As soon as Mubarak stepped down, the utopian nature of what one could call a ‘First World’—the ‘West’ or the ‘North’—the ‘Barra’—the ‘West’ or the ‘First World’—could be labelled as conspicuously cosmopolitan.

Our discussion soon converged on the importance of coffee shops for women. “Coffee shops were able to gather girls from their houses and the club,” Amal said. “Before, we did not have places where we could spend time after work.” The overwhelming presence of women in most coffee shops indeed presented one of the striking features of coffee shop social life. In these upscale coffee shops both veiled and non-veiled women often constituted more than half of the customers. Many single professional women like Amal and Miriyam had taken to spending much of their time in coffee shops such as the Retro Café.

Since their introduction in the mid-1990s, these conspicuously cosmopolitan coffee shops have become emblematic of a young, upper-middle-class presence in Cairo’s urban landscape. The US style coffee shop formula turned out to be ideally suited for the Cairene context, since it was part of global flows of distinctive cultural consumption yet was not associated with ‘immoral’ spaces of alcohol and subterranean sexuality such as bars or nightclubs. Upmarket coffee shops provided upper-middle-class professionals with new opportunities for socialising, finding partners and other forms of networking and self-presentation.

Coffee shops had wrested such mixed-gender social settings away from associations with immorality and loose sexual behaviour that clung to less exclusive mixed-gender spaces outside the redemptive familial sphere, and thereby offered young female professionals the opportunity of respectable public lifestyles.

The rather exclusive context of the coffee shop helped frame a woman’s appearance and behaviour as upper-middle-class and thereby guaranteed that her presence in that space would be read as part of a respectable lifestyle. However, in the streets, where upmarket norms are not hegemonic,
such representations could easily be overturned. The same fashionable cut (sleeveless top) would seem out of place but could also be taken as a sign of disrepute and easy morals—an open invitation to comments and even harassment.

**Gendered fears and the fragility of class**

The urban trajectories of these Cairene women show us a city that is crosscut by intersecting fault lines of gender, class, age and lifestyle. They navigated the city based on experiential maps of the city that included spaces of comfort and belonging in which they expected their presence to be framed as respectable and the general public to be held to those same standards of respectability. Their maps also featured open, less class-specific spaces, such as streets, in which they knew they could not control social identifications and feared they might be misidentified.

The public presence of these female urban professionals had become one of the most significant markers of the young upper-middle-class culture that had developed in Cairo’s new leisure spaces in the 1990s. This public presence was, however, fragile and evoked severe anxieties about the possible harm that could come to female upper-middle-class bodies in the city’s public spaces.

The dangers that being in public represented for the upper-middle-class female body were simultaneously symbolic and physical. Just as upper-middle-class women’s reputations were easily damaged or ruined, upper-middle-class bodies were easily harmed and defiled. The sense of privilege that emanated from this female public presence as the manifestation of a conspicuously cosmopolitan class project, was thus matched by a strong sense of fragility and threat.


1. This article is a revised and abridged version of De Koning (2009a).

2. All names used are pseudonyms.