



What Egypt's El-Sisi and the EU have in common when it comes to women's rights

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A young Egyptian woman by the name of Amal Fathy was given a fine and a two-year prison sentence on 29 September 2018. Her crime? Uploading a [video](#) on Facebook in May in which she shared her experiences of sexual harassment in Egypt and criticised the Egyptian government for failing to deliver to its citizens. Her sentence signalled a first controversial human rights violation on the part of the Egyptian government since the EU announced in-depth cooperation on migration with Egypt during the Salzburg summit. This sentence also takes place against the backdrop of continued support by both El-Sisi and the EU for the protection and promotion of women's rights. **Fathy's case flies in the face of EU and Egyptian government rhetoric about women's rights and raises questions about the sincerity of both actors' agendas on the rights of women.**

El-Sisi's 'state feminism'

Egyptian women are particularly vulnerable to violence in the public space, with [99.3% of women and girls](#) reporting some form of sexual harassment and assault in their lifetime. Upon becoming president in 2014, El-Sisi visited a victim of sexual assault on Tahrir Square in what became a first: an Egyptian president [explicitly committing](#) to fighting gender-based violence. The president said:

"I apologise to you, and as a state, we will not allow this to happen again... I am here to tell you and every Egyptian woman I apologise to all of you."

For the first time in the country's history, in June 2014 Egypt approved a new law criminalising sexual harassment. As part of El-Sisi's 'Year of Egyptian Women', the Egyptian parliament approved a draft bill pushing for tougher penalties on sexual harassment in January 2017. In August 2018, even al-Azhar, Egypt's top Muslim authority, denounced the problem.

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In her video, Amal Fathy decried her daily struggle with sexual harassment in Egypt, linking it to the broader context of poor public services and a deterioration of socio-economic conditions in Egypt. A former member of Egypt's *April 6* youth movement, which despite having played a crucial role in Egypt's revolution was [banned](#) in April 2014 for 'defaming Egypt's image', Fathy has a long track record of fighting for women's rights, democracy and freedom of expression.

By sentencing Fathy for speaking out against sexual harassment, the limits of El-Sisi's women's rights agenda are now exposed once more. A common practice in the North African region and beyond – think Morocco and Tunisia before the uprising – **authoritarian governments often seek to exploit the women's rights cause to win elections and enhance the image of the regime abroad**. Fathy's sentence, however, illustrates the limits of such top-down 'state feminism'. Only those women who endorse the regime are likely to see their rights respected.

While Egyptian women have indeed gained new rights under El-Sisi – at least on paper, they had to give up their independent voice and their freedom of association and expression in return. They have been lumped together under the common label of 'Egyptian women' who purportedly all support the 'feminist' president. Those defying this image by speaking out against the government's authoritarian feminism are being silenced. **Women's rights defenders who link gender justice to broader demands for freedom and social justice are particularly prone to the wrath of the regime.**

The EU's external action in theory...

On paper, the EU not only seeks to '[vigorously promote](#)' women's rights in external relations but also commits to supporting female human rights defenders globally. A [joint 2016-2020 gender action plan](#) (GAP II) by the Commission and High Representative Federica Mogherini aims at "transforming the lives of girls and women through EU external relations", and highlights the prevention of 'Violence against Women and Girls' as the first pivotal area for external action. Next to upholding women's socio-economic and political rights, the document also identifies the need to "significantly shift the institutional culture towards one that places gender at the heart of all of the EU's external actions".

Support for human rights defenders, with a specific focus on female human rights defenders, also underpins EU external relations policy. On September 21st, EU High Representative Mogherini stressed the need to support female human rights activists during the first women-only foreign ministers conference, held in Montréal. During the [opening session](#) of the conference, which brought together foreign ministers from almost 20 countries to discuss security and gender-based violence issues, Mogherini said:

"Here I am proud of the work we have been doing as Europeans together with the United Nations, in particular, and together with friendly and like-minded partners around the world, to also protect *women human rights defenders* at a moment where all human rights defenders are under attack. We see the need to do that."

... and in practice

Unfortunately, rhetorical commitments too often contrast with realities and EU actions on the ground. Indeed, while Fathy and other female activists are being arrested in Egypt for speaking out about women's and human rights, the European Council seeks to step up cooperation with the authoritarian government in Cairo to solve its migration problem and turn Egypt into an energy hub. During the informal Salzburg summit of heads of government on 19-20 September, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, whose country currently holds the rotating presidency of the Council, [praised Egypt](#) for stopping people from leaving its coast and announced increased support for the country. While still in its early phase of thrashing out the details, Donald Tusk already [confirmed](#) that an EU-Arab League summit would be held in Cairo in February, and a [€60 million EU-Egypt agreement](#) to curb irregular migration has recently been signed.

Increased cooperation with Egypt in the realm of migration may well undermine the EU's core commitment to prevent violence against women and girls in its external action, as enshrined in GAP II. Female refugees and migrants are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, gender-based violence, exploitation and abuse. A gender-sensitive approach to migration management from partner countries is therefore vital. From a human rights perspective, however, there are serious doubts about outsourcing migration to authoritarian regimes, as a [recent CEPS report](#) outlined. These regimes often play fast and loose with rules of non-refoulement and the prohibition of arbitrary detention under inhuman and degrading conditions. The rights of women on the move do not generally figure high on the agenda either.

Increased (financial) support for Egypt also further silences female human rights defenders like Fathy, as it further legitimises and normalises the brutal authoritarian nature of El-Sisi's regime. Strongmen such as El-Sisi are glad to accept the EU's migration money in return for immunity from external criticism and sanctions. Thus far, the EU institutions have not spoken out about the recent conviction of Amal Fathy and have failed to denounce El-Sisi's implausible state feminism.

But if the EU and its member states wish to be more genuine about their women's rights agenda than President El-Sisi, further cooperation and budgetary support for Egypt needs to take full account of the 2017-20 ENP partnership priorities, which are predicated on a ['shared commitment to democracy, the rule of law and the respect of human rights'](#).

If nothing else, Fathy's case clearly shows that women's rights can never flourish without democracy and pluralism.