

Phone stalkers torment Egypt women

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The crowded, bustling streets of Cairo can be an intimidating environment for women who venture out alone or even in groups.

It is well known that sexual harassment is a pervasive problem in Egypt, from touching to lewd and abusive cat calls.

But it seems there is another phenomenon that goes largely unreported, phone stalking. With the advance of modern technology a large number of women complain they receive the unwelcome and relentless attention of men they have never met.

One of our colleagues in the BBC office has had a number of phone stalkers, who call repeatedly through the day and sometimes in the middle of the night. She has given them no encouragement - but rarely do they need it.

"What's your name?" enquired one whose mobile number has become depressingly recognisable.

"What's your NAME?" he demanded insistently. "Hello.... Hello."

He knows who he is talking to, because some weeks ago our colleague had engaged him in conversation, a decision she soon regretted. It was the only encouragement he needed to start pestering her with calls.

Most of the harassment - calls and texts - are from young men who ring numbers at random, and often the conversations are fairly commonplace. But occasionally they can lead to something more sinister.

"We know of some cases where it has turned nasty," said Nihad Qomsan, from the Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights.

"We have had cases where the caller tells her, 'I know you, I know your address' or 'I know where you work or where you study'. And he keeps calling - then the language becomes more threatening or insulting. By then it is too late."

At the youth magazine Teenstuff, the girls we interviewed said they'd all experienced some form of phone stalking.

"I was once stalked by someone I know," said 16-year-old Safeya Zeitoun. "He would call every hour."

"I give the phone to my brother and he shouts at them," said another 16-year-old, Marwa Makhlof .

"I had a guy who kept calling me at 0400," said Mona Bassell, 17. "He said: 'Hey, how are you doing?' as if he was a friend. I told him to stop calling but he said: 'No, I want to get to know you.'"

"They think it is funny but it's so frustrating and sometimes it causes real problems for the girl.

"Sometimes she has to tell her friends and only when they each share their stories do they realise they all have the same problem."

In fact in a survey last year of 2,000 women by the Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights, 83% said they had encountered some form of sexual harassment - 23% said they were receiving obscene phone calls. But even so, statistics on how widespread this is are hard to come by.

Nonetheless there are those who believe phone stalking is symptomatic of a bigger issue.

"The only outlet for legitimate sex in Arab society is marriage, which is very difficult to afford these days," said Said Sadek, sociologist from the American University of Cairo.

"Repressed sex in Egyptian society manifests itself in many forms: crank calls, Arabic porn channels, harassing women in the street, secret marriages - it is a real problem.

"They call any number until a woman answers in a soft way, in a way they might find a bit encouraging and they pursue her. But if women filed a complaint about this kind of thing - the caller can be found, no problem."

It should be easy to stamp out. About two years ago, following a number of angry protests and strikes organised by mobile phone users, the government moved swiftly to introduce legislation that required anyone buying a Sim card for a mobile phone to supply a name and address.

And yet all too often the harassment goes unreported. Either women don't believe it will be taken seriously or they don't want the added frustration of the red tape.

"Historically there have been lots of barriers between women and the police," said Nihad Qomsan.

"In the past the police station has often been a source of more problems.

"But increasingly they are taking these cases of sexual harassment more seriously, which is positive."

In February this year, parliament introduced a bill seeking the introduction of stronger penalties for sexual harassment.

It will compel police to investigate all allegations of sexual harassment and those guilty of phone stalking could receive heavy fines.

But the evidence suggests there is still a way to go in changing the attitude of both men and women so that society understands that sexual harassment includes all forms of physical and verbal abuse.

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