

Ground Motive

Dialogue at the intersection of philosophy, religion & social ethics

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Women, violence and harrassment

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There are two major news stories involving women, and harassment or violence in the headlines today: the recent allegations of [gender-based harassment](#) within the ranks of the RCMP, and the [massive response](#) to the violent treatment of female Egyptian protesters at the hands of the Egyptian military.

While these particular headlines are relatively new, they do rise out of a backdrop of stories about gender-based discrimination and violence facing women today. Whether it is the stories that come out of the Pickton trial or off the [Highway of Tears](#), or allegations over honor killings, the media has been full of stories over the last year about women here in Canada as well as across the world that have been harmed or even killed for reasons having to do with their gender. Although it is difficult to trace the roots of the problem in some cases, much of the violence appears to stem from beliefs about how women should or should not act, and whether whether some women and girls are, as in the words of some, "disposable".

There is hope, however. Today, which in the Northern hemisphere is the day with the shortest amount of daylight and the longest night marking the official start of Winter, we can hope that brighter times are coming. The allegations the female Mounties have raised and are continuing to raise look likely be aired in court, and the new Commissioner, Bob Paulson, has already said he means to seriously [address the concerns of harassment](#) as well as the other issues facing the RCMP. Likewise in Egypt, even as thousands of women are taking to the streets to protest the violent treatment of female protesters, their male co-protesters [formed a shield](#) around them in solidarity. It is stories like this, of people working together to address concerns and help protect each other that give me hope. Of course hope is just that: the half belief and half desire that something better is coming. It is not knowing, it is not having.

When thinking about gender-based violence or harassment, I find myself asking, *what are the social structures or beliefs that might support such violence?* Is it a lack of knowledge? Are the roots of discrimination social, cultural, religious--or a mesh of all three and more? Are they tied up in definitions of what it means, socially, to be female? And, most importantly, how does one try to end the violence and bring positive social change? A word that keeps coming up is *solidarity*. In my experience, the most positive change on any issue of human rights or social justice comes when people of all backgrounds work together. On questions of violence against women, seeing men--and women from more privileged backgrounds--take a stand against female gender-based violence and harassment, like the male protesters in Egypt have done, is one possible way forward. So my question for today is, what does solidarity mean in terms of addressing gender-based violence or harassment, and how effective do you think it can be?

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