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Egypt: What has Gov. done to face the phenomenon of suicide?

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In many cases, the government's organs deny the gravity of the phenomenon of suicide, and accuse opposition parties of exaggeration in their talk about it, to deliberately embarrass the community - a logic that seems blind to the upward escalation of the phenomenon, amid wide-range suicide cases that the Egyptian media and press are disseminating.

However, some pro-regime media outlets justify their defense of the government in this regard or their denial of any governmental responsibility towards the escalation of suicide cases, by just stating that the phenomenon of suicide is wide spread in other countries across the world, in attempt to excuse the government from performing its duties of searching for the phenomenon's causes and places of spread, to be able to address it, whether through the Ministry of Health's mental health centers, or by educating community members about the psychological conditions of suicide.

Also, the government has not exerted due efforts to dissuade the suicide folks from their negative tendencies; and it even failed to find solutions to the deteriorating economic situation, provide job opportunities, or work to increase people's income to prevent them from resorting to committing suicide.

It is also clear that there is no official response to the suicide phenomenon escalation during the high school certificate exams that pose tremendous psychological and social pressures to parents and students. Accordingly, at the least defect in exams students immediately resort to the easiest solution, that is committing suicide, in the absence of any effort on the part of the Ministry of Education or on the part of the state as a whole to deal with the problem.

A study conducted by Egypt's National Center for Social and Criminological Research (NCSCR) confirms a high rate of suicide among males, and suicide attempts among females, and that the suicide attempt cases are concentrated in age groups from 15 to 20, while suicides double in age groups from 30 to 40.

Some community initiatives:

In the context of tracing government response to the phenomenon of suicide, the NCSCR report monitors implementation of some media campaigns by some societal agencies with the aim of raising awareness of the danger of suicide. Also, it was monitored that the Ministry of Health has set a hotline for those with suicide motives, to provide psychological guidance. However, all these measures did not lead to decline of the phenomenon.

For example, Al Azhar University's International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research (IICPSR) had launched a campaign titled, "Your life is a trust. Be keen to keep it" in attempt to raise awareness regarding the problem of suicide. Also, there was a campaign titled, "Together against Suicide" that was sponsored by the World Organization for Al-Azhar Graduates (WOAG) to raise awareness of the phenomenon in mosques, schools and universities.

The mental health and addiction treatment hospitals affiliated with the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population have also launched a campaign called "Your Life Deserves to Be Lived", inviting those who have suicidal tendencies to go to the closest government clinic when needed, in addition to launching a hotline in case of desire to communicate with specialists in order to get help or advice.

Sometimes, some observers related to the state indicate that the increasing dissemination of these suicide cases may encourage people to commit suicide through live broadcasts or in some public places to emphasize their message of condemning society.

Here comes the Media Code that the National Council for Media Regulation came up with under Decree No. 62 of 2021. This code imposes a number of obligations on newspapers and websites in publishing about suicide cases.

However, there are major fears that issuance of this law may be taken as a pretext to prevent websites or newspapers from publishing news and reports about suicides and address their causes, especially Articles 5, 6, 7, and 10, where Article 1 refers to banning highlighting suicide incidents in the media or the press, and Article 7 refers to maintaining privacy whoever has been subject to a suicide or an attempted suicide, and also refers to banning publishing any information, speculation or rumors about suicide cases, otherwise it would be considered as a violation of the rules of Public

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Prosecution investigations. This may prompt media outlets and websites to refrain from broadcasting videos or social media links about suicide incidents or suicide attempts in general.

With regard to committing suicide in public places, especially the Cairo subway, the most ridiculous thing is that the National Authority for Tunnels appeals to suicide folks not to use the facility as a place to commit suicide, without even trying to provide official statistics on these cases and trying to identify their causes.

Attempt to pass a bill to criminalize suicide

In this context, Ahmed Mehanna, a member of the House of Representatives (lower chamber of Parliament), last January presented the first draft law to criminalize suicide in light of the increase of suicide cases and the extensive dissemination of media reports about them in the media and press. Mehanna suggested punishing perpetrators of failed suicide attempts by placing them in certain clinics built for this purpose for a period of three months to three years, unless the judge decides otherwise, and subjecting the decision to release convicts to a committee charged with supervising inmates of these clinics.

The draft law also stipulates that any person who attempts suicide shall be punished with payment of fines. If a person attempts suicide once again, he shall face a fine of no less than 10,000 Egyptian pounds (\$640) and no more than 50,000 Egyptian pounds (\$3,200).

An overview of the above axes of the proposed bill shows that they do not go beyond adoption of a punitive approach against those who attempt committing suicide. However, the bill does not address the real causes behind all these suicide cases. The draft law does not also include articles requiring accountability of those that stand behind pushing people to resort to suicide, whether it was a principal, a teacher, an official, a university professor, or a even blackmailer.

The draft law does not address the real reasons behind the suicide case, but rather worsens it, as it does not place any responsibility on state agencies, whether for failing to provide any social assistance, or establish medical and psychological centers, or find solutions to the problems of young people wishing to work, study or form a new family.

Furthermore, the bill seems to implicitly encourage suicide by punishing those who fail to commit suicide by imposing major fines on them, which will certainly further increase their suffering, especially if the suicide was for material reasons such as extreme poverty or increased debts, or others.

Also, the legislation proposed to deal with suicide attempts through isolation of these persons away from society in a place that resembles a prison, will never succeed to solve the problem, as those persons may look for another way to commit suicide inside, even the isolation place.

The bill does not touch on the role of state policies in worsening the economic situation, exacerbating the problem of unemployment, dismissal of private sector workers, failure to improve the educational climate, and others.

In the end, such bills that do not take into account the deteriorating economic and social situation and do not offer any real solutions to the phenomenon of suicide, especially in light of the state's failure to build centers for rehabilitation and psychological guidance for such cases.

The state also does not have any serious studies that monitor the phenomenon of suicide in the governorates where it is significantly widespread, or the common ways and means of committing suicide there. This failure prevents the government from seeking solutions to the phenomenon. For example, one of the easy ways used to commit suicide in the Egyptian countryside is the so-called "poisonous grain", yet it is publicly sold in pharmacies at a very low price¹.

¹ The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egyptian Institute for Studies