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Cyberfeminism and its Political Implications for Women in the Arab World

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RITA STEPHAN, AUG 28 2013

In 2011 Lina Ben Mhenni, a blogger for *A Tunisian Girl*, shook the world when she blogged, tweeted, and reported on Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation and the turmoil that followed. In subsequent weeks, the world witnessed the outburst of the Arab Spring and the emergence of Tunisian women 'everywhere on social media outlets' expressing both solidarity with the Bouazizi family and dissent with the authoritarian regime.[i] Uprisings that followed across the Arab world witnessed the same phenomenon: women and youth using social media to claim their place in the uprisings and to express their dissidence against the prevailing oppressive circumstances.

Arab women's use of cyberspace and social media outlets as a means for activism and cyberfeminism far predates the Arab Spring. Since 1999, Arab women have been using cyberspace to organize collectively and safely. This article investigates how Arab women use social media to foster their activism. It advances the argument that Arab women use cyberfeminism as an extension of their on-the-ground gendered-power struggles against patriarchal and oppressive political and social institutions. Ultimately, cyberfeminism equips women with familiar tools which they are effectively using for national causes in the Arab Spring.

Cyberactivism and Cyberfeminism

Cyberactivism, according to Hawthorne and Klein, is 'the act of using the internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline... to create intellectually and emotionally compelling digital artifacts that tell stories of injustice, interpret history, and advocate for particular political outcomes.'[ii] The use of electronic communication technologies facilitates activism by offering inexpensive and extensive means for communications among transnational actors.[iii] However, the social cost of engagement has been rising with the success of cyberactivism in increasing civic engagement on the grounds—as the world witnessed in Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain.

Likewise, cyberfeminism, as an expression of the feminist discourse on marginalization in cyberspace, is 'an emerging viewpoint within the field of feminist theory [...] which aims to overcome the power differences that exclude women in the masculine digital sphere.'[iv] Cyberfeminism has allowed women to escape the patriarchal control of centralized organizations by providing them with a space where their fragmented subjectivities can exist.[v] Cyberspace has been particularly suited and familiar to women's activism, according to Vogt and Chen[vi] because 'its lack of institutional and cultural norms is similar to the nontraditional spaces that the women's movement has created since its beginning'.[vii] In fact, the Internet is among the few spaces outside mainstream politics that are accessible to minorities and women's activism.[viii] With over 800 million Facebook users globally, 200 million tweets generated daily, and thousands of Youtube videos, blog updates and pictures posted daily, cyberspace has proven to be the new space for individuals, activists, and supporters to become more informed and involved.[ix]

Arab Women Activists and Cyberfeminism

For over a decade, Arab women activists have used cyberspace as an instrument for their feminism. Scholars note how Arab women created online 'alternative discursive spaces where it is possible to redefine patriarchal gender roles while questioning the socio-cultural, economical, political, and legal institutions constraining them.'[x]

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Cyberspace offered Arab women the opportunity to further their political participation by signing petitions, writing letters, donating to groups, and publicizing and disseminating information for global and local causes, from the comfort of their own personal computers.[xi]

Initially, women's use of the Internet was mostly uncontested. The conservative patriarchal social structure and its apparatus viewed women's amusement with computers as a way to further their exclusion from the physical world. In fact, 'Everyone presupposes that the Internet will now pave the way for the Arab woman to do business safely – from the privacy of her home. Online, she can work within the parameters that her patriarchal culture has set for her.'[xii]

Despite the flexibility, freedom, and relative safety that cyberspace affords Arab women, activists, and feminists, cyberactivism is not without its challenges and limitations. First, the noticeable increase in the rates of Internet connectivity throughout the Arab world is not universal. Internet penetration in countries like Syria, Yemen, Tunisia and Egypt is still limited. In 2010, only 20.7% of Syrians, 12.4% of Yemenis, 36.8% of Tunisians and 26.7% of Egyptians use the Internet; and even fewer people are connected via Twitter and Facebook.[xiii] Moreover, women's access to cyberspace continues to be restricted by high female illiteracy rates and unfamiliarity with foreign languages (mostly English), in which most of the information on the web is available. In addition, many regimes exercise further restrictions on Internet usage directly and indirectly by banning access to certain web sites, exercising strong limitations on freedom of the Net, or by not offering fast connections. [xiv] Another challenge to Arab women's connectivity is the patriarchal cultural discourse that maintains rigid sexual propriety and honor as center to social structure. Many see a danger in allowing women free access to the Internet. In 2004, Al-Qabas, a Kuwaiti newspaper, reported a new fatwa given by two Saudi sheikhs forbidding women from using the Internet unless accompanied by a knowledgeable *mahrem* (male guardian) familiar with the ways of promiscuous and dishonorable women.[xv] These limitations are exemplified by that fact that while half of global Facebook users are women, in the Middle East, they only comprise one-third of region's users.[xvi]

Online Advocacy

In light of these challenges, Arab women first used cyberspace to discover, participate, interact, post information, seek answers, date, chat, share ideas, and find kindred spirits.[xvii] Since 1999, they discovered its utility to advance their activism and design their own forms of feminism. They used the Internet to raise consciousness of women's issues, engage in grassroots mobilization for improving women's conditions, and conduct and publish research on social and gender inequalities.[xviii] Most recently, they increased their utility of cyberspace as an additional outlet to their public sphere activism by creating blogs and listservs, posting videos and pictures, and using social media sites, among other things for mass mobilization during the Arab Spring.

The first Arab women's advocacy group to expand their activism into cyberspace was the Arab Women's Solidarity Association International United (AWSA-United). Founded in Egypt under the leadership of Dr. Nawal Al-Saadawi in 1982, AWSA's mission was to '[link] the struggle of Arabs for liberation and freedom from economic, cultural, and media domination to the liberation of Arab women.' In the years following its inception, additional chapters were established in the United States, and in 1999 AWSA-United was created with a mandate making it institutionally and logistically distinct from other AWSA chapters.[xix]

AWSA-United emerged as a listserv to provide a space for Arab women and their allies to share information and discuss issues relevant to Arab women's lives and experiences. Members found in AWSA-United an outlet to chat, express their opinions, sign online petitions, take polls, post links and articles relevant to Arab women's issues, and correspond with one another. In doing so, AWSA-United pioneered the use of cyberspace for feminist activism by helping foster individual and collective identities, connecting hundreds of members across six continents, and offering members the opportunity to further their activism through various forms of online expression.

The advent of social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and LinkedIn among others, led to a decline in the use of listservs. The decline was overcompensated by an increase in the number of Arab women's advocacy groups that use cyberspace as a medium for their activism. In the years following AWSA-United's inception, groups such as Lebanese *Nasawiya* and partner organizations like KAFA and CRTD-A turned to cyberactivism to

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supplement their advocacy work. Founded by Lebanese feminists in 2005, *Nasawiya* tackles issues such as domestic violence, abuse of female domestic workers, women's art, male-centered knowledge, and sexual diversity. In the post-2005 era, *Nasawiya* and its partner organizations use social media outlets as instruments to disseminate information, recruit supporters, provide improved connectivity between members, and raise awareness.[xx]

Cyberactivism and the Arab Spring

The outburst of the Arab Spring drew greater attention to women's cyberactivism in countries like Tunisia and Egypt where women turned to the Internet as a means of protest. Women capitalized on cyberspace instruments including Facebook and Twitter as well as YouTube, blogs, and picture uploading sites to make their voices heard, challenge the norms, and link the fight for women's rights and equality to the struggle of rebuilding their respective nations.

Tunisian blogger and activist Lina Ben Mhenni's blog was quickly blocked and her Facebook account suspended after reporting the incident of Bouazizi's self-immolation. Yet, Mhenni succeeded in using cyberactivism to draw global attention to the injustices being committed and to motivate Tunisian citizens to take a stance against oppression.[xxi] Soon after, numerous women followed suit, creating Facebook pages, tweeting, and posting pictures and videos to express their dissent and solicit the support of citizens and activists.[xxii]

In Egypt, at the peak of the protests almost one-quarter of a million Egyptian women flooded Tahrir Square protesting next to the men. Their presence online was even more dynamic.[xxiii] Through social media sites, women engaged in online activism not only by blogging, tweeting, and chatting, but also by organizing virtual protests, and contributing to citizen journalism.[xxiv] Egyptian women capitalized on the abundant resources available on cyberspace to act as intermediaries between the world and mainstream media and to ensure that an eye-witness source was consistently available, especially in contesting sexual terrorism and the public rapes of female protesters. Established activist Esraa Abdel Fattah became known as the 'Facebook girl' for using Facebook to help launch the April 6 movement in support of the workers strike. Likewise, Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian columnist and commentator, who was living in New York at the time of the Egyptian uprising, garnered thousands of followers as she used the Internet to convey to the world in English and Arabic the events that transpired.[xxv]

Both in Tunisia and Egypt, women relied on cyberspace to express their opinions, and draw the world's attention to their struggle. Cyberactivism in Egypt and Tunisia are but two representations of the larger scale activism that was carried out across the Arab world. The Arab Spring is characterized by women activists in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Syria engaging in cyberactivism and achieving unprecedented connectivity, mobilization, and support.

Successes in generating greater on-the-ground mobilization and disseminating information in efficient manners have advanced cyberactivism across the Arab world. In October 2011, the Facebook group *The Uprising of Women in the Arab World* was launched to urge women and men to unite against the oppression of women in the Arab World, adopting the slogan 'TOGETHER FOR FEARLESS, FREE, INDEPENDENT WOMEN IN THE ARAB WORLD!' This Facebook group calls for an uprising of Arab women in the name of gender equality and strives to raise awareness of the atrocities and injustices committed against women throughout the Arab world.[xxvi] Over 114,000 followers from around the world, posted pictures of themselves holding a poster with the following message: 'I support the Uprising of Women in the Arab World because...' These women and men listed several reasons that motivate them to support this e-movement. The significance of such a group is that it continues to grow in popularity with supporters, contributors, and commentators from all over the world. This Facebook page has gotten international recognition from several media outlets and policymakers, thinking that finally Arab women are rising!

Conclusion

While in 1999 AWSA-United was the first Arab women's group to engage in cyberfeminism, thousands of women today extend their activism online to amplify their on-the-ground activism in their struggle against social and political restraints. With the Arab Spring, Arab women launched cyberactivism by combining activism for women's inclusion in national dialogues and pursuing women's rights within the framework of the continued national struggles. Garnering national support and inspiring followers across the globe, the intersection between gender and culture has

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come to define transnational Arab cyberactivism and cyberfeminism.

Social media has become crucial to the discourse on social movements, activism, and feminism in that it affirms the presence of cyberfeminism and cyberactivism as viable forms of feminism and activism. Cyberspace has been transformed into a contested space for power struggle and gender power relations as cyberfeminism operates within this fragmented space to overcome the power differences that exclude women from the social, cultural, and digital spheres.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent the views of, and should not be attributed to, the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. Census Bureau.

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