

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2015

Sexual rights and the internet



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
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Global Information Society Watch 2015

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The democratisation of authority in the Middle East and North Africa

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The recent revolution in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region known as the Arab Spring could not have happened in the way that we know it without the internet and the powerful new forms of social media. Organisers of major protest rallies used social media to pull them together. Eventually their efforts led to toppling long-term tyrannical leaders and a push for more democratic reforms. It was first and foremost through social media that many of us outside of the MENA region got our most enduring images of those protests. The Arab Spring caught standard news agencies off guard. Even policy makers in the West would second-guess whether it was a real revolution or not. It was.

I dare say: the Arab Spring will go down in history as the first of its kind – a revolution that owes more to the internet, including social media, than any before it. Through social media we also caught in full view the grotesque acts of sexual harassment and exploitation of mainly female protesters, both by juntas of the military in Egypt and other pro-government forces, as well as by the usual chauvinist opportunists. So social media brings us the good and the bad, often with little or no censor. Certainly all governments seek to control the tide of information projected in these media, from different degrees of censoring certain images through maturity rating, to “security” issues, even as far as attempts to completely block access.

Technical details about the internet and social media are not my area of expertise. In fact, I can scarcely keep up the content of my web page.¹ So let me locate myself in this topic. I am a 62-year-old, retired humanities professor – not the most likely social media geek. I manage a modest amount of social media – a personal page and a public figure page on Facebook,² a Twitter account,³ and recently

I’ve ventured onto Instagram. So this is not about my spectacular personal presence on social media.

I built my academic reputation upon the nuances of language, linguistics, rhetoric and hermeneutics. In my line of work, *words* matter; and that’s NOT just word count. What makes me a perfect Ph.D. also makes me a not-so-exciting Twitter personality. Most of what I do requires more than 140 characters. I’m too long-winded for the fast pace of social media. However, in the past five years I have come to appreciate its merits and impact in my areas of interest: Islam, justice and gender (that’s what my Twitter avatar says, coincidentally).

I took up social activism more than a quarter of a century ago, because I could see that good ideas or theory needed to be made into policy in order to really benefit those who have experienced oppression due to narrow interpretations of texts. It took time before I felt I should keep up with social media; but clearly it makes a difference – not just in revolutions, like the Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter,⁴ but also in everyday transformations for users. With access to the internet, anyone can harness its power – from crowd funding independent projects, to movement building towards equality and justice in the Muslim family like www.Musawah.org.⁵

Using social media allows all sides to have equal access. While active social media can challenge the odds over exertions of power and authority in Islam, as it stands, neo-conservatism and patriarchy still seem to have the most say. With the rise of violent extremist groups like the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) we can see how effective use of social media evens out the playing field – between the good and the bad. In the context of Islam and issues of social justice, one of the most important questions of our time centres on who has the power to assert their definition of “Islam” to control the lives of others, be it the rule of law, cultural pressure, or even spiritual manipulation.

Everything I do – and therefore everything I do on social media – engages the intersection of systems of oppression. Although my focus is mostly on

¹ www.aminawadud.com

² <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Dr-Amina-Wadud/1542191152675401>

³ <https://twitter.com/aminawadud>

⁴ blacklivesmatter.com

⁵ www.musawah.org

Islamic thought and praxis, I engage in the discourse over all matters that impact the deep and enduring experience of justice. Therefore, I reflect on power exploitations or coercion, on the logistics of asymmetrical relationships, and on social, political, racial, economic, spiritual and cultural hegemonies over race, class, gender, sexuality, ablism and the environment. (I did say I was long-winded, right?) On any one day I may tweet, retweet, post, or re-post about each one of these intersecting factors. I've also blogged on several sites related to these issues.

I am interested in Islamic reformation, by which I mean radically rethinking and critical engagement with the Ultimate Sacred sources of Islamic thought and practice – from its sacred text, its Prophet Muhammad (upon him be peace) and the vast and variegated intellectual history for more than 14 centuries. While I believe Islamic intellectual history is still evolving, the need for a reformation considers the current realities as pivotal to achieving the over-arching principles of Islam: justice, peace and human dignity.

This reformation includes Islamic feminism.

In particular, I propose that the construction of new knowledge in Islamic thought must be ongoing. In Islamic feminism this started with one simple and yet strategic question: What is the role of gender in this discourse? For several centuries after the advent of Islam this idea of “reading for gender” did not exist. Of course people lived and functioned in certain culturally constructed and time-specific gender roles. However, few would reflect critically upon the implications of these roles relative to the ultimate objectives of Islam.

This was due in part to the many radical changes in the lives of women integral to Islam's beginning, like granting women the right to own property, the right to education, the right for marriage choices and for divorce, a share of inheritance, and a role as credible witness. Alas, the trajectory was not sustained, with great loss to women's agency and intellectual contributions as early as one century after the Prophet. Meanwhile other trends went unchallenged, like what it means to be human and gendered, including certain unnecessary binaries, ascribing certain roles exclusively to men and reinscribing male privilege – since patriarchy was pervasive, and not just amongst Muslims.

Islam is a religion focused on “right practices”⁶ and these are encoded into elaborate legal formu-

las. Over time certain functionary asymmetrical gender roles would be encoded in the law as if they genuinely reflected the spiritual, philosophical and theological objectives of Islam. When a faith system is dependent upon this interchange between praxis and orthodoxy, it may take some time to unravel which came first: the praxis or the ideology. Over time unexamined gender roles become conflated with ideas about the “natural order” or are seen as a divine mandate. It is a simple logic, really: for example, if women do almost all the caretaking, that must mean women are “natural” caretakers and men are exempt, although this role is vital to human existence and to the environment.

In theory, both men and women were encouraged to participate in Islam's intellectual development and there are historical examples of women as intellectual contributors. However, they did not play a major role in establishing the basic paradigms of Islamic practice and world view. So when right behaviour became encoded in the law, women's experiences or women's ways of knowing and believing would be filtered through the lens of male commentators, philosophers, theologian and jurists.

In our time, we interrogate the ways in which patriarchal norms and biases controlled women's behaviour by collapsing the link between men's ways of knowing and believing with the natural or divine order. Whatever men thought was soon equated with what God/Allah thought. All faith paradigms are constructs. When they are constructed only or primarily on the basis of what men experience or perceive, and the connection to these sacred ideas and their human origin is forgotten, then male bias creates notions of authority linked to those constructs as though actually authorised by God. So what men think becomes what God thinks; and the only legitimate way to practise Islam.

While there have always been a few who question the (il)logic of patriarchy, in the 21st century we have reached a critical mass. In every country, every city, every town, every group – no matter how small – Muslim women are questioning what it means to be full agents of our own lives, contrary to patriarchal assertions. We have looked at the consequences of patriarchal interpretations on what it means to be Muslim. Now we are facing an epistemological crisis, where certain ideas – once held sacred and integral to Islam as a universal faith system – are shown to be merely inflections of time-specific, place-specific and gender-specific logic; not sacred at all. Furthermore, certain constructs are no longer tenable or sustainable given the realities of the world we now live in.

6 “Right practices” refers to two aspects of what it takes to live a good life according to traditional sources: the right faith and right actions; in other words, not by faith alone, nor just by being a good person who does good things.

This is part of the comprehensive change formulated and projected under a new wave of Islamic feminism. My early work on the Qur'an, Islam's sacred text, forms one of the cornerstones to these challenges. It centres on one simple question: Does it make a difference if the person reading the text identifies as a man or as a woman? The answer was yes. Reading is always impacted by location, including gender identification. Yet, until this last century, we had no record of women's responses to the text and no formal exegesis. We know that women read, memorised, recited and used the text as part of their general belief and practice, but we can find no written record of what they thought about its meanings. Meanwhile during that same history men left elaborate exegesis using multiple methods of interpretation.

Reading for gender affects questions of authority in laws made from the perspective of textual interpreters. Now Muslim women have reached a critical mass seeking change. We are diverse and not always mutually supportive in our methods, but despite inner contestation we all demand justice. This critical mass is due largely to a general rise in levels of education. However, there is also a clear link to new forms of communication due to the internet and social media allowing for a dissemination of ideas as sought after by the better-educated populist. This flow of ideas is untainted by constraints of particular institutions, or institutional requirements, and free of patriarchal control.

Knowledge is power. The more ways people have equal access to information, the more they are able to construct informed opinions about any matter. The more pervasive information is, the less control the old-guard authorities will have over the masses. The flow of information in the media is second only to the increased levels of education for all, allowing women, men and children to construct change, challenge injustice and form new trends in authority, more democratic ones. Although we still have a long way to go – considering that access is not nearly equal or universal – at least we see the unfolding of what I call the democratisation of authority. The internet is an important tool for change. It increases access to knowledge and contributes to meaningful exchange in knowledge.

In the particular context of Muslims, the internet gives voice to those who were previously unrepresented and silenced. In the context of gender constructions, and Muslim women's lived realities, sometimes actual physical mobility is still limited by cultural and legal constraints. However, access to the internet can thwart this lack of mobility,

bringing women out of the confines of patriarchal control.

Even if only from the privacy of their homes, Muslim women can venture all over the world, form alliances, support each others' work, and gain greater insights into the limitlessness of possibilities. Once they get to that world, they can have their say. Once they have their say, they can have an impact. Once they have an impact, they become agents of change.

Exposure to the vast diversity of ideas and ideals across the planet gives greater clarity over the assertions that there is only one way to do things, one "true" Islam – the patriarchal one. For example, in working with www.Musawah.org we use online resources to expose the ways that Muslim Personal Status Law varies from country to country. So if believing Muslims in Jordan do something totally different from what believing Muslims do in Indonesia over the same matter, then clearly the laws are not divine but completely human-made. Since Muslim women are human, we can construct new laws, advocate for reform in existing laws, and challenge those laws imbued with patriarchy to reach more egalitarian policies, laws and experiences. When this diversity is observed through facts presented, it is impossible to say, "This is God's law and you cannot do anything about it, if you are a believer" – a tactic too often used to silence women's justice movements.

Another merit of the internet is raising the equality of voices. No one voice is above another voice. This is a great equaliser: no matter how insignificant one internet user may be in the scheme of things, his or her voice can become well known, widespread and persuasive. All that is needed is to have a message that gains momentum through social media. Inadvertently this increases the space for diversity. The argument itself becomes the measure – not the clout of the one speaking. Didn't the Arab Spring bring down tyrannical rulers? Social media gives greater importance to voices that might have gone unrecognised.

While the internet is a powerful equalising tool, allowing ALL voices to speak, creating forums for people to meet across the globe and share concerns, there are certain challenges to it as well.

I use social media because I agree with its powerful potential for liberation, justice and equality. Since my primary interest is in gender, of course this means I have to discuss issues about sex and sexuality. These seem to gain the most attention when I post. Meanwhile, among the world's 1.6 billion Muslims, honest and open conversation about

sex and sexuality is still primarily missing – despite our sex-affirmative intellectual legacy. For example, in Islam there is no particular virtue in or privileging of celibacy. Details of sexual pleasure have long been celebrated and elaborated. Medical research was so advanced that Muslim doctors were among the first to approve and perform sex-change operations, indicating a deep understanding of sexual diversity. Today's Muslim cultures have a tendency towards prudishness, silence and shame. Because of this, many conversations I initiate about sex and sexuality receive the greatest negative reactions.

For example, people feel free to question the level of my personal faith because I am open about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LG-BTQ) issues. The tactic is almost always the same: they assert their homophobia and THEN project that I am NOT a Muslim and could not possibly be a

scholar because I do not share their interpretations of certain verses in the Qur'an that talk about the story of Lot. Since ALL passages of the Qur'an are subject to multiple interpretations, as part of the rich legacy of Islamic thought and textual analysis, why the literal reading of any one verse should hold sway over another reading is a matter of power, politics and public pressure. This pressure is rampant in social media.

My observations about social media, Islam and sexuality indicate how social media is an indispensable tool. So while I have every intention of keeping up my use of it, I will never have the following of even some untalented Hollywood or Bollywood personalities. That's okay by me. Instead, I recommend for everyone a balance between the utility of the medium and the random harassment it might bring.

Sexual rights and the internet

The theme for this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) is sexual rights and the online world. The eight thematic reports introduce the theme from different perspectives, including the global policy landscape for sexual rights and the internet, the privatisation of spaces for free expression and engagement, the need to create a feminist internet, how to think about children and their vulnerabilities online, and consent and pornography online.

These thematic reports frame the 57 country reports that follow. The topics of the country reports are diverse, ranging from the challenges and possibilities that the internet offers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities, to the active role of religious, cultural and patriarchal establishments in suppressing sexual rights, such as same-sex marriage and the right to legal abortion, to the rights of sex workers, violence against women online, and sex education in schools. Each country report includes a list of action steps for future advocacy.

The timing of this publication is critical: many across the globe are denied their sexual rights, some facing direct persecution for their sexuality (in several countries, homosexuality is a crime). While these reports seem to indicate that the internet does help in the expression and defence of sexual rights, they also show that in some contexts this potential is under threat – whether through the active use of the internet by conservative and reactionary groups, or through threats of harassment and violence.

The reports suggest that a radical revisiting of policy, legislation and practice is needed in many contexts to protect and promote the possibilities of the internet for ensuring that sexual rights are realised all over the world.

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2015 Report

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