

ILLEGAL MIGRANTS

Sicily: the seven rapists were 'model' immigrants

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The seven men, three of them minors, who assaulted a young couple, she 13 and he 17, on 30 January in the centre of Catania, are Egyptians. Two raped the girl, the others immobilised the boyfriend and witnessed the rape, forcing him to watch as well.

All were identified and have been arrested. They had arrived in Italy illegally at different times during the last three years and were housed in a community. The

community leaders who look after them, shocked, claim that the boys are 'well integrated, calm', in contact with their families of origin. The lawyer in charge of the community, Angela Pennisi, speaking about one of them, said: 'I would define him as a sweet person, he participated in parish and animation activities, earning good feedback'.

The news of the gang rape was reported not only by the Italian media but also abroad. Presumably the families of the arrested boys have already been informed of the incident, and will have to deal with relatives and neighbours and public opinion in their country. It would be interesting, and useful, to know what they think, to know how they judge their children. "In Egypt such behaviour would never be allowed," said MEP Annalisa Tardino, interviewed by the US website Breitbart. She is right, but not completely because rape is widespread in Egypt although it is punished with prison terms of 15 to 25 years and life imprisonment if the victim has also been kidnapped. Although no official data on sexual violence is available, it is estimated that around 20,000 rapes are reported every year and that many more are not reported due to shame and reticence if families fear retaliation and above all the stigma on the victim, who is in any case dishonoured, and the negative judgement on her family members, starting with the head of the family, who may be thought to have not been sufficiently vigilant about the safety and perhaps even the public behaviour of their women.

It is in these terms that Egyptians who have remained faithful, wholly or in large part, to the institutions of their ancestors' patriarchal system reinforced by Islam, the religion of the majority of the population, experience the sexual violence suffered by their women, and indeed - the Italian parliamentarian is right - in traditional contexts, violence against a young girl, even worse if in a group, is unthinkable and unacceptable. Those responsible deserve and receive exemplary punishment, even death. In fact, the patriarchal system that has ruled the Egyptians for centuries dictates that women are handed over as virgins to their husbands and families to which they will belong for the rest of their lives.

So important is their virginity and the control over their sexuality that Egypt is one of the countries where, although banned by law since 2008, female genital mutilation, the cruellest and most reprehensible way to control the sex life of young women and ensure the paternity of their children, continues to be widely practised. Indeed, it is believed that the extreme form of mutilation, infibulation, was instituted in Egypt during the time of the pharaohs and is therefore also called pharaonic circumcision. According to the most recent surveys, seven out of ten Egyptian girls between the ages of 15 and 19 have been mutilated, and the percentage rises to 82% in

women aged 15 to 49, one of the highest rates in the world. The fact that in 72% of cases the surgery was performed by professionals makes complications and the risk of death less frequent, but does not mitigate the permanent consequences of the mutilation inflicted.

In environments, especially urban ones, where traditional institutions have lost ground, there remains the patriarchal legacy of the discrimination to which women are subjected, the deep-rooted idea of their social and even moral inferiority, of their submission to men, of the male right, which Islam approves of and protects, to command and dispose of them to the point that marital rape is not conceived of, and therefore not punished.

Egypt, it should be remembered, is also the country where the *taharrush*, the horrific mass sexual aggression against women, in public, premeditated and planned, which Europe and Italy have also experienced in recent years, was born. The first to practice it were the Egyptian security forces in 2005. They used it as a weapon against women protesting in Cairo's Tahir Square. Then this type of aggression spread and was also adopted by groups of young people, always made possible by the presence of large crowds. The *taharrush* involves the formation of three circles of attackers. The first, more internal, is composed of the one who rapes the previously isolated victim(s), who may be subjected to various forms of sexual violence, groping, beating, biting, digital or foreign body penetration, rape. The second films, photographs and enjoys the spectacle. The third circle distracts the surrounding crowd with shouting and noise so that they do not realise what is going on.

The aim of this specific sexual violence is to humiliate women, to punish them for daring to show themselves, to go out without men, thus appearing as 'nobody's women', within everyone's reach.

In Italy, the first reported *taharrush* occurred in Milan, in Piazza del Duomo, on New Year's Eve 2021. A second case occurred on New Year's Eve 2022, also in Milan. As for sexual assaults, both individual and group, those committed by foreigners now number in the thousands every year. In 2022, according to data provided by the Department of Public Security of the Ministry of the Interior, sexual violence was six times more common among foreigners than among Italians and 27 times more common among illegal immigrants. Out of 5,231 reports and arrests, 62% were Italian nationals, 38% were foreigners.