

Women's Digital Activism in a Changing Middle East

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An amusing and indicative sign of changing times,¹ in December 2014 Saudi cleric Ahmad 'Aziz al-Ghamdi, a religious scholar and former head of the religious police in Mecca (officially known as the Committee for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice), ignited a fierce national debate regarding the niqab when he replied positively to a tweet by a Saudi woman asking if it was permissible in Islam for her to post a picture of her face on social media.² His affirmative answer went viral and his Twitter feed received more than 10,000 comments, ranging from congratulations to death threats. He subsequently appeared on *Badriya*, the popular weekly TV talk show broadcast from Dubai, together with his wife, Jawahir bint Shaykh 'Ali, who appeared without a face veil and wearing make-up.³

Across the region, the use of social media in processes of change has produced new descriptive coinages, usually by external observers. Thus "Facebook Revolution" and "Twitter Revolution," synecdoches for complex political and social dynamics, found a home in global public discourse even as they have been criticized for both overstating and obfuscating the role of social media in change. Such hyped constructions function as zombie categories, explaining little about either new media or political process. Of course social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were used within the Arab Spring movements of 2010–11. Twitter's use in particular has risen considerably in Saudi Arabia where, as elsewhere in the region, a sizeable proportion of the population is under thirty-five and accesses the internet via mobile phone, making it one of the world's top Internet markets.

But citizen movements and political struggles for democracy and rights in the region did not begin with the Arab Spring, and neither did women's political activity. Online politics and material social movements are not ontologically different activities but rather different modes of being political. Yet it is reasonable to suggest that access to the Internet, the development of social media platforms in English and Arabic, and the growing popular awareness of change have produced a more conducive environment for women's political activities and thus for a general enlargement of what counts as the "sphere of the political."

Unfortunately, recent regional reports on trends in the Arab online environment and social media pay little or no attention to gender, so that it remains extremely difficult to gain any kind of statistical picture of women's online usage and activities.⁴ Other international measures such as the World Economic Forum's analysis of the "gender gap" in 2014 suggest that the region ranks the lowest in terms of reducing the gaps between men and women across a number of economic and political indicators.⁵ But given the globally widespread violence toward women, ongoing misogyny, and lack of gender equality, the MENA region is most interesting not as an example of any kind of exceptionalism but rather as a vivid scene of the range of difficulties and struggles with

which women are currently involved as well as both the possibilities and limitations of the online environment.

First, and even at the anecdotal level, it is evident that there is a plethora of digital activity by women across the region. Many women were and became active in the broad-based social mobilizations of 2010–11 and they and others have been active since. Some blogged, some took photographs, some graffitied walls, some tweeted. There is no obvious dominance of one social media platform or variety of digital engagement over another. Web pages and websites, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are used singly and together, as local practices and preferences combine. What does seem clear is that the mobile phone diffusion in the region is giving many more women access to the net and the possibility for all kinds of communication beyond the control of both parents and male relatives, including husbands.

Second, after transnational broadcasting, the possibilities of the Internet have pushed further the spatial turn in media studies and a strong critique of “methodological nationalism.”⁶ Rather than appropriating a Habermasian notion of a singular “public sphere,” it is perhaps more useful to think of online communication as building diverse communicative networks with nodes of linkage. Much of women’s online activity in the region has a national origin and focus, with considerable activity in and particular to Egypt, Iran, and Tunisia; much is conducted in regional languages such as Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Evidence of cross-regional influences and campaigns are hard to come by, although one might posit an “energy effect” as change suddenly became thinkable across the region—and, indeed, internationally, as Tunis sparked Cairo sparked Wisconsin sparked Gezi, and so forth.

A great deal of material is publicized in English and French, and many sites provide links to other campaigns and events happening elsewhere, addressing transnational feminist sympathies. And it is evident that much of this online activity is conducted and aided by what can be broadly termed “Middle East diasporas” in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere. Such activity seems to be broadly indigenous and locally driven, although funding from various international and nonlocal nongovernmental organizations does support activities around gender empowerment and equality. Entrenched political voices in the region like to label women’s activities as manipulated from the outside, while the sudden recognition of the plight of Afghan women by US politicians did little to challenge that opinion. But the Internet makes boundaries porous, blurring the inside and outside of national spaces, and emergent transnational interconnections between women in the region and beyond are worthy of analysis.

Third, and as elsewhere, in the online environment individual voices get amplified and can make a difference. There were and are many individually renowned female activists.⁷ Well-known Egyptian tweeters include Gigi Ibrahim and Mona Seif, the latter active in the “No to Military Trials for Civilians” campaign; there are Saudi bloggers and Iraqi Kurdish Facebook activists. Activist Lina Ben Mhenni maintains the Facebook page “Tunisian Girl,” on which she shared “the experience of a Tunisian Cyber activist under the regime of Ben Ali,” gathering over 90,000 likes.⁸ Also in Tunisia, Olfa Riahi became famous when her blog broke the country’s biggest postrevolutionary news story, known as Sheratongate, and helped to save the country’s liberal revolution from the Islamists.⁹

Fourth, women’s activities are extending not only the nature but also the content of what is thought of as “political.” Chantal Mouffe has argued that there is no inherent

distinction between what constitutes the social and what constitutes the political; rather, she suggests, a social issue becomes “political” when it is brought into public contestation.¹⁰ That is what women’s online activity is doing—putting new issues into public contention. Much of the current debate across the region about violence and antiharassment was triggered by the spate of attacks that Egyptian and other women experienced while demonstrating in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, and their online response. The savage beating of an abaya-clad female protester by Egyptian military forces was captured on phones and graphic videos uploaded to YouTube and Facebook. Known as Blue Bra Girl,¹¹ she became an icon of the fight against repression, as women using the hashtag #bluebra took to the streets in one of the largest demonstrations by Egyptian women in a long time.¹² There are numerous stories of gender harassment emanating from Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and elsewhere; HarassMap monitors sexual harassment and assault in Egypt and is developing a manifesto to support safe schools and universities.¹³ In Iran, recent acid attacks against women on the streets of Isfahan gave rise to large demonstrations, images of which were posted on Twitter and opposition websites. In 2014 the “My Stealthy Freedom” campaign took off with a Facebook page that has attracted thousands of Iranian women who have dared take off their veil inside the Islamic Republic and post a photograph of themselves.¹⁴

Other foci of online activity include promoting women’s awareness of rights, ability to obtain national ID cards, and participation in elections. And some is more economic in orientation, raising funds to support female entrepreneurs, allowing women to market goods directly without costly middlemen, or providing information and support for what is called women’s “economic empowerment.”

So women have been involved as newly empowered citizens in the social movements directed at the contemporary state-formations that maintain neopatriarchal policies and at existing legal and regulatory limitations. Women are challenging the regional state formations to recognize their rights—and those of other minority groups—as political citizens, as consumers, and as emerging interest groups. While it remains to be seen whether the proliferation of new voices in the virtual sphere can produce material changes, the political milieu has certainly been altered.

Fifth, women are also asking questions about gender roles, sexual identities that challenge older patriarchal cultures, and the habitus and practices that limit not only women’s but also men’s sexuality. Women in particular are challenging prevailing social attitudes—often as sanctioned and manifest by state-run broadcasting media—and the existing, often policed, boundaries between the public and private, turning once “private” matters of domestic violence and sexuality into public and political ones. Women are breaking social taboos, raising new issues, and showing the enduring power of patriarchal values that lie before and behind state power.

Across the region, LGBTQI support networks have sprung up. Ahwaa,¹⁵ a regional grassroots digital network, aims to create a safe space to debate LGBTQI-related issues. Ikhtyar (Choice) is a research collective aiming to create “indigenous knowledge around gender and sexuality trends” in Arabic, so as to be “the knowledge producer, not just the subject of study.”¹⁶ Online groups provide support for those who identify as LGBTQI in order to combat what is sometimes termed the “digital closet”; Helem¹⁷ supports the Lebanese LGBTQI; Solidarity with Egypt LGBT is a new and highly active network,¹⁸ while the Palestinian Aswat aims to be pan-regional.¹⁹

Yet, sixth, if women are harassed in the flesh in many places, the online environment has sadly not been all that much safer, resonating a contemporary global problem. Women online have suffered from censorship and state surveillance in Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and beyond, but also, as in other parts of the world, including the “liberal” West, from trolling and online harassment by local men. Many regional political activists are digital adepts and have learned to use TOR software and fake online profiles for online anonymity and filter-breakers to circumvent state monitoring.

The region thus manifests vividly the standoff between Clay Shirky’s uber-optimism and Evgeny Morozov’s uber-pessimism about the possibilities of online activism to produce systemic change. In 2010–11, the states of the region understood and could better control physical demonstrations than they understood and could handle invisible online organizing. They are learning those lessons fast, detaining and imprisoning bloggers and journalists, although, as of yet, the “halal” and national Internets proposed by Iran and Egypt have not emerged. Despite the difficulties, the people of the region are making their presence felt like never before, in physical demonstrations of somatic solidarity as well as through a full range of new media techniques available for Internet political activism. The region’s women are speaking about many issues and with many voices, with or without clerical support and male rescuers, and challenging both state power *and* masculinist hegemony (while, of course, a third challenge comes from the regressive side of Islamist politics, with Islamic State attracting some women into its fold). All of this is in its own way a significant if narrowly defined “political” change. If women were to be not only heard but also listened to, that would produce significant sociocultural effects.

NOTES

¹I am indebted to Farida Hammad at SOAS for her excellent research into Arabic sources for Middle Eastern women’s online activities.

²Deborah Amos, “A Tweet on Women’s Veils, Followed by Raging Debate in Saudi Arabia,” 17 December 2014, accessed 11 January 2015, <http://n.pr/13p1fhC>.

³See “Awwal Zuhur al-Shaykh Ahmad al-Ghamadi wa-Zawjatuhu ‘ala Qanat MBC ma’ Badriya al-Bashar,” YouTube video, televised by MBC, posted 13 December 2014, accessed 11 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBdCoCIWZCk&feature=youtu.be>.

⁴2014 UAE Social Media Outlook: *Increasing Connectivity Between Government and Citizen* (Dubai: Muhammad bin Rashid School of Government, 2014), accessed 11 January 2015, <http://www.mbrsg.ae/getattachment/3122bce8-b0e3-48e7-872e-2644fceb71ff/2014-UAE-Social-Media-Outlook-Increasing-connectiv.aspx>; *The World Online 2014: Trends in Internet and Mobile Usage in the Arab Region* (Dubai: Muhammad bin Rashid School of Government, 2014), accessed 11 January 2015, <http://www.mbrsg.ae/getattachment/f170c2c5-0fce-405d-b23f-93c198d4ca44/The-Arab-World-Online-2014-Trends-in-Internet-and.aspx>.

⁵*The Global Gender Gap Report 2014* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2014), accessed 11 January 2015, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR14/GGGR_CompleteReport_2014.pdf.

⁶Sadly, Ulrich Beck, who revived the idea and who is cited in current debates, died suddenly in early 2015. See Ulrich Beck, *What Is Globalization?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

⁷Any list would be limited and could be expanded to include other names and sites. Those included are intended to reflect the range of issues and geographic locations covered by such activities.

⁸Tunisian Girl’s Facebook page, accessed 11 January 2015, https://www.facebook.com/pages/Tunisian-Girl-le-petit-livre/141641589260364?fref=pb&hc_location=profile_browser.

⁹She revealed that the foreign minister used government expenses for hotels while having an affair, a story that became a major embarrassment to a conservative government that prided itself on its religious morality. See

Thomas A. Bass, "A Woman Blogger's Scoop Helped Save Tunisia from Islamists," *The Daily Beast*, 6 April 2014, accessed 11 January 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/04/06/a-woman-blogger-s-scoop-helped-save-tunisia-from-islamists.html>.

¹⁰Mouffe Chantal, *On the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

¹¹Issandr El Amrani, "The Girl," *The Arabist*, 17 December 2011, <http://arabist.net/blog/2011/12/17/the-girl.html>.

¹²Isobel Coleman, "'Blue Bra Girl' Rallies Egypt's Women vs. Oppression," *CNN*, updated 22 December 2011, accessed 11 January 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/12/22/opinion/coleman-women-egypt-protest/>.

¹³HarassMap, accessed 11 January 2015, <http://harassmap.org/en/>.

¹⁴My Stealthy Freedom's Facebook page, accessed 11 January 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom?fref=ts>.

¹⁵AHWAA, accessed 11 January 2015, <https://ahwaa.org>.

¹⁶Ikhtiyar, accessed 11 January 2015, <http://www.ikhtyar.org>.

¹⁷Helem, accessed 11 January 2015, <http://www.helem.net>.

¹⁸Solidarity with Egypt LGBT's Facebook page, accessed 11 January 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/sweglgbt>.

¹⁹*Majallat Aswat*, accessed 11 January 2015, <http://www.aswatmag.com/>.