

# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2013

Women's rights, gender and ICTs



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)  
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# Global Information Society Watch

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# EGYPT

Gender and civil rights: How effective is women's online activism?



## ArabDev

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### Introduction

ICTs were and continue to be an important tool for political resistance for Egyptian women. Egyptian women have used Web 2.0 channels for online disobedience, sabotage and resistance. There are many examples of women activists working online. This short report lists only a handful.

### Women's rights activists working online

Israa Abdel-Fattah co-founded the April 6th Youth Movement,<sup>1</sup> an activist group supporting industrial workers in the town of El Mahalla El Kubra. The movement created a Facebook page calling for a peaceful civil strike on 6 April 2008, asking Egyptians to wear black and abstain from public life that day. The strike included a wider protest against the general political and social degeneration in Egypt, including police tyranny and torture, political, judiciary and social injustice, and wide income disparities and illegal wealth. The strike call-out was also announced through Twitter, blogs and Flickr and gained mass popularity.

Israa Abdel-Fattah was arrested by the Egyptian security forces after the 6 April strike and kept in detention for two weeks. Despite the arrest, she continued her political participation and was an active protestor in the 25 January Revolution of 2011, where she communicated events on the ground via Facebook, Twitter and Al Jazeera.

Tens of thousands of youth members joined the April 6th Movement through its Facebook presence and it soon became the nucleus of youth activism against the Mubarak regime. They organised rallies and were a permanent target of police surveillance and repression.

Asmaa Mahfouz, a young woman, posted a YouTube message<sup>2</sup> urging people to protest Mubarak's corrupt government by rallying in Tahrir Square on 25 January. Her plea for participation was made

out of personal frustration after the lack of demonstrators at a rally just days before. Mahfouz used the patriarchal Egyptian stereotype of the vulnerable unmarried woman, the virgin,<sup>3</sup> to spur more participation in peaceful street rallies. She said: "I, a girl,<sup>4</sup> am going down to Tahrir Square, and I will stand alone. And I will hold up a banner. Perhaps people will show that they have some gumption.<sup>5</sup> Don't think you can be safe anymore. None of us is. Come down with us and demand your rights, my rights, your family's rights. I am going down on 25 January and will say no to corruption, no to this regime." The shaming technique worked, especially as it coincided with a boost to national pride after the ouster of the Tunisian president through a popular mass uprising.

Gigi Ibrahim<sup>6</sup> was a Twitter pioneer at the 25 January Revolution. She was one of the most outspoken Egyptian women right from the start, with an accurate vision predicting the end of the Mubarak regime. It should be noted, however, that she is an Egyptian who was raised in the United States and came back to Egypt as a university student.

### Using ICTs for protest

Current Egyptian women's activism is nearly synonymous with the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs). Most activists use at least one platform, or a combination of mobile communication, email and social networks, including Twitter. ICTs played a major role in exchange, with information being shared quickly, points of view being discussed, and actions organised throughout the Egyptian revolution and its aftermath. For women, the internet, especially the social networks and Twitter, were a convenient way to express their opinions, call for national and international alerts to sexual attacks and harassment, call for rallies and boycotts, voice their opposing points of view, and uncover and warn about attacks and dangers.

<sup>1</sup> [www.6april.org/](http://www.6april.org/)

<sup>2</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgjlGmDsEuk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgjlGmDsEuk)

<sup>3</sup> Which is a very real vulnerability in light of the constant harassment that women, especially young ones, face on the streets of Egypt.

<sup>4</sup> A "girl" means an unmarried woman, aka virgin, in colloquial Arabic.

<sup>5</sup> Here she used shaming as she was especially addressing men, as in, "If a 'girl' can do this, where are you?"

<sup>6</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gihan\\_Ibrahim](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gihan_Ibrahim)

Online protests over “virginity tests” and gender-based violence translated into street protests. The rape incidents in Tahrir Square on 8 June 2012 went public through social networks, including pictures and video clips, resulting in an immediate national and international outcry.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the experience, the internet has allowed Egyptian women to transcend the barriers that restrain and impede their political and social participation.

Facebook has been widely used as a communication tool between groups of Egyptians where women were often leading the conversation, urging participation in the many rallies and protests that were organised during the anti-Mubarak uprisings and later on in the attempt to formulate the new state.

### The marginalisation of Egyptian women protestors

Nevertheless, despite Egyptian women’s active presence online and in the streets, they were quickly marginalised after the climax of the Mubarak abdication. The main youth groups that sustained the Tahrir rallies asked for the creation of a “group of ten wise men” to advise them on the next steps. Mona Makram Ebeid was quickly made the tenth member of this venerable group in an attempt to include a woman. As a Coptic Christian, she added the diversity bonus. The problem was that the youth, including the young women, did not have a plan, let alone a vision, for a post-Mubarak Egypt. After having their demands met by Mubarak stepping down, they literally did not know what to do next.

This lack of a political strategy highlighted two major shortcomings:

- Poor education and a lack of in-depth political thought and understanding. The naiveté of the “activists” seems hard to fathom: how can one rally politically, risking life, without having a plan for a viable alternative?
- The young, supposedly secular activists were the first to disfranchise and marginalise their female activist colleagues. The youth never saw women as a group capable of giving advice, nor did they see women as a cornerstone of the revolution and the new Egypt. This attitude also surfaced repeatedly in online networks, especially Facebook, where the revolutionary youth spokespersons are mostly males.

In modern history, Egyptian women were politically vocal in the 1919 revolution against British occupation. The national movement spearheaded by the Wafd Party and Saad Zaghloul had a secular approach that was used by educated women to highlight the importance of women’s participation in building a modern Egypt. In *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, Beth Baron<sup>8</sup> argues that despite Egyptian women’s support of nationalism, they were excluded from political participation once the national movement gained power and did not need women’s support any longer. The author sees this as a contradiction to the main message sent out by the nationalists who equated Egypt to a woman.

However, as an Egyptian, I do not support Baron’s hypothesis that Egypt was depicted “visually and metaphorically as a woman.” Instead, Egypt was depicted by Saad Zaghloul, the Wafd and by the Egyptian people as their “mother”, thereby singling out the country’s femaleness only in that specific role. But “Egypt, the mother” only supported women’s participation in nation building in line with their traditional roles (i.e. within the established patriarchal system). Despite this limitation, women were successful in the 1919 revolution in setting aside the face veil and obtaining more education and public participation for themselves, claiming that an educated “mother” is the base to build an educated society. They established public roles that grew with time and became ingrained in Egyptian society.

From a historical perspective, it seems that the 1952 army coup and the militarisation of Egypt’s ruling elite brought with it a diminishing role for women. As an ultra-patriarchal organisation, the military supported a secular regime that appeared to create equal gender opportunities, though these never materialised into meaningful political participation by women. Women were added as a quota to political bodies like the parliament and the cabinet of ministers, but they never played a marked and strong political role in Egypt.

The 2011 revolution followed the 1919 revolution in its use of women to catalyse the nation, but once the goal was achieved, women were quickly removed from the power-talk table. A difference with the 25 January Revolution was that the Egyptian youth were not prepared, as their predecessors were, with implementable plans for the transition of power. The Egyptian youth, female and male, had been disabled by an inefficient educational system and the absence of venues for political participation. In addition, Egypt has been ridden with a culture of ageism

7 Momtaz, R. (2012) Egypt: Women Sexually Assaulted at March Against Sexual Harassment, *ABC News*, 13 June. [news.yahoo.com/egypt-women-sexually-assaulted-march-against-sexual-harassment-004250792--abc-news-topstories.html](http://news.yahoo.com/egypt-women-sexually-assaulted-march-against-sexual-harassment-004250792--abc-news-topstories.html)

8 Baron, B. (2007) *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender and Politics*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

so pervasive that it crippled the youth from being true revolutionaries, beyond using their bodies and voices for opposing a regime online and in the streets without having a concrete alternative. When the goal was achieved, they looked for elders to lead the way.

Women activists showed the same deficiencies. Another difference between the revolution of 1919 and the 2011 revolution was that in the former, women had definite propositions on how they would support Egypt's national quest besides ending the British occupation. Aside from repudiating face veiling, they advocated public education for girls and women, raising the slogan that only educated women can raise the generations needed to make Egypt a modern state. They further pushed for women's participation in the workplace. Although it was seen as too early to ask for political participation, this seemed more of a tactical delay, as active institutional political participation by Egyptian women was in the plans for the future, with education as its road paver.

In comparison, one does not find many progressive women activists proposing solid solutions for Egypt's current problems where women play a leading and unique function. On the contrary, women who support the Islamists do have concrete plans. They are calling for women to retreat into the home, to leave the public arena, to live a more secluded life, to restore traditional moral values, to decrease the need for personal consumption and, by leaving work, to create employment for the thousands of young males. This is seen as a fundamental first step to reduce social strife and build a better-functioning society and nation.

It is interesting to note that these demands are more articulated through the traditional means of face-to-face meetings, flyers, through providing services while sending out political messages, and so forth, rather than social media or the internet. This raises the question of how effective online female activism is without a formula to solve Egypt's current problems – and without using “the street” to promote these ideas and to build mass support in concrete numbers.

## Conclusions

Women activists were more focused on securing and expanding women's rights in a post-Mubarak era, rather than showing how women are going to build a new Egypt. This backfired immediately: it left the rudder in the hands of groups that had a plan. More importantly, these groups had been working for years among the masses providing health care, emotional and financial support, and catering to the psychological needs of many Egyptians. It

also shows that online activism is just one aspect of activism. The traditional “street-based” activism is still needed to sustain the momentum of a revolution.

It is remarkable that a group of military officers in their early to mid-30s were able, by themselves, to establish a republic in 1952, with deep political and social changes, yet the regimes that were set in place produced youth, female and male, unable to do the same 60 years later.

## Action steps

The recent Egyptian experience shows that:

- Online women's activism was effective in raising issues, mobilising vast public rallies and publicising transgressions against women.
- Women need to have a detailed plan for building a new regime and correcting socioeconomic inequities. Demanding rights first is an ineffective tactic. What is your role in the new regime, in the new country, in the new society? What needs to be done and how are women going to contribute?
- ICTs are an effective tool for publicising these plans, but women cannot rely on them in the absence of traditional methods of political campaigning and support-base building. The latter are indispensable.
- The Egyptian feminist movement began with education – education that women demanded to be expanded publicly, beyond home education, to include higher education and to be made universal. At present it seems that a detailed proposal for quality education is essential. Education made by Egyptians for Egyptians. Women are the main educators of societies – they need to set educational policies and ensure their proper implementation.
- As part of the educational policy, ICTs should be used by Egyptian women to provide tools for independent thinking, research and access to knowledge that enriches the education provided through brick-and-mortar institutions and means.
- Abstain from rallying if you do not know what you are going to do if you get what you want! ■