

ARAB WOMEN, THE INTERNET, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Marlyn Tadros, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Virtual Activism

<http://www.mengos.net>

<http://www.virtualactivism.org>

Prepared for the Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting

Florence, Italy, March 2005

Workshop 07: Women's Activism and the Public Sphere:
Local/Global Linkages

ARAB WOMEN, THE INTERNET, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Marlyn Tadros, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Virtual Activism

<http://www.mengos.net>

<http://www.virtualactivism.org>

January 2005¹

Women's rights activists have used the Internet in their activities and campaigns across the globe, expressing the local in a global forum, using a public sphere for both public and private issues to inform and empower themselves and to campaign for public policy changes. The speed and de-centralization of cyberspace have encouraged otherwise disenfranchised and marginalized individuals and groups to join in a participatory process and to connect to, and network with, others. Since networking is in itself an empowerment tool, the importance of the Internet cannot be underestimated. It has shifted power to access and present information from governments to people, which gave rise to the hope, and fuel to the claim, that it is indeed a possible democratizing force, primarily because it has encouraged interactivity, discussion, debate, connectivity, interaction, and horizontal participation.

Arab women have not used the Net as effectively as their counterparts elsewhere in the world or as their male counterparts locally, but there have been instances where the Net has been used for specific campaigns by and for women with effective results and outcomes. Some Arab women have indeed succeeded in forming partnerships and creating networks that have helped in their empowerment through this relatively new computer-mediated medium. Nevertheless one must not lose sight of the problems and challenges that impede their progress in using this tool, nor be over-optimistic about its impact. After all, the Internet continues to be an elitist tool whose access, cost, and skills make it prohibitive to many in the Global South, Arab women included.

¹ This paper draws on a study prepared for the Gender Equality and Development Section of UNESCO's Social and Human Sciences Sector. I am grateful to Valentine M. Moghadam for her careful editing of the paper.

Cyberspace, a virtual reality existing partially in a virtual world and partially in real life, has created a powerful new model of communication. Some have argued that its impact on reality is such that e-democracy could lead to real democratization. While I consider this argument, I focus mainly on the Internet's impact on freedom of expression and censorship and the ease and flow of accessing and disseminating information. Does the Internet facilitate freedom of expression? Does it facilitate communication and networking among women? Has it facilitated flow of information for them, and has it succeeded in creating a change in the public sphere and public policies in their countries?

This paper will highlight, describe and analyze some women's organizations and/or campaigns that have utilized the web for activism, information exchange, and networking, and the kinds of coordination they have had with other organizations both regionally and internationally. The countries chosen for this paper are Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, given that those countries not only have strong women's movements but also significant uses of the Net in their work and activism. In this paper I argue that as in many networks that have been created, Internet networks have not always been effective and did not always manage to survive. I also contend that while the Internet does encourage women to seek and receive information, and at times to even generate the information themselves, this does not mean that it is a democratizing or transformative tool in and of itself although it may be used as a step towards such a process. To be a productive and empowering tool, the Internet has to reflect these women's value systems and address their needs, and it does not do so automatically. Women's empowerment is also dependent on their Internet skills and the type of tools they use.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first examines debates about the use and implications of the Internet, including its potential for collective action, social change, and democratization. We then turn to the Internet in the Arab world, including its use by the the women's movement, with a focus on women's organizations in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco, as well as several transnational (or regional or pan-Arab) networks. Here we describe the tools that they use and the communities and networks, if any, that they have created, as well as specific campaigns they have undertaken for legal reform or public policy changes. We end with an overview of the challenges and opportunities the women's organizations face in their "virtual activism".

Part I: The Internet: A Means of Cultural Invasion or a Tool for Activism?

What is the Internet's potential, as well as its challenges and limitations for women in the Middle East? There have been few in-depth studies of the issue or credible statistics of the impact of their work.² In real life, campaigns are assessed by their impact on legislative change and the progress they make in changing and impacting policies and the decision making process. One of the criteria that this paper has chosen to determine the success of the Internet as an enabling power in the Middle East is the impact of online campaigns and activities on policy change. Another is the wider, societal and political impact of a web-based campaign as a first step toward empowerment and awareness and towards democratic participation. It should be noted, though, that it is difficult to determine any campaign's success, much less online campaigns. Janye Rodgers of Amnesty International comments on the impact of campaigns on policy change and legislators: "...there is a significant problem in identifying the success of online campaigns, relating to the fact that governments rarely admit that policy changes have been made on the basis of pressure from human rights campaigners."³

Given that the Internet is a product of the American military, there is an overwhelming English language content where 68.4% of Internet content is in English.⁴ This hegemony constitutes a problem for non-English speakers, in terms not only of content, but even of mere access. Non-Latin based languages such as Arabic and Chinese that use different characters from the Latin alphabet still have to write a URL in English. In addition, the cost of both hardware and software, not to mention Arabized software, is prohibitive. Another dimension of cultural adapting is language, and the Internet no doubt has English language hegemony. Encouraging the creation of Arabic language content

² Trends of Internet usage in the Arab world show a difference between them and the Western World. Whereas the majority of Western Internet users, and especially women, go to online shopping sites, Arabs, and especially increasingly women, tend to go to chat rooms and email. The Gulf News reports that in the Emirates, youngsters "spend most of their time chatting and searching "useless" sites". The survey also stated that 70% of cyber café visitors are youngsters between 12-25. (Ahmed 03)

³ (Interview with AI in Rodgers) This is true of both real life and online campaigns.

⁴ Global Reach: <http://glreach.com/globstats/index.php3>

will increase the participation of Arabs in communication with the world and regionally among themselves.⁵

Through language domination, the West is capable of disseminating a culture that is ‘foreign’ to local and national values. It is perceived as a cultural invasion that increasingly affects the younger generation in particular who are more vulnerable yet more technologically-capable and savvy, alienating them from their environment and society. After all, as Rheingold (2000) said: “Televisions, telephones, radios, and computer networks are potent political tools because their function is not to manufacture or transport physical goods but to influence human beliefs and perceptions”. In diplomatic terms, such inventions are called ‘soft power’, as opposed to military ‘hard power’, because of their ability to influence without resorting to violence.⁶

Clearly the Internet does not exist in a vacuum, nor is it a “virtual world” that is apart and separate from the physical world. It is a technology that is part of the physical world and affects it and shapes it. It also has a culture that is shaped and affected by the physical life of those who provide input into it and those who access it. It therefore provides and transmits values across borders. As McMahon (2001) said of technology, the Internet, is “never value neutral; it always promotes certain social interests over others, and more specifically, certain institutional forms over others.” This may be one of the reasons for the wariness of Arab communities to embrace it.

The Internet is therefore viewed as a reflection of negative globalization, a reference solely to free trade and a free economy, and a tool for the elitist economic empowerment. It is perceived as an expression of “one sole course of history of a special historical consciousness, that of the West”. It is colonialism and imperialism at their worst, where “the powerful was the global while the weak was the local. The global was the center while the local was the periphery” (1998). The Internet, together with other technologies, is hence perceived as an alienating tool, one that by default eventually

⁵ Recent trends though show that language hegemony on the Internet is in decline and the Internet is indeed opening up to anew world community.

⁶ Hamilton (2003) gives a definition of soft power as “the capacity to get others to do want what we want without coercing them because they admire our achievements and want to emulate us.” He adds: “The science and technology industries posses the power as no other profession does in this country. When asked what they admire most about the United States, people in other countries, whether in the Middle East or Asia or South America, say U.S. scientific and technological expertise.”

appropriates a foreign and hence negative culture, aimed at alienating the younger generations from their heritage and origins for the benefit of the economic and militaristic security and supremacy of the West.⁷ It is an ‘all or none’ concept that is repeated and prevalent in Arab discourse in general, and the Internet is the current principal tool for achieving this objective.⁸

As was the case with the human rights movement, when the Internet was first introduced to the Middle East, there was an initial suspicion of its benefits. Among the majority of Middle Easterners, it was perceived as cultural invasion, another part of a series of attempts at globalization, hegemony, and control of the West. It was portrayed in the media primarily as the producer of pornographic and anti-religious material, a new extension of globalization, an attempt at dissolving cultural norms, traditions, and values, a producer of non-authentic culture, and a tangible manifestation of immorality. This view is particularly detrimental to the human rights movement, since now there is a combination of two aliens: human rights concepts on the one hand, and Internet technologies on the other that are inundating the Arab World with an alien culture. Yet while this view continues to be pervasive, it has nevertheless witnessed a dramatic change as more and more individuals began gaining access to the Internet, and began using it as a forum of open and free discussion even on otherwise taboo issues. Younger users in particular are undeterred in their desire for access to this new world. In fact, younger users take particular delight in shattering social taboos and traditions on the Internet, and in their ability and tech-savviness to circumvent their families’ supervision and control.

By far the biggest hurdle to overcome, if not *the* primary, one besides culture is governmental control. The US State Department’s Annual Review of Human Rights (2002) claims that over 90 countries illegally monitor the communications of political opponents, human rights workers, journalists and labor organizers. Telecommunications are generally government owned, and this enables government to control access to

⁷ McMahan (2001) views globalization as an ongoing project “to bring the whole planet into a condition under which an overall logic of social control, to meet the purposes of economic efficiency or military security.”

⁸ Indeed McMahan (2001) argues that technology in general [not just the Internet] is vital to globalization and that there could be no globalization without it: “Technology is the physical and organizational enabler; without appropriate technology, there would be no globalization because it is through technology that we extend social control across the dimensions of space and time.”

‘sensitive’ information.

There is no doubt that even with very limited physical space and resources, civil society institutions in the Middle East and women’s groups in particular were organizing diverse campaigns long before the Internet with varying degrees of successes and failures. What, therefore, is the importance of being out there on the Net as opposed to just doing their work locally without international or regional connection? Would their work be effective without it? The answer to the last question is yes, their work would continue to be limited but as effective without the Internet, and civil society institutions will continue to work within the space that has been provided to them, or the space that they will be able to carve for themselves, and will continue to try and create other spaces for themselves. The advantage of the Internet, however, is that it is an adaptable tool that strengthens and facilitates work, and that creates a venue and a space within which they can disseminate their information with speed and at minimal cost. The Internet is an additional tool that women may use to strengthen their campaigns and to draw upon the information that is available on the Net to adapt to their work. Women’s groups become no longer isolated, but have immediate and speedy connectivity and networking with like-minded organizations within the region and beyond it.

In the physical world, given the constraints on civil society in general and the women’s movement in particular, the latter has tended to be isolated within the elitist intellectual community. It has not been very effective in reaching the grassroots, especially with the absence of access to means of communication. With the advent of the Internet, an alternative medium was created, but remains within the grasp of the educated elite, hence denying large sections of the population in the Arab world access to it. It took some time for civil society to recognize that through this new medium traditional methods of censorship have been rendered almost useless and that it can be used as a powerful tool of communication. Anyone can publish anything at any time, and there is little that traditional gatekeeper governments can do to prevent or control using traditional control mechanisms. In Jordan, for instance, censors removed an article from 40 print copies of the British based magazine the Economist that was on sale in Jordan. A subscriber found the article online, made photocopies, and faxed it to 1000 Jordanians.

The result, according to Daoud Kuttab, head of the Arabic Media Internet Network, was ‘much worse for the government’ than leaving the original print version intact. Kuttab added: “We found this very exciting ... for the first time the traditional censorship that exists within national borders was bypassed.”

It should be noted also that most NGOs in the Arab World, and especially human rights and women’s rights NGOs, have no memberships in the first place because they are not full legal entities. They are really private voluntary organizations (PVOs) rather than nonprofit organizations. To register as NGOs there is a long process of registration that usually ends in a denial of registration. It is for this reason that human rights organizations chose to become other entities such as nonprofit companies, as is the case in Egypt, until a new NGO law was passed in 1999 that restricted their ability to do even that. Given this situation, such ‘illegal’ entities could not have memberships or membership dues. In assessing how effective the Internet has been in bringing about interested members, one should compare it only to real life [as distinct from “virtual reality”], and not to actual numbers. It is clear that a virtual existence has facilitated people’s access to those NGOs, providing them information on their work and activities without necessarily compromising themselves. This access created an audience for the NGOs who access their website to get information but not to necessarily participate in activities nor in discussion forums.

Yet it has also created a ‘curious’ audience who ask questions and who demand more information, especially among the younger generation and the youths. The Internet presence of those NGOs has created an interest in the issues those NGOs try to present, and has helped security-shy students and individuals to receive this information with the click of a mouse. While this is not considered ‘membership’ it is a first step towards awareness-raising and eventual active participation. It is important to note that most Internet users in the Arab World are the youth who are seeking an identity in an increasingly globalized world. It is through them that there is a hope for building transnational democracy, through a cumulative process of education and awareness-raising that will no doubt lead to more active participation and democratization.

The Internet has also reduced the isolation of human rights activists themselves in

the Arab World by removing geographical boundaries and facilitating direct connectivity. Not only are they now connected to one another on a national and regional level, but they are also connected on an international level. Where regular mail was slow and uncertain, and where faxes were expensive and unaffordable, the Internet has provided a cheaper way of daily communication with each other and with the outer world. It has helped build bridges across these isolated communities, and has created an “information-inclusion” platform for them. They have succeeded in creating online networks that had been previously very difficult to follow through prior to the Internet, even though not all of them have been sustained.

Because of the speed by which information travels across the Internet, it has been an extremely effective tool in spreading information about human rights violations and other special human rights situations. NGOs have used email alerts and sent out their regular reports using email rather than paper and fax machines, hence cutting down substantially on costs. Online campaigns and petitions cross and re-cross the Globe several times, before governments could take action against them. A major benefit of having technology integrated into nonprofit organizations is the increased ease and flow of information: “communication with co-workers, donors, clients, fellow agencies, funders, volunteers, and the general public is greatly enhanced.”⁹

The Internet also has provided campaigning and lobbying skills to isolated women’s rights activists across the globe and also in the Middle East and has facilitated the sharing of information and skills between organizations. It has given access to international instruments and documentation that was previously accessible only to a limited group of activists who knew how to get them. It has given them the ability not only to be recipients of information, but also to act upon that information, even if by signing a simple petition or passing around a politically-charged email. Additionally, organizations and campaigns on the Internet seem to be larger than life even when they are lone individual campaigns, which has helped magnify the ‘smaller’ voices and the smaller campaigns.

“Virtual activism” requires active participation on the part of the users, which television does not provide. The Internet, on the other hand, provided a new opportunity

⁹ www.infolineinc.org/connect.htm

for passive Middle East citizens to become active users. It has also provided anonymity in case individuals wanted to express opinions without being known for expressing them. Additionally, it provided a proliferation of discussion groups on diverse topics, and an opportunity for networking and coalition building. It therefore provided the means to circumvent traditional media and to create a new space for the users where they can feel more comfortable with participation.

The Internet is forging an identity for the Middle Eastern voice in an increasingly globalized world, providing alternatives to mainstream government-controlled media. The presence of Middle Easterners on the Internet is itself empowering and their influence is likely to increase because their very presence has revived a national and a Pan-Arab debate. Additionally, through exposure to different opinions and perspectives, and in particular through their exposure to published scientific research, anti-religious, and anti-Islamic material which has long been a taboo and a criminal offence in all Middle Eastern countries, along with other culturally challenging information, the Internet has provided the opportunity of exposure to analytical thinking and forced the Middle East into strategies to counter such material using the same methods and other creative ones. Sites that attempt to disseminate information on Islam and an explanation of its content and principles abound on the Internet, as do sites that attempt to respond to criticism of Islam and/or of ‘culturally sensitive’ issues.¹⁰

Although government control continues in all Arab countries, the Internet has the potential to significantly alter the relationship between individual and State and between civil society and the State. From a situation in which the individual is dependent on information provided by their government, now Arab citizens could go on the Internet themselves and seek out the uncensored information they want.

Among the many uses of the Internet in the Middle East, is that it continues to be used as an opposition/ resistance tool. It is a means of challenging authority on a political as well as individual level. More time needs to be given to be able to assess the successes

¹⁰ To read more about this, see Jon Anderson, ‘Muslim Networks, Muslim Selves in Cyberspace: Islam in the Post-Modern Public Sphere’, 2001. Anderson claims that Muslims had been “at the forefront of developing its uses if not in developing the underlying technology itself”. He says that Muslim texts began to appear on-line as scanned text “placed there by students who were Muslim and studying or working in the high-tech precincts that spawned the Internet.” Those students were motivated “to use their skills to assure a place for Islam in the on-line medium whose potential to reach a new public they understood. That is, they were laying claim for their religion...” In other words, creating their space.

and failures of such models in order to build upon and replicate. Nevertheless such instances have been prevalent. In Algeria, opposition parties use the Internet to disseminate information about their activities. In Egypt, several political petitions were circulated in 2003 urging people to statements on the need for constitutional, political and legal reform in Egypt. One petition in January 2003 specifically expressed opposition to President Mubarak's apparent attempts to prepare his son for power following his father's demise. The importance of this petition is in the fact that it can only happen online and anonymously, even though some of those who signed it chose to write their names and emails in full. Criticism of the President/Monarch or his family is one of the primary taboos in the Arab World.

Almost every opposition party from the Arab World, whether existing within the region or outside it, exists on the Internet with its newspaper and publications, the content of which is occasionally censored in real life. The Egyptian Islamist al-Shaab party and newspaper were banned from real life but continued to exist on the Internet as a publication. Newspapers shut down in Morocco re-posted their articles on the Net; in Tunisia, a journalist was denied the license to publish a newspaper and she took it to the Internet and published her paper there.¹¹ Parties with little public outreach capabilities currently have discussion forums and e-Newsletters in Arabic as well as other Internet tools where Arabs from all over the world participate, subscribe to, and share ideas and voice their opinions.

Because media has been traditionally constrained in the Arab World, the Internet has provided a useful alternative. Some activists have used the Internet as an alternate information and media tool, not just to receive information but also to disseminate it. Daoud Kuttab created Ammanet in 2000, which provides radio broadcasting on political issues of the Arab World, including human rights violations as well as elections. The broadcast could also be heard on FM radio. This broke the taboo on private media ownership. While this is only one initiative based in Jordan and which primarily targets Jordanian citizens, it is a replicable initiative in other countries.

¹¹ The Morocco case was in 2000 when three weeklies criticized the then Prime Minister Abderrahmane Youssoufi and their papers were shut down. In Tunisia, Siham Bensedrine was trying to get a license to publish a magazine called al Kalima. It is currently online as Kalima.com. See Reporters without Borders, Annual Report 2003.

Given that Arab governments do not wish to undermine the strength and importance of the potential economic empowerment that the Internet provides, they have not been able to permanently ban the Internet. Nevertheless they are becoming increasingly concerned with the free flow of information and they are being educated on filtering strategies and technologies. In spite of such technologies, they realize that plain censorship is no longer a viable strategy and understand that they must devise other strategies for control and hegemony. Civil society should make better use of the Internet and should be involved in policy making regarding the communications and have a leading role in its development and promotion, before governments regulate it beyond recognition.

Arab governments are beginning to note the impact of the Internet and are creating means of monitoring and surveillance of activities. They are catching up quickly to the potentially ‘dangerous’ usages of the Internet by human rights groups. Morocco continues to be the only Arab country with no Internet regulation and filtering, but in Jordan, security officers monitor telephone conversations and Internet communication, read private correspondence, and engage in surveillance of persons who are considered to pose a threat to the Government or national security. In Tunisia a “full corps of cyber-police went into operation to track down subversive websites to be blocked, intercept email or attempts to reach sites containing political or critical material, hunt for and neutralize proxy servers used to get round directly-blocked access to sites, and track down and arrest over-active Internet users – the cyber dissidents.” Tunisia is reported to be the worst in terms of “having the most extensive Internet censorship operations”. Reporters without Borders reports that Egypt tightened its surveillance of the Internet in 2002 and went as far as setting up a government department to ‘investigate online crime’. Internet users were “warned off taboo issues such as relations between Copts and Muslims, publicizing terrorist ideas, human rights violations, criticizing the president, his family and the army and promoting modern versions of Islam and told that too much outspokenness was unwelcome.” In addition, the director of this new department, Ahmed Essmat, told an Egyptian newspaper that his staff monitored the Internet on a daily basis.

This no doubt constitutes a serious threat to democracy and to the human rights movements in the Middle East. Indeed this has been one of the primary criticisms of

those critical of the concept of e-democracy, where they perceive the Internet as yet another tool that allows governments to violate the privacy of their citizens.¹² Undoubtedly, Arab governments are making use of this technology.

Part II: Arab Women's Organizations and the Web

Women's rights are restricted in Arab countries in many ways but the degrees of restriction vary from one country to the other, taking into consideration that those restrictions have to do as much with the law as with culture and traditions. Women in Saudi Arabia for example are vastly different in their experiences from women in Egypt or Lebanon. Yet women throughout the Arab World have been slowly and systematically achieving gains without necessarily using the terms 'feminist' or 'women's movement'. Clearly the 'movement' has not reached the general lower classes and continues to be confined to the upper strata, which is why it is more elitist in nature than grassroots. While society forces women to seek employment due to the enormous economic pressures under which most Arab societies live, the gender ideology itself remains static and the view of women's rights continues to be affected by tradition. Women have continued to be underrepresented throughout the Arab World in positions of power and in decision making processes. We therefore cannot claim that there is a strong, organized 'feminist movement' in the Arab World that is capable of influencing politics or society. Yet there is a general understanding and consciousness of inequality even among the grassroots with varying degrees of acceptance and resistance to it. Added to the already fragile nature of the movement, many of the gains that women have achieved over the past several decades have been, in many ways, derailed because of the rise of radical movements throughout the Arab World and beyond.

Since both the democratization and the women's movements have a relational

¹² While Rheingold, one of the pioneers of Internet philosophy and writing, is an advocate of e-democracy, he nevertheless understands some of the criticisms against it. One such criticism is that "The same channels of communication that enable citizens around the world to communicate with one another also allow government and private interests to gather information about them. This school of criticism is known as Panoptic in reference to the perfect prison proposed in the eighteenth century by Jeremy Bentham --a theoretical model that happens to fit the real capabilities of today's technologies." (2000)

existence, following either of them will necessarily reflect on the other. As Moghadam (2004) writes:

“Democratization and women's rights movements have emerged more or less in tandem. These processes are closely intertwined and indeed mutually dependent: the fate of democratization is bound to the fate of women's rights and vice versa. Separating the two is conceptually muddled as well as politically dangerous.”

Taking into consideration also that the women's movement is an integral part of the successes and failures of civil society, the status of civil society in the Arab World serves as an important indicator for the status of the movement. Hawthorne has noted that NGOs in the Arab World have grown in number but not necessarily in influence because the “bulk of Arab civil society is made up of organizations, associations, and movements that support the status quo, advocate conservative reforms, or are simply apolitical” (Hawthorne, 2004). In addition, women's contribution to the economy is often unrecognized and under appreciated whereby in most Arab countries, women's work in the informal sector fails to be registered in national censuses and accounts.

One of the primary reasons for this state of affairs is that Arab societies have been ‘information isolated’. The Internet is changing that. The success or failure of the Internet in empowering and strengthening the women's movement needs to be considered against this backdrop. Its success can be assessed by comparing it to similar actions and activities in the real world within the Middle East, rather than comparing it to international campaigns and their impact. This provides a much fairer assessment of whether the Internet is providing progress towards social transformation or not.

But if communities are groups of people coming together with full transparency, could the Internet then be considered a viable alternative to real communities? The Merriam-Webster's dictionary identifies community as “a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society.” Are Arab women online creating online communities? Mernissi (1987) argues that “space boundaries divide Muslim society into sub-universes: the universe of men (the *umma*, the

world of religion and power) and the universe of women, the domestic world of sexuality and the family” (138). To cross the boundaries that separate the public from the private, women need to protect themselves and prevent any potential social disorder or (*fitna*) by wearing the veil. Women thus can “enter men’s public space only by remaining shielded in their private space,” and the veil is seen as a “symbol of interiority” (Hessini 1994: 47) that renders the woman “invisible” in the street (Mernissi 1987: 143). [Farha Ghannam] Thus online, a network and community is created outside of government and outside of traditionally known communities.

In this context, how do Arab women’s organizations utilize the web for activism, information exchange, and networking? What are the kinds of coordinating they do or partnerships they have with other women's organizations or other activist organizations (e.g., human rights organizations), both in the Arab region and globally? What are the tools they use? In this review of case studies, we find that they use mostly e-mail and mailing lists. Extensive websites are maintained by only a few of the women’s organizations. We begin by examining Pan-Arab networks, followed by nationally-based feminist networks in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco.¹³ Our understanding of network is framed by the following definition:

“A network is defined as an exchange site or an ideas bank, with members spread throughout the country, region, or even the world. The aim of the network is to facilitate the collection and circulation of experiences and information from several people or organizations. More and more women are organizing themselves into networks to assert themselves in the process of development. Their ambition is to enrich and renew reflection and cooperation in areas concerning women...”¹⁴

The Permanent Arab Court To Resist Violence Against Women [Pan-Arab]

<http://www.arabwomencourt.org>

¹³ I am grateful to Val Moghadam and her assistant Manily Bagheritari for most of the material in this section.

¹⁴ Momo, Rachel Solange Mienje. Expanding women’s Access to ICTs in Africa, in Information Communication. Chapter 6

The Arab Women's Court was created to shift the issue of violence against women from a personal issue into a public concern. It seeks to raise and evaluate awareness on the phenomenon of violence, its causes and different manifestations, while also offering direct help and support to women subjected to any form of violence. Another goal is to exert pressure on Arab governments and NGOs to take measures to protect and support women victims of violence. The Arab Women's Court stated methods and strategies are to detect, document, and report all acts of violence to the general public; examine and condemn the factors that encourage and fuel the practice of violence; lobby for the advancement of women's rights; introduce the necessary changes to existing laws and create new laws to provide full protection for women victims of violence. The Court includes women from the following countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

The Permanent Arab Court to Resist Violence Against Women has used the Internet to voice women's testimonies on sexual violence. Between 1995 and 1998 the Court's activities focused mainly on physical abuses, but more recently (1999 to 2002), the Court launched a campaign to end juridical violence against women. Named the "Feminine Rights Campaign", it aims to achieve equality for Arab women's in personal status codes, particularly with respect to the rights of women in divorce.

The Court uses the Internet to engage with public policies at national and regional levels, but the language of the website is English; while this seems useful for international networking, it does seem problematic for reaching more Arab women.

Arab Women's Speak Out: Profiles of Self-Empowerment
<http://www.jhucp.org/pubs/sp/8/8.pdf>

This was a project of the Communications Program of the Johns Hopkins University. It was conceived as a documentary, training and advocacy project designed to promote women's empowerment and active participation in social development throughout the Near East. The project featured profiles of women in Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia and Yemen who are perceived and respected as innovators within their communities. The goal of this project was to produce a manual to promote women's empowerment by portraying thirty successful women as role models in the domains of the

family, community, and education. The Arab women who took part in this project hoped to promote women's self-confidence by discussing how they had used internal and external resources to overcome obstacles.

Johns Hopkins University's Communications Program launched the project in collaboration with the Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR) and the Population Initiatives for Peace (PIFP). The project was funded by USAID, European Commission (EC) and the Arab Gulf Program for UN Developments Organizations (AGFUND). The report, finalized in November 1997, is posted on the website.

Egypt: AWSA and the Nawal Saadawi Campaign in Egypt

<http://www.awsa.net/profile.htm>

Nawal Saadawi is a prominent feminist writer in Egypt, as well as a founder of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA), which was launched in Egypt in 1982. AWSA was established by a group of 120 women who agreed that the struggle for the liberation of Arab people and freedom from economic, cultural and media domination could not be separated from the liberation of Arab women. By 1985, AWSA had 3,000 members internationally and was granted consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations as an Arab non-governmental organization. But in 1991 the Egyptian government ordered it closed down, due to AWSA's oppositional stance when the first Gulf War was launched. AWSA continued to exist on the web through a San Francisco branch.

In 2001, a young Islamist lawyer filed a lawsuit against Dr. Saadawi because of a published interview conducted by *Al-Midan* newspaper [March 6, 2001] in which she expressed opinions that the lawyer perceived to be anti-Islamic. A Islamic court found that Saadawi had blasphemed and become an apostate, and ordered a judicial divorce (on grounds that Islamic law forbids the marriage of a Muslim with an apostate). A local committee was formed comprised of Egyptian human rights activists, feminists, women's organizations, human rights organizations and individuals to lead the campaign to support Dr. Saadawi and her husband Dr. Hetata, who had been ordered, under Islamic law, to di-

voice his wife. The committee was called the Egyptian Committee for Solidarity with Nawal El-Saadawi. The issue became internationalized, but not before a website was created about the case and in support of Saadawi. During its first two months, the website attracted more than 50,000 visitors, all of whom sent letters of support of Saadawi. In the meantime, Saadawi left Egypt with her husband for the more congenial atmosphere of an American university, and returned after the case against her was dismissed.

Currently AWSA has a campaign against “honor killings”. On its website there are links to news and reports on honor killings, and links to other organizations with similar campaigns, such as Amnesty International, Arab Women’s Court, and the International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Violence in Pakistan. There are quite a few links to news on honor killings in Pakistan where women’s organizations have reported a large number of such gender-based forms of violence every year.

The website is easily accessible and well-organized but written only in English. There is also a live chat room provided on the website called “The Cyber AWSA e-mail list” which provides a space for English-speaking Arab women and their allies to discuss and share information around issues relevant to Arab women's lives and experiences. It also serves as a springboard for activism related to Arab women's issues (as noted on the website).

Egypt: Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance

<http://www.cewla.org/en/index.htm>

The Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA) is a non-governmental organization founded in 1995 to offer Egyptian women legal support and assistance regarding their rights under the Egyptian Constitution, Egyptian laws and the international conventions such as CEDAW. In addition, it provides women with a variety of skills that enable them to manage their lives and overcome their problems. Its stated goals are to create a society that provides equal opportunities for both genders; utilize international laws and conventions to support women; develop and further the idea of legal and judicial assistance and eliminate discriminatory provisions in the different laws; support women and provide them with various skills and knowledge such as legal

awareness, literacy classes, and strategic planning to help enforce their role in society; organize conferences and meetings to discuss women's problems with intellectuals, jurists and media field workers.

CEWLA has constructed a bi-lingual (Arabic and English) website with a detailed description of the organization's projects and its accomplishments. One of its most important accomplishments has been to initiate legal help so that Egyptian women may obtain their legal papers (birth certificates, divorce or marriage papers and so on). This is very useful for empowering women and giving them an identity and legal status separate from their husband or male kin. In addition, the website can be useful as a source to connect to other women's organizations in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world, as well as international human rights organizations.

Egypt: The New Woman Research Center

One of the pioneers of the women's rights movement in Egypt, the New Woman Research Center began in 1984 as an informal group concerned about the legal status and social positions of Egyptian women. Among its tenets are that women have an unconditional right to freedom, equality and social justice; that women's social, political, economic, citizenship and reproductive rights are an integral part of human rights; and that the struggle for women's rights cannot be separated from the struggle of nations and peoples for justice from global oppression and violence. NWRC works through advocacy, dissemination of information, and mobilization of women around gender specific issues, targeting women's empowerment and self-determination. It has issued position papers e.g. Gulf War, structural adjustment policies, violence against women, reproductive rights of women, women in the media, and female genital mutilation

The group does not currently have a website, but they have used the Internet extensively in their work, and most effectively when their existence was in jeopardy. In June 2003, when they were denied the right to register as an accredited NGO with the Ministry of Social Affairs, they conducted an international campaign largely on the Internet. By reaching out to the Association for Middle East Women's Studies (AMEWS), they helped mobilize the international support of feminist activists and scholars, who signed petitions that were forwarded to the Egyptian authorities. As a result

of national, regional, and international lobbying, the government rescinded its decision in October 2003. In an e-mail message posted that month, the NWRC said:

Although this ruling sets a precedent in the struggle of Egyptian Civil society, yet we realize that our struggle is still in its very beginning. Despite its major importance and significance, the ruling is but a step on the road of democratic struggle of Egyptian civil society, not only concerning the registration and acknowledgment of the rest of civil society organizations, whose cases are still in court, but also for the widening of the space of democracy in our country and the struggle against all non-democratic laws, including law 84/2002.

The courageous solidarity of democratic NGOs and groups both nationally, regionally and internationally has been a precious resource for our case and us. It has managed to turn this case from one concerning a particular organization to one of a broader democratic movement that struggles to liberate civil activism in Egypt from the security mentality that continue to govern many of the official institutions in our country.

And in another message to its international supporters, dated 24 May 2004, the group explained:

We are glad to inform you that we have finally managed to be officially registered as the New Woman Foundation. After repeated refusal to enforce the court decision which had been taken in October 2003, acknowledging the New Woman Foundation's right to be register, the Ministry of Social Affairs has finally provided us with the registration number 2014.

We know that being registered is not the end of the journey. Rather, it is the beginning of another battle for a democratic law for Associations in Egypt; a law that would allow, not hinder, Egyptian NGOs to flourish,

expand and actively participate in the democratic and social transformation we dream of in Egypt.

We thank you all for your dedicated and consistent support for our cause, without which we would not have been able to get registered.¹⁵

Jordan: The Toujan al Faisal campaign

Toujan al-Faisal was the first woman elected to the Jordanian Parliament, where she served from 1993 to 1997. She is well known as an activist for democracy and human rights, and for her vocal pursuit of domestic reform and women's rights reforms in Jordan. On March 16, 2002 following her public criticism of the Jordanian government, she was arrested and imprisoned. She began a hunger strike on March 17 to protest her arrest. The charges against her included "publishing false materials deemed harmful to the country's reputation and that of its citizens", as well as seditious libel and slander, misdemeanors punishable by three to six months of imprisonment and/or a fine of up to 5,000 Jordanian dinars under Article 150 of the Jordanian Penal Code. She was accused by the Jordanian judiciary of being untruthful during an interview with an Arab satellite TV station, and was also said to have posted a statement on the Internet accusing key members of the government of corruption.¹⁶ On May 15, 2002, Faisal was sentenced to 18 months in jail and a 20 dinar fine. The sentence was issued by the Jordanian State Security court, and could not be appealed.

An international campaign on behalf of Toujan al-Faisal was conducted by several human rights organizations as well as transnational feminist organizations such as the Sisterhood is Global Institute, the Women's Learning Partnership, and the Association for Middle East Women's Studies. Petitions were drafted, signed, and submitted to the Jordanian government. As a result of this international pressure, and also due to her deteriorating health,¹⁷ King Abdullah, who had the exclusive right to repeal her sentence, did so. She was released in June 2002.

¹⁵ These statements are in the possession of V. M. Moghadam.

¹⁶ "Hunger Strike Dissident Vows to Fight On." BBC News, Friday, 28 June 2002; 18:33, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/2071#812.stm>

¹⁷ In an interview at her home in Amman in October 2003, Toujan Faisal told V. M. Moghadam that she had suffered partial loss of hearing during her stay in prison, mainly due to a loudspeaker outside her prison window that blared Koranic messages at a very high decibel.

News about Toujan Faisal and support for her continues to appear on various websites, including that of the Paris-based Federation International des Droits de l'homme (FIDH), which criticized the Jordanian government's rejection of her candidature in the 2003 parliamentary elections.¹⁸

Jordan: SIGI-Jordan, Arab Resource Center on Violence against Women

www.amanjordan.org; www.sigijordan.org

SIGI-Jordan started in 2000 as a project of the Sisterhood is Global Institute, a transnational feminist network that was at the time based in the U.S. (Moghadam 2005). The Center focuses on women's human rights and aims to end violence against women in Jordan, including honor crimes. It produces training manuals and materials on women's rights; provides legal advice and counseling; houses a library open to the public; and organizes meetings, seminars, and conferences. Since April 2001 it has had an extensive website in Arabic, dynamic and interactive, which was created and is maintained by a male staff member of SIGI-Jordan, who has a master's degree in law and is a specialist in IT.¹⁹ According to Lina Quara, executive director of SIGI-Jordan,

[The website] has 3,500 visitors per day from around the Arab region and from Arabs around the world. It is a truly instructive and educational website. There are browsers from Saudi Arabia and the UAE – 130 countries identified so far. Browsers stay on an average of 20 minutes.²⁰

In January 2005, the English website was still incomplete. Though it claims that it conducts on-line training, the links lead nowhere. However, the news on the English version of the website can be very useful because it is updated, international, and expresses different views on women's issues. The Arabic website is an excellent source of information about national laws in Arab countries and international laws regarding human rights of women. One can browse, download or print training manuals, a calendar

¹⁸ International Federation for Human Rights. "Toujan al-Faisal denied the right to stand for the parliamentary elections", 26th/05/2003, Jordan www.fidh.org.

¹⁹ Lina Quara, interviewed by V. M. Moghadam, Amman, October 2003.

²⁰ Ibid.

of events in the Arab region, research reports and studies; a listing of international conventions, family laws, constitutions; a news center that is updated daily; full coverage of conferences; ongoing legal cases; data bases.

Morocco: L'Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc

http://www.adfm.ma/francais/en_action/index.htm

Along with a number of other Moroccan feminist organizations, the ADFM spearheaded a 10-year campaign for the reform of the country's family law, considered one of the most conservative in the Arab world. They were among the principal players in the North African regional feminist network that formed in the run-up to the Beijing conference, called Collectif Maghreb Egalité 1995 and played a major role in the alternative Muslim Women's Parliament that took place at the NGO Forum during the Beijing conference. Subsequently, they helped to form the Collectif Maghreb 2000 and continued to hold seminars, publish papers, and utilize the media to raise awareness and support for the reform of the Mudawanna. With the change of government in the latter part of the 1990s, they found state support for their endeavors, and helped carry out a two-year national dialogue on a proposed National Plan for the Advancement of Women, which included a plan for family law reform. In the face of a newly-mobilized Islamist opposition, the National Plan and the family law reform was postponed, but it was revived when the new king appointed a royal commission. After a ten-year struggle, a new and reformed family law was approved by royal decree in October 2003 and adopted by the Moroccan parliament in January 2004.

In January 2005 the ADFM website was under construction. However, in a 6 December 2004 posting, *Femme d'Afrique Francophone* (www.famafrique.org/femafrance/adfm.html) reported that ADFM's latest campaign aimed to raise awareness on women's reproductive health and rights. The website has a long list of partner organizations, including many well-known international NGOs and UN agencies, civil society organizations, and a number of governmental organizations. The website is solely in French (the diplomatic language of Morocco) and not in Arabic which is the official language of Morocco.

Part III. Conclusions: Opportunities and Challenges for Arab Women's Virtual Activism

While it is too early to make an accurate scientific assessment of the Internet's impact on NGOs and the Arab public sphere, there is no doubt that it has already created a distinct community within the Arab World – a community of online activists, able to communicate with each other and capable of producing their own two-way information without direct government intervention. It may be even called a parallel community of activists, strengthened by the fact that individuals who normally would not be involved in activism are now 'speaking out' and expressing themselves on the Internet.

It is also clear from the case studies that women have been using the ICT's effectively in their "virtual activism" around some notable campaigns. As such, they have been taking part in the building of the Arab public sphere and have made their presence felt. And yet there are more obstacles than opportunities.

Although the Arab world comprises four percent of the world's population, its Internet users constitute only one percent of the world's users. Women are only the smallest percentage – just four percent of the total. Cost, language, and government control continue to hinder broader access. While the Internet has been and continues to be effective in women's collective action, giving them access to information and the ability to network, lobby, and share information, it has not yet reached its potential in the Arab world and is indeed under-used. It is the youth and the elite who use it most. Women are present more in discussion groups than with websites because of the skills needed to create sites. More bold initiatives need to be undertaken in order to strengthen such work and activities online. Educating women on using the Internet and other high-tech communications equipment is essential to help empower them. But the websites need to be in Arabic as well as in English and French. What hinders women's participation is real life also hinders them on the Internet. Illiteracy, cultural ethics and values and technophobia are just some of the problems.

The Internet itself is a global economic, technological and communication network dominated by the West. It is, by default, North/West centric. The issue of

Internet governance itself is important. While it is decentralized in some aspects, Internet governance is still through the United States, creating a new model of power structure. This issue is relevant to the Middle East because it reinforces the idea of Western hegemony over the world and in particular over the Arab World. Nevertheless, the very fact that the Internet allows other groups to “speak” broadens the scope for transnational dialogue and participation. And while Arab women’s organizations are vastly outnumbered by Islamist and government content on the Internet, the very existence of feminist websites and of the kinds of “virtual activism” described in this paper suggest a potential that may yet be realized.

References Cited

- Ghannam, Farha. 2002. *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation, and the Politics of Identity in a Global Cairo*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
<http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft109nb0bn/>
- Habermas, Jurgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*
- Hanieh, Adam. 1999. "The WWW in Palestine, An Informational and Organizing Tool." *Middle East Report* #213 (Winter). http://www.merip.org/mer/mer213/213_hanieh.html
- Hawthorne, Amy. Editor. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*
<http://www.ceip.org/files/Publications/ARB-7-19-04.asp?p=1&from=pubdate#gender>
- Hawthorne, Amy. 2004. "Middle Eastern Democracy: Is Civil Society the Answer?" Carnegie Paper No. 44. url:
<http://www.ceip.org/files/Publications/CarnegiePaper44.asp?from=pubdate>
- Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. 1995. *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
<http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft8c6009n4/>
- Mehrez, Samia. 2001. "Take Them Out of the Ball Game: Egypt's Cultural Players in Crisis." *Middle East Report* 219 (Summer). http://www.merip.org/mer/mer219/219_mehrez.html
- Millennial Middle East: Changing Orders, Shifting Borders
- Moghadam, Valentine. 2004. "The Gender of Democracy: The Link Between Women's Rights and Democratization in the Middle East." *Arab Reform Bulletin*, July 2004, Volume 2, Issue 7.
- Moghadam, Valentine M. 2005. *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- UNIFEM Arab States Regional Office -the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) launched a new study on the situation of women in Egypt on the 16th of March in Alexandria. Report in Arabic. "Progress of Arab Women 2004" UNIFEM report UNIFEM Arab States Regional Office
- Waltz, Susan E. 1995. *Human Rights and Reform: Changing the Face of North African Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
<http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft2t1nb1vf/>