U.S. Department of State
Overseas Security Advisory Council

Female Travel in the Middle East & North Africa: Considerations & Resources

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Overview

On top of the general concerns that all travelers encounter, women face additional concerns they must consider when traveling. The Middle East and North Africa on its own provides a unique problem set, as cultural, legal, and security issues must be considered when female travelers embark on travel. Often these cultural and religious customs tend to impact female travelers more than they do male travelers. While the majority of female travelers visit the Middle East and North Africa without incident, maintaining awareness of cultural norms and expectations can help to ensure safe travels anywhere.

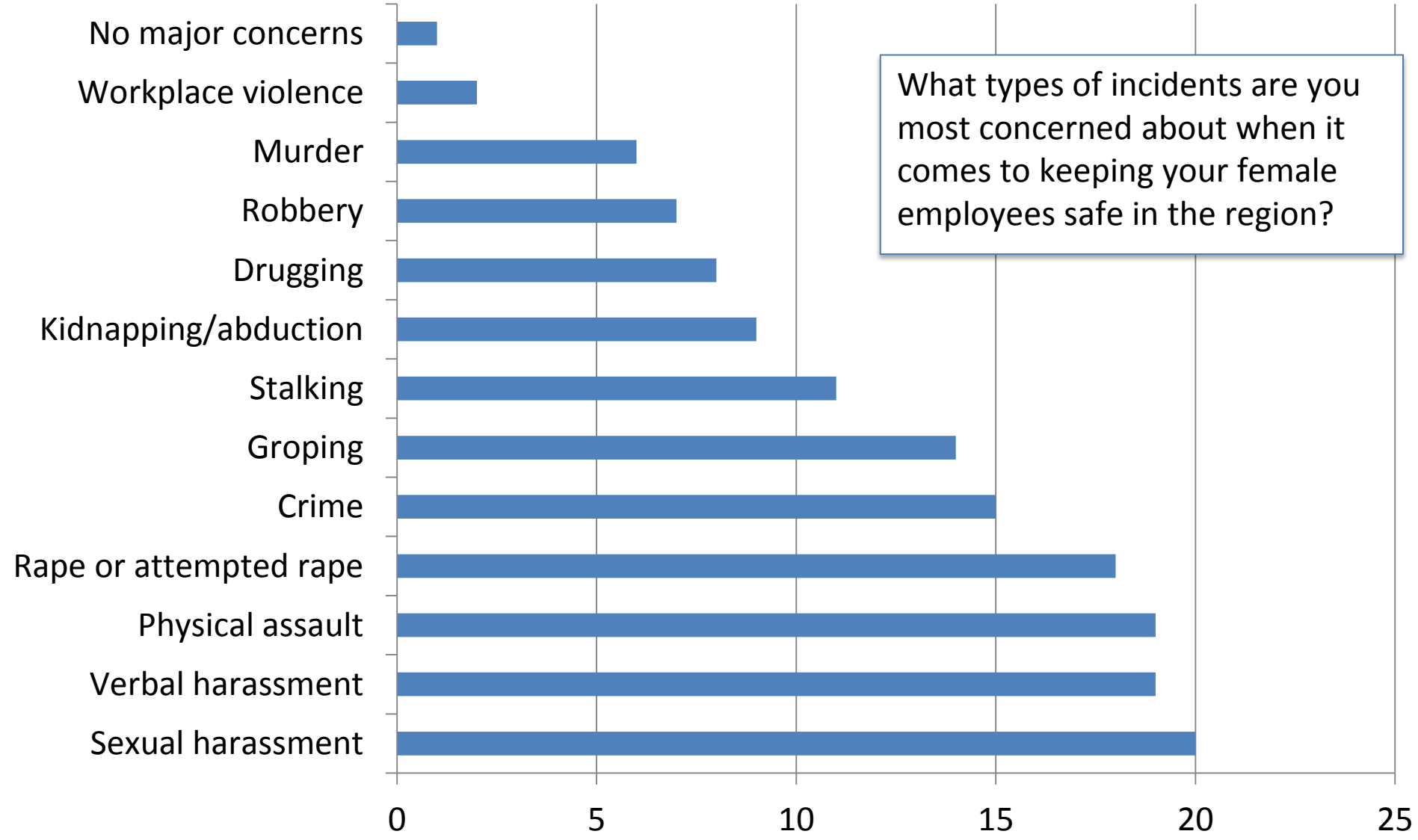
OSAC surveyed members of the Middle East and North Africa Regional Council (MENA RC) regarding safety issues they were more concerned about for female travelers in the Middle East and North Africa. A majority of responses highlighted the importance of understanding local cultures and norms, wearing appropriate clothing to avoid unwanted attention, and sexual harassment. While these concerns transcend the region, understanding the specific cultural norms and risks in a given country can mitigate some uncomfortable situations and make for a more enjoyable experience for all travelers.

This report is designed to provide a high-level review of some of the areas in which female travelers to the region may experience problems and provide general advice and resources.

Benchmarking

When asked which countries in the region posed the greatest concern for female travelers, survey respondents overwhelmingly indicated Egypt followed by Saudi Arabia. In Egypt, concern over harassment and assault of females (both local and expatriate) has consistently been a major concern for travelers, with incidents highlighted during the 2011 Arab Spring protests when numerous women reported being assaulted in large crowds. Meanwhile, respondents specifically outlined that concerns for travel to Saudi Arabia were less about security issues but more about the inconveniences of travel and dealing with Mutawwa (religious police). Other countries frequently mentioned were Iraq, Lebanon, and Morocco.

Benchmarking



Benchmarking

When asked “is there any one safety issue that you are more concerned about for female travelers to the Middle East and North Africa than other locations?” constituents were mostly concerned with the below themes:

<u>Cultural norms and modesty</u>

- “Wearing appropriate clothing. Female employees should be advised about dressing in accordance with the cultural/religious expectations of a given country.”
- “Awareness training of cultural differences, for example if the females need to wear clothing to cover their arms completely.”

<u>Sexual assault & harassment</u>

- “The potential for robbery or mugging to turn into sexual assault.”
- “Groping and attempted rape.”
- “Arrest/harassment by religious police in Saudi Arabia.”
- “Sexual harassment and rape or attempted rape are our main concerns in the region.”

<u>Concerns regarding hotel rooms being entered during the evening</u>

- “Most female travelers have reported that someone tried to enter or actually entered their room late at night.“

Cultural Norms & Local Laws

Local norms and laws can be a significant barrier to safe travel to the region, especially for female travelers. Proper research can allow for an educated traveler to mitigate potential concerns ahead of time. When traveling to the Middle East and North Africa some considerations should be made to the following issues:

- Limitations to women's movements. Such restrictions are most acute in Saudi Arabia, where women are not permitted to drive vehicles or socialize with unrelated men. Other countries may also enforce segregation at specific times and places.
- Travel Holds. In some countries, women can be subject to travel holds in which husbands or other male relatives can legally prevent departure from a country. Jordan and Egypt both maintain such policies.
- Behavior deemed inappropriate between men and women. Public displays of affection or comingling can be an issue in some countries. In the United Arab Emirates, it is against the law to share a hotel room with a member of the opposite sex if unmarried or unrelated.

In the region, Saudi Arabia has some of the most stringent restrictions on gender relations. Many businesses have separate entrances for men and women, while public transportation is entirely segregated. Restaurants often are separated into "family" and "bachelor" sections. Some places may offer different hours for men vs. women and children. Saudi Arabia's Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV, also called Mutawwa) are given authority to enforce Sharia Law. The Mutawwa have accosted or arrested foreign nationals for improper dress or other alleged infractions.

Cultural Norms & Local Laws Cont'd

- Criminalization for victims of sexual assault. Of specific concern are laws that criminalize a victim who reports rape or sexual assault, generally for engaging in sexual relations outside marriage. In 2013, a Norwegian woman was given a 16-month prison sentence in Dubai after reporting a rape by a colleague. The woman was sentenced on charges of having unlawful sex, making a false statement, and illegal consumption of alcohol. Another consideration is that in places where there is no law criminalizing the victim, some authorities may still be more lax to investigate such crimes.

- Modest dress. Some countries have specific customs regarding appropriate dress in public, such as Saudi Arabia. However, even in countries that appear less conservative, failure to dress modestly may draw unwanted attention. For many countries in the region, it is advisable to be sensitive to Islamic culture and wear conservative clothing to avoid unwanted attention.

Qatar launched a public awareness campaign targeting Western visitors in 2014. "Reflect Your Respect" leaflets and social media aim to encourage more conservative dress as well as discourage public displays of affection and remind visitors that drinking alcohol is prohibited outside hotel bars.

Harassment

Harassment can come in many forms, from unwanted comments to following an individual. In some countries, harassment of women is commonplace. In many North African countries, for example, female travelers can face high levels of harassment in public areas. Responding to verbal harassment may escalate the situation; often, the best course of action is to not respond or make eye contact with the harasser. Women traveling alone are generally more likely to face harassment. Basic precautions may help to decrease the likelihood of harassment, such as:

- Avoid travel to unfamiliar areas at night
- Avoid traveling alone
- Do not ride in the front seat of a taxi
- Dress modestly in public
- Avoid engaging in small talk or making eye contact; doing so can be misinterpreted as over-friendliness or a form of propositioning by some taxi drivers in the UAE.
- In some countries, travelers may consider wearing a wedding ring, even if unmarried, to avoid unwanted attention

In Egypt, incidents of harassment range from lewd comments and gestures to indecent exposures and inappropriate physical contact. Harassment can occur anywhere, but particularly serious incidents have occurred at protests and large public gatherings. During the 2011 Arab Spring protests in Cairo, there were several reports of women, including foreign women, facing harassment and assault amid protests and large crowds.

Sexual Assault

Female travelers are more likely to be victimized by sexual assault; approximately 80-90% of victims are female. Overall, crimes are widely believed to be underreported, so exact statistics are very difficult to come by. The term refers to a broad range of sexual offenses, and includes unwanted touching.

In some countries, there may be no place to seek assistance following a sexual assault. For example, there are no rape crisis centers or women's shelters in Kuwait, where it is advisable to seek medical attention and collection of evidence prior to reporting a crime to police. Protections and assistance afforded victims to domestic violence and sexual assault are not the same as those in the U.S., and the U.S. Embassy's ability to provide assistance is limited.

As mentioned earlier, in some countries, laws may criminalize a victim of rape or sexual assault for a number of reasons, including engaging in sexual relations outside marriage or illegal consumption of alcohol. In areas where there are no specific laws that criminalize the victim, the process for reporting and seeking assistance may be burdensome and/or insensitive.

U.S. citizen travelers impacted by sexual assault can contact the Office of Overseas Citizens Services or their nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate to report an incident and seek assistance.

Hotel Accommodations

Many survey respondents highlighted concerns about intrusions into the hotel rooms of female employees. Even at hotels with good security practices, crimes and assaults can happen. In 2014, a British businesswoman reported being raped by a security guard who she asked to walk her back to her room at a luxury resort in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt.

Some recommendations to consider for safety inside hotels:

- Bring a door stopper to keep out intruders
- Request a room near the hotel lobby to avoid walking down a long corridor
- Book and check in using only first initial and surname (avoiding a female-specific title like Miss, Ms., or Mrs.)

Increasingly hotels have designated women-only floors. The women-only floors are designed both for security--often limiting access to those on that specific floor-- as well as for comfort and convenience. Hotels in cities such as Riyadh and Dubai currently offer female-only floor options. Riyadh is thus far the only city to offer a women-only hotel.

Transportation

The use of taxis and public transportation can be a threat in any region of the world for both female and male travelers. Buses, subways, and trains tend to be areas vulnerable to harassment and criminal activity. Taxis leave an individual in a closed space with an unknown individual.

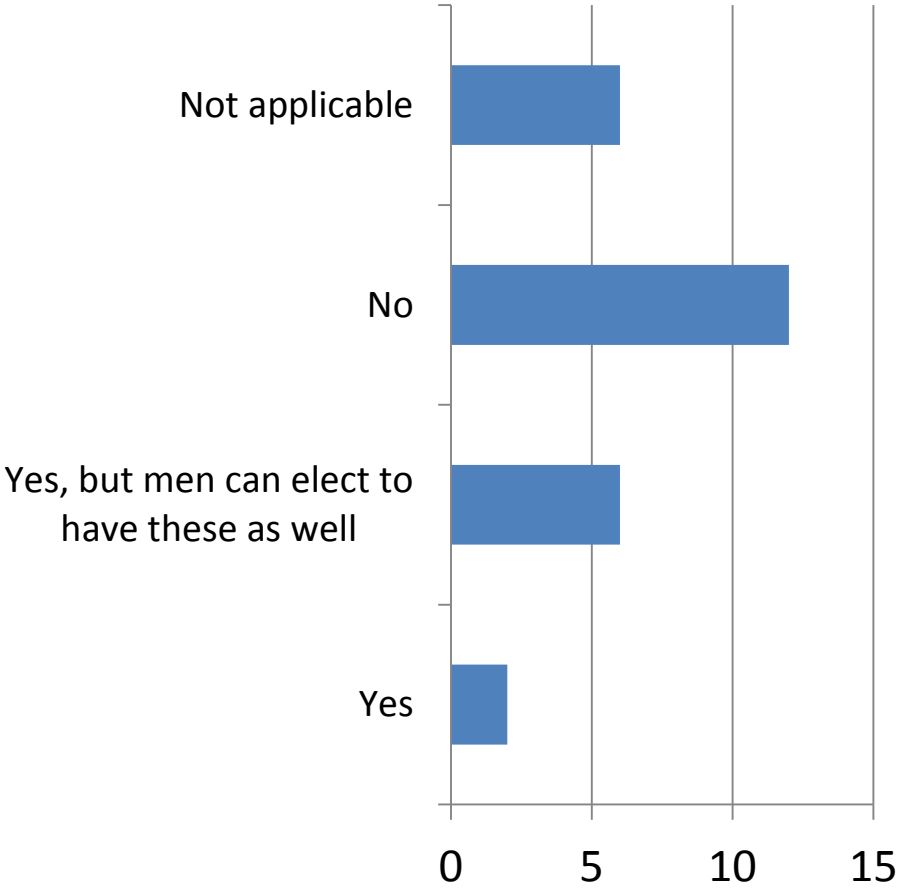
In countries where taking a taxi is generally considered safe, female travelers are reminded to sit in the back seat, directly behind the driver, to limit the driver's proximity.

Using vetted taxi services and arranging taxis from hotels and restaurants rather than hailing them from off the street, in general, is believed to limit risk exposure. However, in 2014, an OSAC constituent reported that a young female U.S. citizen employee was assaulted by a taxi driver in Istanbul. During the incident, the taxi driver pulled over in an unfamiliar area and pressured the passenger to move to the front seat, at which point he placed his hand on her leg and held her hand until arriving at the airport. In this case, the taxi had been arranged through the hotel, generally thought to ensure a heightened degree of security.

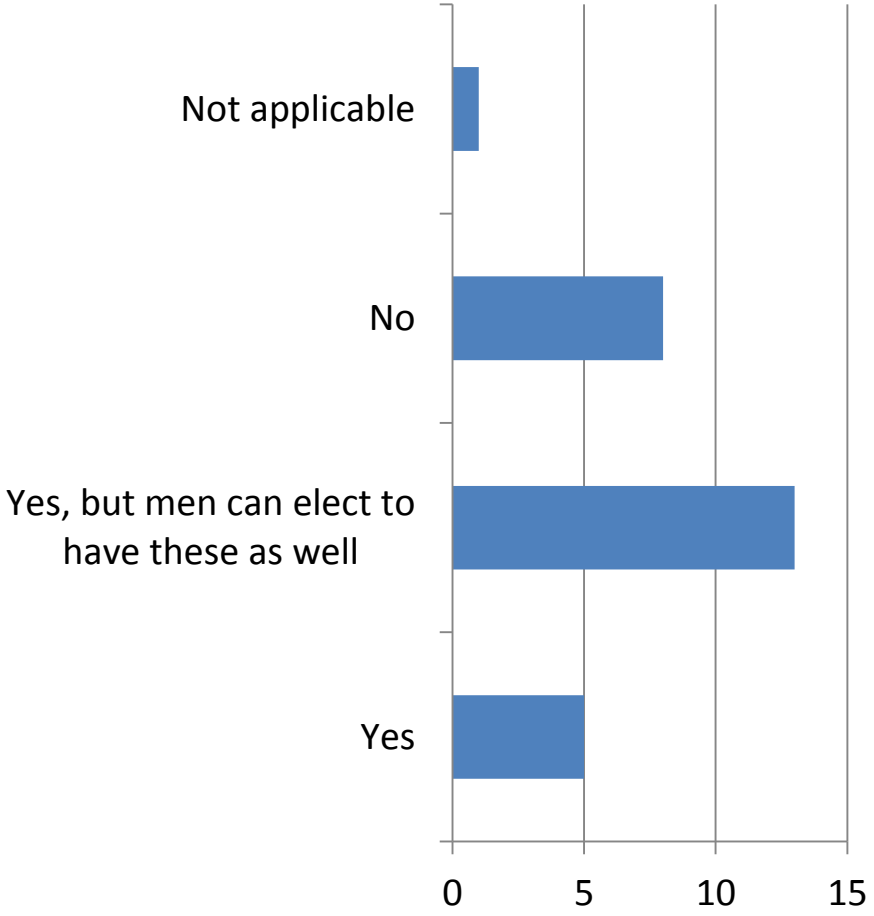
Similar to women-only hotel floors, many urban areas are seeing the emergence of women-only taxi services or train cars. These services, often called "pink taxis" may be more accessible in urban areas. Currently, such services exist in the UAE, Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain.

Benchmarking

Does your organization provide additional security measures for your female employees who *live and work* in the region:



Does your organization provide additional security measures for your female employees who *travel* to the region?



Resources

Department of State: [Information for Women Travelers]

UK Government: [Rape and Sexual Assault Abroad]

Australian Government: [Female Travelers]

Australian Government: [Sexual Assault Overseas]

[Harassmap] (Egypt-Specific)

Harassmap: [Towards a Safer City]

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For additional information on this report or on travel to specific countries in the region, please contact OSAC's Middle East & North Africa team at OSACnea@state.gov.