public spaces should look like.

## Conclusion

I have argued for conceptualizing legal cynicism as a multidimensional cultural frame that takes different meanings for

different actors, and that varies depending on the context. Breaking down people's distrust of the law into the dimensions through which they perceive the law—the law's legitimacy, the protective role of the law, the threat of the law—helps understand how people choose between different possible strategies of action, why the same people may choose different strategies at different times, and why people that all share a generalized distrust in the police will choose different strategies of action when faced with the same situation. For example, when seeking to understand why a person who distrusts the law will choose to call the police when faced with a problem, we need to examine the person's perceptions of the law's legitimacy (is the law legitimate to deal with this particular issue?), her perception of the law's potential to provide protection (is the law responsive to my needs? does it have the capacity to effectively address them?), and her perceptions of the threat of the law (how strong is the risk that I will be arrested if I call the police?). People can share a generalized distrust in the law but respond very differently to these questions. Examining the causes and the degree of actors' cynicism about the law can help understand how this cultural frame shapes strategies of action.

This study also expands legal cynicism theory by beginning to explore how legal cynicism shapes strategies of collective—rather than individual—action. By examining social movement organizations whose actions are driven by legal cynicism, the analysis highlights the action-oriented aspect of legal cynicism. When people get together to act collectively, their shared understanding of the shortcomings of the law serves as a common ground to develop strategies of action that imagine an alternative conception of justice. The multidimensional view of legal cynicism helps analyze the impact of a group's specific brand of legal cynicism on their strategies of action. This approach can be helpful when studying other social movement groups whose actions are driven by a distrust in the law, for example, activists whose actions target law enforcement (e.g., Black Lives Matter), or who seek to move away from the criminal justice system as a solution (e.g., feminist movements questioning criminalization as a solution to gender-based violence, see RESURJ 2016). Examining how social movements attribute specific failures to the law, and how they develop collective actions to make up for those failures, can help uncover the mechanisms through which dominant understandings of legality and justice are challenged (Kirk and Papachristos 2011; Silbey 2005).

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