

Media Hubris Dodges Real Look at Sexual Violence

By Violet Kittappa | February 19, 2011

Much of the media attention this week on the sexual assault committed against reporter Lara Logan in Cairo has been filled with two strains of hatred—misogyny and racism—and supported by ill-informed and undeserved measures of American superiority in gender equality. In place of meaningful examination of the crime has been flippant commentary from sources we'd hope have a better understanding of the real situation, not least among them Nir Rosen and Simone Wilson.

In an effort to denounce what happened to Logan, many commentators have lazily used one Egyptian Center for Women's Rights statistic on the prevalence of harassment in Cairo over and over again, omitting statistics from other sources showing equal and larger numbers of women being harassed in America, Japan, France, Argentina, Jordan, Australia, and England, to name a few—barely stopping short of saying *But that would never happen here*.

Others have indulged in waxing proudly on the freedoms afforded American women, using mainstream media's favorite defense mechanism—ethnocentrism. Poorly.

“How many Bahrainian women, after all,” wrote the Atlantic's Andrew Sullivan, “would produce an ass-cam video,” referring to an irrelevant YouTube clip, sending readers off googling *ass-cam* and thinking about all of the ways in which Egyptian and American societies are different, instead of prompting them to ask why rape is happening in both places, and what part of our society is so broken that it can't be fixed?

Because it does happen here.

What better "American" example than Woodstock 1999, where four women experienced sustained sexual assaults and rape during daylight music sets on festival grounds packed with Pepsi products, ATMs, and MTV cameras.

During the 2000 Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City, a 29-year-old kickboxing instructor named Anne Peyton Bryant, out for some afternoon rollerblading along Central Park South, was doused in water and beer, shoved to the ground, groped, and partially stripped of her clothing. An 18-year-old nearby had her underwear ripped off and was raped by finger while the men screamed, chanted, and cheered their fellows on. Bryant fled her attackers as the crowd moved on to assault dozens of other women, and tried in vain to capture the attention of police officers assigned to the area sitting on the steps of the nearby Plaza hotel. She was told to come back and file a report when she had calmed down a bit.

Thirty men were indicted in the case on felony sex abuse, rioting, and assault charges, including a 14-year-old boy. Among the worst offenders was the younger brother of a NYC cop who took part in more than 15 of the assaults. Bryant became the mouthpiece for the events that day, enrolling in law school, speaking publicly about what happened to her, and filing charges against the city and NYPD for failing to respond to her pleas for help. Seven years after the crimes, she settled for \$125,000.

So Logan's assault is not an isolated or uniquely Egyptian incident. Failing to acknowledge our own widespread, homegrown brand of misogyny ensures that the anger and hatred behind these acts of sexual violence will continue to exist unchecked. Subverted public opinion borne of sloppy language choice and hateful media commentary ensures we're busy reading whatever afternoon doldrums-inspired rant some journalist with a return key could spit out instead of considering what sorts of social programs and comprehensive government-backed studies will be required to remediate our own rape culture.

When we include the color of a journalist's hair and details of her sex life alongside coverage of her sexual assault, what we are effectively telling the American public is that she asked for it. And when we half-heartedly try to convince anyone that we're lucky to be female in America and not Egypt, we draw an unfair comparison and avoid solving the problem, perpetuating the same crimes of which we write.