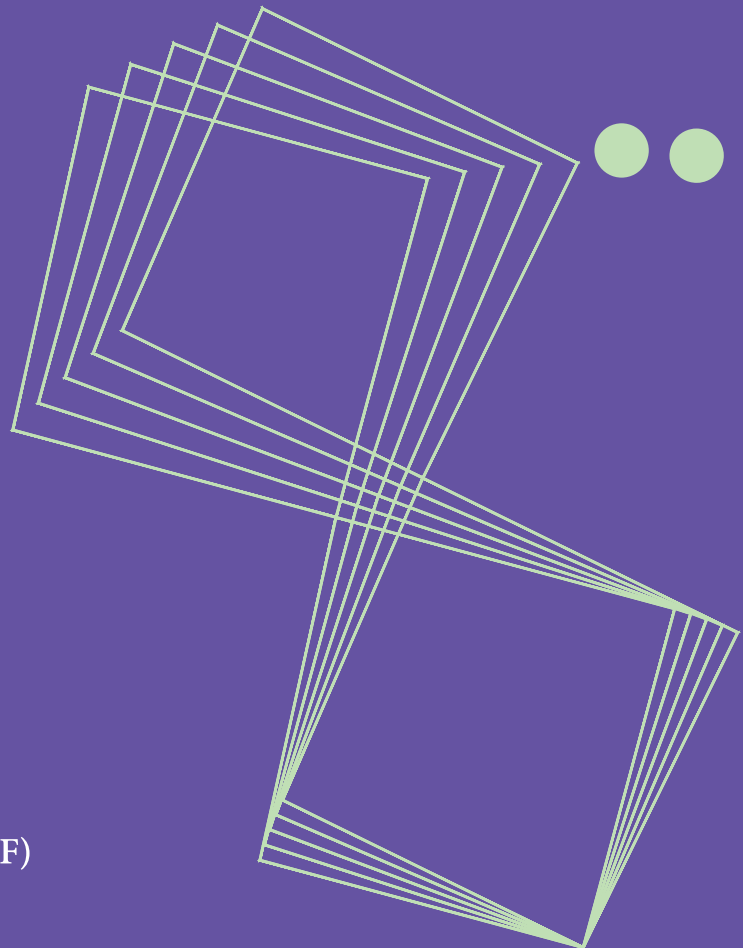
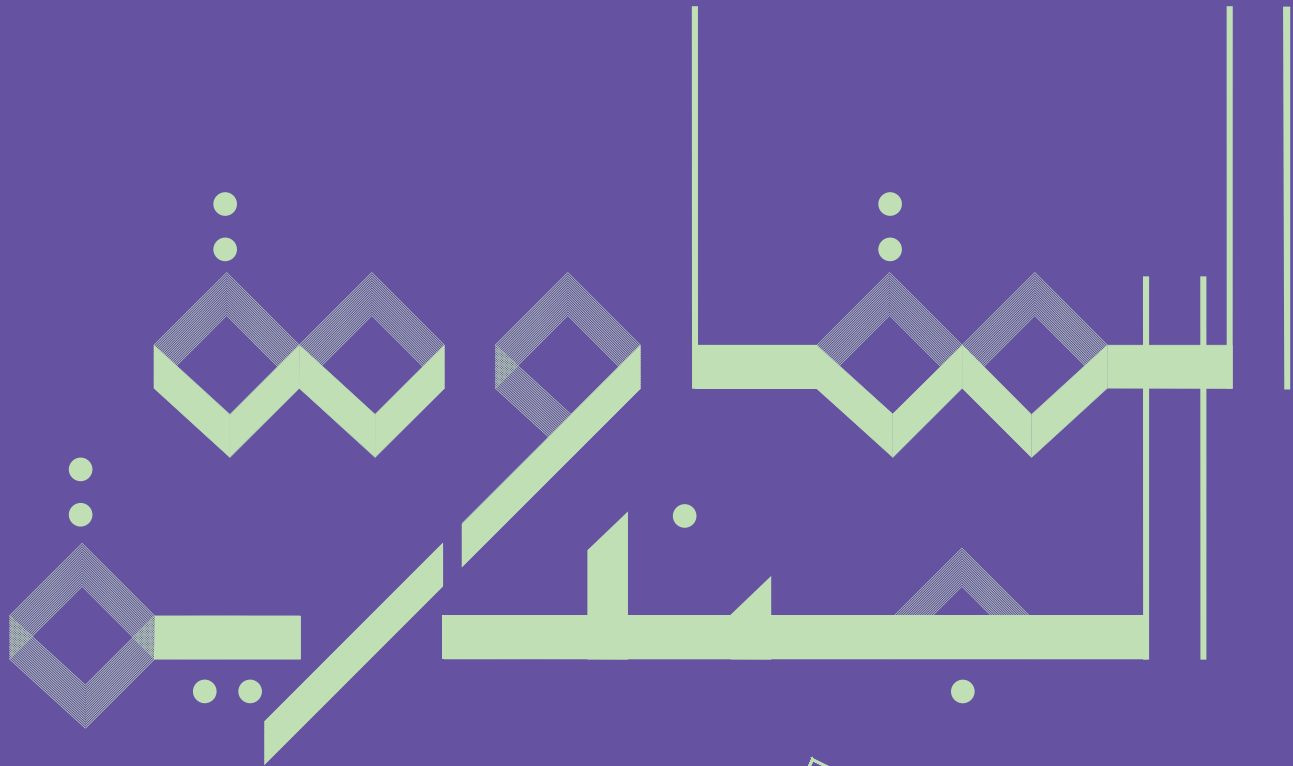




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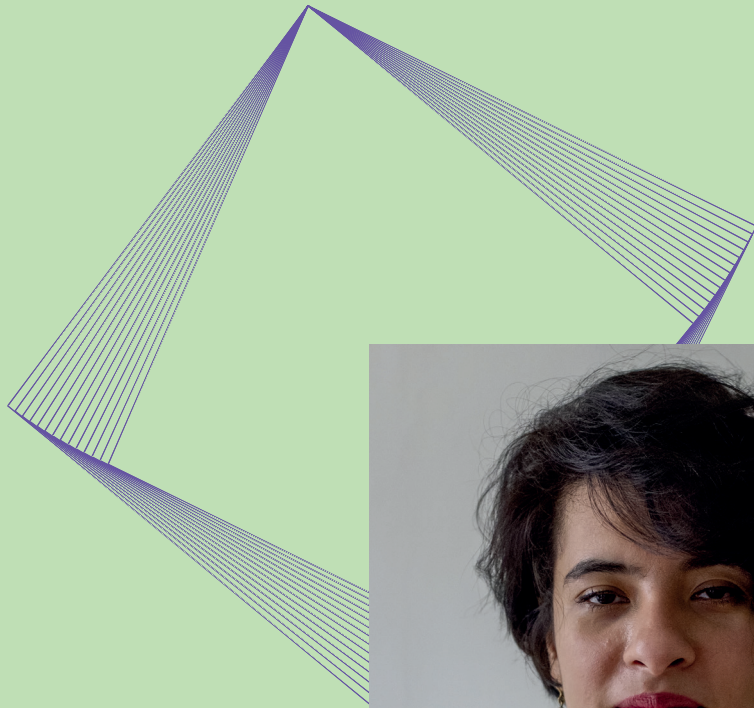
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The Impact of Ride-hailing Services on Women's Mobility in Cairo

Introduction

The internet and GPS have changed our lives drastically in the last few decades, and it was inevitable they would change the way we commute. Ride-hailing services (RHS) made their debut in Egypt in 2013 (Fakhr El-Din 2016). However, it did not take off until the arrival of Uber and Careem¹ in 2014, when they took the market by storm. In 2016, Uber had more than 40,000 drivers and over one million active riders (Rizk 2017).

In this piece, I attempt to understand the effect of RHS on women's mobility in Cairo based on interviews with female RHS users. I investigate the changes RHS had on their mobility and the reasons behind that change. Using the themes of mobility, everyday resistance, and respectability, I argue that using RHS could be seen as a way to resist the restrictions (e.g., spatial and temporal restrictions) on women's mobility due to male domination over public space. This resistance is through features such as accountability (i.e., the ability to submit complaints against the drivers to the companies and using social media to share their bad experiences) and door-to-door transportation.

Previous studies on RHS were mainly concerned with the economic side, management, and transport (Arora and Rejikumar 2017; Chen, 2015; McGregor et al., 2016), and some of these studies stated that women tend to use RHS as they perceive it as safer (Tokar, Negoiesc et al.

2018; Arora and Rejikumar 2017). However, to my knowledge, none of the studies focused on RHS' impact on female riders' mobility and their everyday life. I focus on this topic considering that studying women's mobility is the gateway to understanding the obstacles that hinder them from accessing the city and can provide us with clues on creating a more gender-sensitive city.

In the upcoming sections I contextualize Cairo's transportation system and the struggles women face within that system, introduce the themes I relied on, followed by the methodology and analysis.

Contextualizing the Scene Cairo's Transportation System

With a population estimated at 24 million people (CAPMAS 2018), Cairo² requires a massive transportation system to cover its population's needs. Public transportation in Cairo is represented in the formal and informal sectors (El-Geneidy et al. 2013). The formal sector is owned and operated by the government, such as buses, minibuses, and the metro. Public buses and minibuses³ are one of the main pillars of Cairo's transportation system, mainly for their affordability. However, the number of public buses and minibuses running in Cairo is small due to the lack of public funding, which led to overcrowding and service quality deterioration (El-Geneidy et al. 2013).

The informal sector, which is not planned by the Ministry of Transportation, consists of means such as taxis and tuk-tuks. The taxi is higher in cost⁴ than most means of transportation and provides a more passenger-oriented service. The taxi could be considered a middle ground between public and private forms of transportation since they are not a collective mode of transportation and are privately owned (El-Geneidy et al. 2013).

Sexual Harassment in Transportation

With overpopulation and a deteriorated transportation system, women in Cairo face numerous challenges in their everyday trips. Sexual harassment is one of the main challenges women face. A study by the UN Women exposed the magnitude of sexual harassment in Egypt. The study states that 99.3 percent of Egyptian women were subjected to harassment, and 81.8 percent were harassed on public transportation (UN Women 2013). While there are some doubts about how accurate these figures are, similar estimates were reported by other organizations such as HarassMap. A report by HarassMap in 2014 showed that 95.3 percent of the female respondents reported having been harassed and that public transportation was the main place where the harassment occurred (HarassMap 2014).

The literature on women's safety in public transportation has highlighted how women perceive public transportation as unsafe and consider taxis risky due to fear of sexual harassment (Nassif 2010). Men dominate the public spaces in Cairo, including transportation. One way this is manifested is through their judgment of women who are present in the public space (Koning 2009; Ilahi 2009).

For this reason, women's mobility and access to public spaces are often restricted under the name

of safety. Young women moving in the public space by themselves are often seen as objects of sexualized attention. For them, avoiding public spaces was their strategy to avoid that attention (Koning 2009). Women who possess sufficient financial means rely on taxis and private cars as an avoidance strategy to the unwanted male gaze (Ilahi 2009; Nassif 2010; Koning 2009).



I argue that using RHS could be seen as a way to resist the restrictions (e.g., spatial and temporal restrictions) on women's mobility due to male domination over public space



As shown, the literature that touched on women's safety in transportation and mobility in Cairo was mainly before RHS. Thus, this significant new factor was not included in women's strategies when navigating the transport system. Analyzing that new factor, which I am attempting in this piece, will provide us with a better insight into the everyday strategies women in Cairo depend on to be more mobile.

Mobility, Respectability and Everyday Resistance

The concept of mobility is complex and needs to be analyzed by discerning both the physical movement and the social context of that movement (Uteng and Cresswell 2008; Cresswell 2010). This means looking at relationships of power and inequalities as part of the context for movement experiences (Mountz 2011). Mobility does not only refer to the physical movement but also incorporates the capability of conducting such movement (Uteng and Cresswell 2008). Thus, power relations play a definitive role in mobility. It is regarded as socially produced

and part of space production (Cresswell 2006). Gender and mobility are deeply intertwined as gender is spatially produced (Massey 1994; Koskela 1999). Hence, mobility contributes to the production and reproduction of gender power hierarchies (Uteng and Cresswell 2008).

The relationship between gender and mobility has been the focus of many studies in the past few decades. Many surveys have found that men prioritize speed and cost, while women prioritize safety (Whitzman 2013). Women's sense of safety in transport and public space has a substantial impact on their mobility. Having a negative perception of safety in transport and public spaces leads to restricting women's mobility (Uteng and Cresswell 2008; Phadke 2005; Pain 1997).

Phadke (2007) argues that the narrative of women's safety in conservative communities in its essence is centered on sexual risk as opposed to a concern regarding the physical risk of women getting killed or being in a car accident. Women are judged as worthy of safety and protection based on the level at which they express respectability. She explains that respectability can be expressed through means like the manner of dress (e.g., modest long dresses), symbols of matrimony (e.g., wedding rings), or by having a male chaperone. Through narratives of respectability, women's behavior is regulated and judged by others, particularly by those looking for an explanation for male violence (Stanko 1997).

I use the concept of mobility in the analysis to assess the range of mobility the participants had before RHS and how it changed after RHS emerged onto the scene. In particular, I analyze how the notion of respectability restricted their mobility and how their usage of RHS might have helped them to resist such restrictions.

As for resistance, I use the concept of everyday resistance in this paper, which was first introduced by James Scott in 1985. Everyday resistance refers to how people can undermine power through their everyday actions. Vinthagen and Johansson (2013) define everyday resistance as follows:

(1) done in a regular way, occasionally politically intended but typically habitual or semi-conscious; (2) in a non-dramatic, non-confrontational or non-recognized way that (has the potential to) undermine some power, without revealing itself (concealing or disguising either the actor or the act), or by being defined by hegemonic discourse as "non-political" or otherwise not relevant to resistance; and is (3) done by individuals or small groupings without a formal leadership or organization (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013, 39)


I use this concept while reflecting on RHS as a way of resistance for the women to deal with the restrictions on their mobility. Everyday resistance is a subtle form of resistance that is not too flashy or visible and usually can pass by without being easily detected. Relying on the data, I demonstrate how using RHS could be viewed as an everyday resistance strategy.

Method


The analysis relies on 25 semi-structured interviews with RHS female users residing in Cairo in 2017 and 2018. I chose to use interviews in this study, as I am not aiming to produce any generalizations but rather trying to better understand and enrich the context of women's mobility in Cairo. I narrowed down the RHS to Uber and Careem since they are the leading ride-hailing companies in Egypt (IFC, Accenture, and Uber 2018).

The data sample is homogeneous to a certain extent for two reasons. Firstly, to use RHS, you need to have a smartphone, internet, and sufficient knowledge of RHS applications. Hence, access to RHS is limited to groups of women with the financial means to attain the requirement needed to use them (IFC, Accenture, and Uber 2018). Secondly, I resorted to snowballing in my data collection and depended on referrals. This led to the participants being in the same age group (20-40 years old) and sharing some other traits such as educational background or residential areas in some cases.

As for the participants' profiles, it is apparent that they shared similar traits. The participants were all highly educated women. Two of them were university students, while the rest were university graduates. Their occupations varied between academics, engineers, doctors, working in corporate jobs, stay-at-home moms, and others. They all lived in affluent districts and some in gated communities. As for their household incomes, they all were within the middle-class⁵ criteria.



Men dominate the public spaces in Cairo, including transportation. One way this is manifested is through their judgment of women who are present in the public space (Koning 2009; Ilahi 2009)



The frequency of using RHS ranged between the participants between daily usage to two times a week. The participants' trips varied based on occupation, family status, and how they spend their leisure time. Some participants used RHS to run domestic errands and drive their children to school and sports practice. As for leisure trips,

participants used RHS to go to cinemas, shopping, nightclubs, and visiting friends and relatives.

Analysis

Upon approaching the participants, they were excited to share their RHS experiences, with some saying it was “life-changing”. I start by discussing the conditions of women's mobility before and after RHS, highlighting the shift in the power relations in RHS. I proceed to analyze how RHS function as a resistance strategy. Finally, I reflect on the sustainability of RHS as a resistance strategy.

This is a Man's World

Male dominance over public spaces presented the main hurdle to the participants' mobility. Although some of the participants would have preferred to use public transportation to save money, most of them relied as much as possible on taxis (before RHS) to limit interactions with strange men, whom they perceived as a threat. Nonetheless, the participants were not satisfied with the taxis' services.

One major problem they pointed out was the lack of transparency in the fares' pricing as the taxi drivers rarely used the fare meter. Inas, a 37-year-old journalist, recalled her frustration with some incidents she had with several taxi drivers, such as drivers raising the fare when the weather was hot or when she had a lot of luggage. This unstructured pricing system often led to altercations between the participants and the drivers.

Moreover, the participants were also dissatisfied with the taxi drivers' attitude in general. Mona, a 37-year-old translator, complained, “They smoke, play loud music, and they ask so many personal questions...” Also, the taxi drivers refused to

drop them at their exact destination unless it was on the main street. That is why the participants often perceived themselves as “helpless” in front of the “angry swearing” drivers.

As I mentioned before, sexual harassment is one of the main manifestations of male dominance in public spaces (Ilahi 2009; Koning 2009). Sexual harassment was a shared experience between all the participants. Inas says, “Public transportation was a harrowing experience for me. I usually get harassed on buses. Men used to find any way to brush against my breasts or rub themselves on me. I try to avoid using them (buses) as much as possible”.

Due to such experiences, some of the participants tried to avoid going out or using public transportation⁶ and taxis as much as possible, while others avoided them altogether. Mennah, a 30-year-old photographer, explained, “I discovered that the taxi driver who was driving me was masturbating when I got off. When I started crying, he laughed and asked if I like what I see. I never rode a taxi after that ever again”.

Women often correlate the space and time with the occurrence of violence and tend to avoid them as a tactic to ensure their safety (Valentine, 1992). Thus, the participants’ experiences led them to fear public transportation and taxis, consequently restricting their mobility.

Notions of respectability also played a part in the women’s struggle with mobility. The dress and temporal constraints are ways respectability limits women’s mobility. As for the temporal constraints, the participants linked their fear with nighttime as it made them feel more afraid. This fear is ingrained by society and the media discourse perceiving nighttime as no time for “respectable” women to go out. Thus, women’s fear of going out late at night was more to do with

the risk to their reputation than their physical safety. As for the dress, women are viewed as sexualized objects. So unless their behavior and dress were modest with nothing that made them too visible (e.g., laughing loudly or wearing something flashy), they would be partly if not entirely blamed for the sexual harassment they experience as they would be “asking for it”. That is why women censored how they dressed when they went out.

Nadia, a 32-year-old engineer, talked about why she stopped riding public transportation, which was related to that definition of the “respectable” woman.

“I was riding a microbus late in the evening, and a guy put his hand on my thigh... I confronted him and told him he should get off or I will slap him and take him to the police station... The passengers stood by him and started shouting at me for making a scene, saying that dressed the way I dressed I shouldn’t dare to curse this guy when I was asking for it...After that, I never used public transportation again, no matter how much it would cost me.”

Nadia’s experience was a clear example of how respectability notions play a part in determining who is worthy of safety and protection and who is not. Women’s presence in public space is preconditioned by being “respectable”. This entails women avoiding visibility. First, by being out at night and wearing tight jeans, she breached the temporal and dress conditions that the respectability notions dictated. Adding to that, she again violated the terms of respectability by standing up to the sexual harassment she experienced by shouting and cursing. Hence, she was no longer invisible. This took away her right to safety, and she ended up being attacked. That is why most of the participants ended up avoiding

confronting the perpetrators, as they were afraid they would be stripped of their right to safety or simply because they saw it was pointless.

As we have seen in the previous stories, the participants felt that taxis, public transportation, and streets are a man's world and women are merely guests. They could not go out when they want or dress and behave how they want. They felt that they could not resist male violence. So, their only resort was to minimize their movement or rely on private cars as much as possible or have male chaperons with them, all of which are tactics to maintain their respectability.

After RHS: the Customer is Always Right

The power relation where men were in control of transportation and women having to fly under the radar shifted upon using RHS due to its accountability factor. The rider can rate the drivers' performance and report any incidents that caused them any inconvenience or discomfort. RHS screen these complaints and take action accordingly (e.g., financially compensating the user or penalizing the driver). There is no accountability factor in any of the public transportation or taxis.

The accountability made the women feel more in control and, consequently, safe. RHS being massive corporations view customer satisfaction and their reputation as critical for further growth. This is why some participants believed RHS drivers' culture is different from the taxi drivers' since RHS drivers rely on the clients' ratings and need their satisfaction to keep their jobs.

The power such corporations and its policies have on the drivers changed the power relations

within the car. The RHS' policies now chain the drivers' "control" as men to comment and sexually harass. This was prevalent in the participants' remarks that the RHS drivers rarely asked personal questions or commented on their appearance, unlike the taxi drivers. The participants were able to choose the music in the car, prevent the driver from smoking and choose whether to use the AC or not.

Moreover, feeling in control also showed in the participants' usage of an assertive tone when talking about reporting the drivers. Eman, a 28-year-old dentist, explained that she does not feel she is in any danger using RHS because "if the driver does anything I don't like, I can make him suffer". Ola also showed a similar position saying, "If the driver refused to give me a lift to my exact destination, I could easily harm him by reporting him".



The concept of mobility is complex and needs to be analyzed by discerning both the physical movement and the social context of that movement



Although the participants have heard or even experienced some incidents where riders' complaints were not met with proper action from the RHS, they still believed that it gave them a sense of control. Maha, a 26-year-old communication officer, explains, "I know that reporting is not always effective, but it feels good knowing I could say something about it".

Another side of the accountability factor in RHS is informal accountability. RHS provides the users with the photos and the car license plates of the drivers. The participants resort to using the drivers' information on social media to resist

violence by the drivers if the companies did not respond to their complaints. Layla, a 39-year-old stay-at-home mom, explained, “If they (RHS) ignore my report, I have the driver’s face and license. I write a long post about the incident on Facebook, tag the company, and scandalize both the driver and the company”.

Ibn El Nas Driver

Another appeal of RHS was the drivers themselves. Careem calls them “captains”, making them sound more like pilots than drivers, distancing them from the stereotypical, poorly mannered taxi and bus drivers. Participants perceived public transportation and taxi drivers as lower class men. On the other hand, the RHS driver is usually well dressed, rides a private car, and uses smartphones. That is why the participants assumed he⁷ is well-educated and well-mannered and labeled him as *ibn el nas*. The term, which literally means “son of people”, signifies respectability, good morals and manners, and a high level of education, among other factors (Peterson 2011).

Perceiving the RHS driver as *ibn el nas* made the participants believe they could maintain their respectability by using RHS. To many participants, lower class men are the main reason for sexual harassment. This is not based solely on their experiences of sexual harassment. The state and media discourse also demonize lower class men and frame them as the perpetrators of sexual harassment (Ilahi 2009; Amar 2011). This is partly because of the discourse explaining the rise in sexual harassment stemmed from the increase in unemployment (Ilahi 2009). This makes it sound like sexual harassment is linked to poverty. Thus, many participants believed *ibn el nas* driver, whom they presumed to have the financial means to own a car and the sufficient education to handle GPS, would not sexually

harass them as he is not poor⁸.

Therefore, RHS takes the class segregation strategy that women relied on when using taxis and private cars to the next level. This is not only because of the *ibn el nas* driver but also as it serves as a door-to-door transport. When hailing a taxi, you get in contact with people on the street. Also, when you drive your own private car in Cairo’s busy streets, you are most likely going to park it away from your destination, which forces you to walk. On the other hand, RHS provides you with a car that will pick you up from your exact location and drop you at your exact destination. Thus, the participants avoided getting unwanted gazes and harassment of not just men on the street but also taxi and public transportation drivers and passengers.

RHS as a Resistance Strategy

Through the interviews, it was clear that the participants started relying on RHS to overcome the restrictions imposed on their mobility due to male control over transportation. This was manifested in how they use RHS to resist the temporal and dress constraints they faced.

RHS provided minimum contact with the streets minimizing the risk of being viewed as non-respectable women. Hence, the participants relied on it as their go-to transport. Also, due to their strict policies and accountability and the perception that the driver was *ibn el nas*, the participants felt relatively safe. Lamia, a 26-year-old bank employee, mentioned that she feels comfortable going out till after midnight as long as she uses RHS. Yasmine, a 35-year-old engineer, also agrees that the RHS helped her to move more freely regardless of the time. She explained that now with RHS, she can accommodate her hectic work schedule as she needs to work until midnight or head to the office early. Sarah, a

30-year-old chef, talked about how she was finally able to see her favorite bands performing at nightclubs, which she was never able to do since she was afraid to catch a taxi late at night.

As for dress restrictions, by using RHS, some of the participants felt more at ease and being able to dress the way they feel, as they do not have to go out on the streets anymore. Inas pointed out, “Before RHS, I used to wear loose trousers because I used to walk a lot...now I can wear tight trousers because no one is going to comment on how I dress”. Manar, who works at a hotel, also explains how she had to go to work early as she couldn’t walk the streets in her uniform with a short skirt and always had to change into her uniform once she got to work. However, after RHS, she can go to work in her uniform without worrying about hearing unpleasant comments on her way.

Using RHS habitually was not only a form of everyday resistance because of how they used it to overcome the constraints over their mobility. They also used it to undermine the power of the taxi drivers which most participants relied on before RHS. This was shown in how the participants viewed the taxi drivers’ demonstrations⁹ against RHS, accusing them of stealing their livelihood. Although several participants sympathized with the taxi drivers, they all refused to go back to riding taxis to support them. As many of them pointed out, this is a chance to pressure the taxi drivers to change how they treat their customers, especially women.

RHS: a Band-Aid Solution or More?

Through the analysis, I discussed the effect of RHS on women’s mobility in Cairo. Based on interviews with female RHS users, I compared the mobility for RHS female users before and

after RHS. I demonstrated how the participants used RHS to resist notions of respectability imposed on them and to increase their mobility. However, it is essential to ask whether it is a Band-Aid solution for the restrictions on their mobility, or if it would help change the status quo of male domination over public space and transportation.

Notions of respectability also played a part in the women’s struggle with mobility. The dress and temporal constraints are ways respectability limits women’s mobility

One of the reasons women used RHS was because it works as a class segregation strategy as it separates them from the lower class men that are usually considered the source of sexual harassment. Respectability goes hand-in-hand with class segregation as places that are presumed respectable are usually class-bound, such as cafes and upscale shops (Koning 2009). Thus, even though the participants became more mobile, their map of Cairo is still missing a massive chunk as they needed to stay within the borders of the class-bound places to maintain their respectability. They can go out late at night dressed the way they want, but they still cannot walk down most streets of Cairo without being at risk of sexual harassment.

Another point we need to highlight is the economic burden the RHS present. Most of the participants did not have the financial means to buy a car. Even before RHS, they tried to rely on taxis to decrease the risk of encountering sexual harassment, which presented an economic burden. Adding to this, the soaring prices of RHS during the rush hour as it imposes a surge pricing makes the burden even more onerous.

Nevertheless, all the participants stressed that they would not go back to using public transportation or taxis, even if the pricing of RHS goes up. Shaimaa, a 26-year-old banker, explains, “There is no price tag for safety. I am paying to be treated as a human being. Even if it is expensive, I will pay for it”. This poses a question of economic sustainability. With the rising prices and inflation in Egypt, will the women be able to continue using RHS?

In a way, RHS seems like a Band-Aid resistance strategy that is hard to sustain due to the rising prices. Also, it does not open a venue for women to organize collective resistance to the social and political pressures that produce and reproduce violence against women in the public space. However, using RHS made the participants realize that gender power relations in transit are not carved in stone but have the potential to change.

Nadia explains, “Uber and Careem made me realize that I am entitled to more than this. I am entitled to not have the driver pry on my privacy or interfere with any private conversations, to not smoke or fight with me just because he feels he deserves to be paid more”. This realization made them more aware of their rights and the potential for change. This could be a small step to prepare to make collective resistance possible in the future.

Endnotes

¹ The base fare for UberX, which is the standard service using regular cars, was 7 EGP, the price per kilometer was 2.30 EGP, and the waiting fare was 30 piasters/minute in 2018 (Tawfeek 2018). As for Careem, the base price was 6.5 EGP, 2.31 EGP per kilometer, and the waiting fare cost 36 piasters (Cairo 360 2018). However, “surge pricing” is included in both companies. “Surge pricing” refers to

the companies raising their fares by a specific multiplier determined by an algorithm when the number of riders is more than the number of drivers available. This rise in fare could reach 52 percent (Aggour 2016).

² In this paper, Cairo refers to Greater Cairo which includes Cairo Governorate, Giza and Qalyubiya Governorates.

³ In 2018, the fares varied between 4 to 8 EGP according to the type and the distance travelled (Barsoum 2018).

⁴ In 2018, the base fare was 6 EGP, with each subsequent kilometer priced at 2.50 EGP (Barsoum 2018).

⁵ The middle class is the group of households of which their consumption level lies between 7,644 EGP and 11,496 EGP per person per year on average (World Bank 2019).

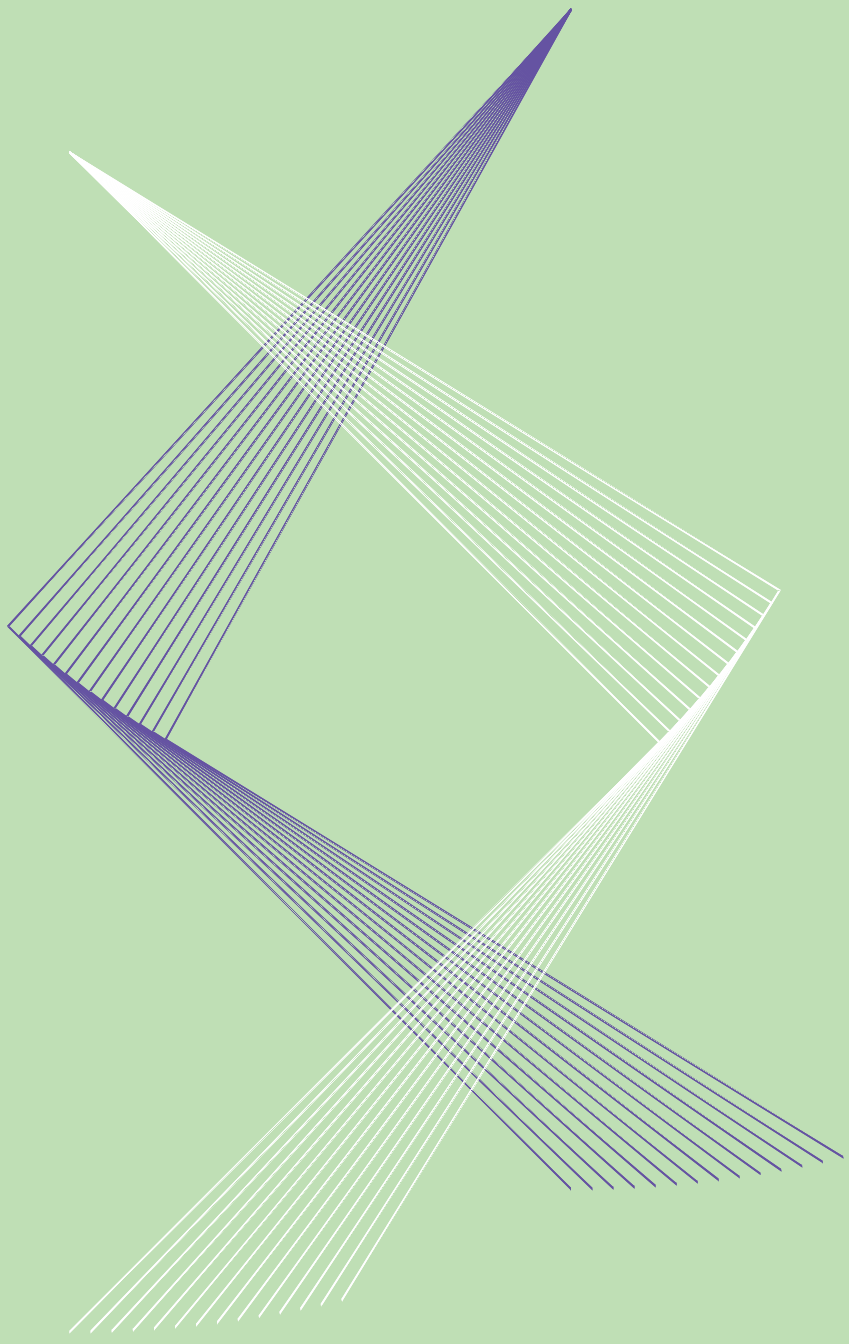
⁶ Due to the uniqueness of the taxi from the other public transportation, I decided to handle it as a different category from public transportation in my analysis for clarity.

⁷ I refer to the RHS driver using the pronouns “he/him” as all the participants experiences were with RHS male drivers with the exception of three participants who rode once with a female RHS driver. This is due to the extremely low numbers of female RHS drivers (IFC, Accenture, and Uber 2018).

⁸ The “poor harasser” myth was mainly debunked by the Egyptian version of the #MeToo movement in 2020 as they highlighted rape and sexual assault cases in which the perpetrators were mainly from wealthy and powerful families (Ahram Online 2020).

⁹ The demonstrations started in 2016 demanding to suspend the RHS as they were illegal because they rely on private cars and drivers without taxi licenses (Alaa El-Din 2016). In 2018, the parliament issued a new law regulating RHS in Egypt which ended the debate over their illegal status (Ahram Online 2018).





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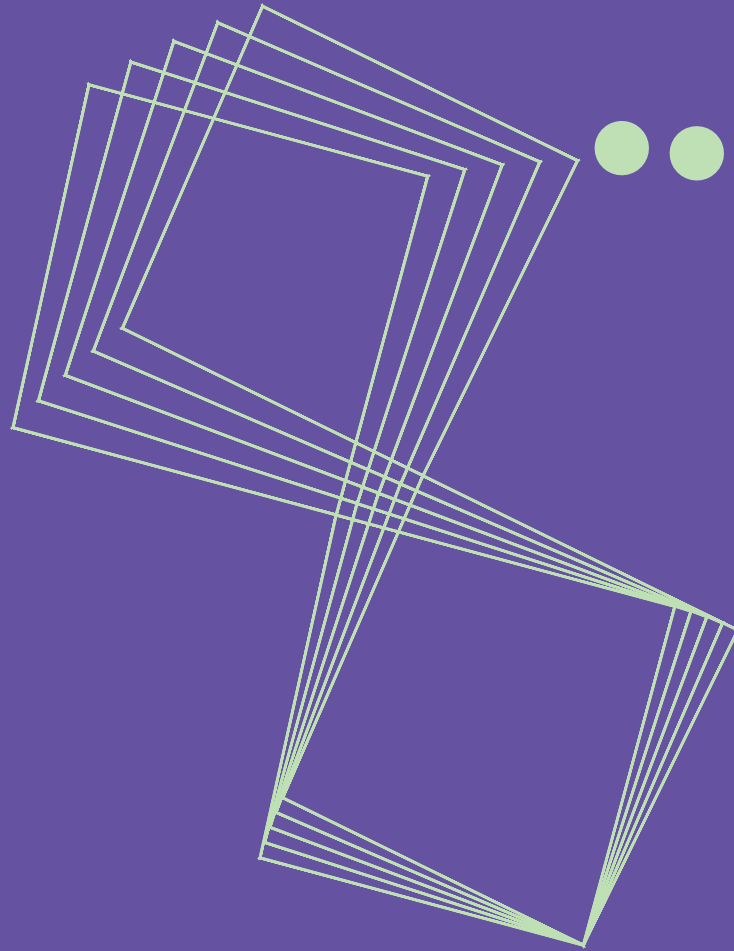
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