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The Other Voice: Women in the Cyberspace Discourse in the Middle East and Islamic World

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In recent years, the Internet has become a swift and accessible means of communication in the Middle East, thanks in part to the proliferation of personal blogs and, even more recently, micro-blogs (through “Twitter”). Users are now able to transmit short announcements and updates via mobile phones connected to the Internet. Groups and individuals formerly marginalized or ignored by mainstream media, and in what are generally conservative and tradition-heavy societies, now possess unprecedented means by which to disseminate their views.

This is especially true with regard to women. All over the Middle East, women are active on the Internet, writing in Arabic, Persian, Turkish and English, telling their personal stories and discussing societal matters, taking advantage of the relative anonymity that the Internet offers. Some women have no problem with enabling all interested parties to read their Twitter blogs and feeds.[1] Others, especially concerned with protecting their anonymity, e.g. in

Saudi Arabia, insure that only people with their prior permission may do so.[2]

Their Internet usage covers both public and private matters, often using frank and even sharp language which can otherwise not be voiced in their societies. A number of Saudi women have already made their mark in promoting women's status via the Internet. The Saudi journalist Rim al-Salih, for example, champions the improvement of the status of women in the kingdom as part of a larger campaign to improve the life of ordinary citizens. She slams the ease by which men are able to divorce their wives, even by sending them a fax, and sometimes without their knowledge. What will be next, she wonders, the sending of a divorce notification via an SMS or e-mail?[3] The writings of Saudi journalist Hayfa'a Khalid are also noteworthy in this regard. Seeking to promote fair divorces for women, she created an Arabic-language website entitled "The Saudi Divorce", which details her organization's activities and includes a variety of information materials, including articles and interviews.[4]

A third person worth mentioning is Eman al-Nafjan, a mother of three and lecturer at a health sciences university in Riyadh, who maintains an English-language blog addressing women's issues in the kingdom and has published a variety of articles.[5] A fourth is Zaynab Ghasib, who has written about the mindset of Arab, and particularly Saudi female terrorists, which she says stems primarily from their ignorance.[6] Addressing the particularly sensitive religious sphere, Hatun Ajwad al-Fasi, one of Saudi Arabia's leading female intellectuals, has publicly complained of the lack of equality for women during prayers at the Grand Mosque in Mecca.[7] More bold still in her critique (although writing from abroad), has been the liberal Saudi writer Wajiyha al-Hawaydar, who views the adoption of secularism as the solution for most of Saudi society's problems. [8]

Around the region, female commentators treat a variety of subjects. The Palestinian journalist Maryam al-Dahir has attacked the forgiving approach towards Islamist terrorism adopted by Arab satellite television news programs and called on the Arab public to forthrightly condemn terrorism.[9] The exiled Syrian intellectual Marah al-Baq'a'i has condemned the ignorance and closed-mindedness which characterizes so much of Arab society, in contrast to the intellectual openness of Western societies.[10] Similarly, in an interview on al-Jazira TV during the controversy over the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, the Syrian-American psychiatrist Wafa'a Sultan railed against the absence of freedom of expression in the Arab world.[11] In Kuwait, the writer Ibtihal Abd al-Aziz al-Khatib condemned the absence of an Arab equivalent to Israel's Winograd Commission, which investigated the government's and

army's conduct in the 2006 Lebanon War, emphasizing the lack of accountability of Arab leaders. [12]

Egyptian women have also made considerable use of the Internet in their battle for equality. For example, the "We Are All Layla" site has carried the flag against daily injustices against women for the last three years (the organization's Twitter account contains numerous links to material dealing with women's issues across the region).[13] The venerable doctor and prominent feminist Nawal al-Sa'dawi has long campaigned against female circumcision, and now employs the Internet to spread her message, as do other activists on this issue.[14] The poet and activist Fatima Na'ut attacks the absence of religious tolerance towards Egypt's Coptic minority,[15] as does the human rights campaigner and blogger Dalia Zaida.[16]

One of the key Iranian blogs treating status-of-women issues is "Change for Equality",[17] which was awarded a prize for its activities by "Reporters Without Borders" Its centerpiece activity was an initiative to gather a million signatures on behalf of a petition to change existing laws which discriminate against women. Scores of Iranian female activists have paid a considerable price for their struggle on behalf of women's rights, including arrests and imprisonment.[18] Similarly, the "Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organization", the "Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan" (RAWA)[19] and scores of additional organizations employ the Internet to campaign for minority and women's rights and greater social justice.

Local initiatives by women on a variety of subjects also take on greater weight thanks to the Internet. Some would not even be possible without it. Such initiatives have included: a boycott by Saudi women of stores selling underwear and lingerie which employ only men; criticism of a call by Saudi religious figures to keep women out of the Saudi media;[20] the establishment and operation of a radio station in Egypt which caters exclusively to women's needs and interests;[21] and the creation of a Pakistani internet site by a fashion house which contains articles about the status of women in Pakistan.[22] Of course, the Internet has also become an important arena for men and women to meet one another[23] and to share details from women's daily life "under headscarf".[24] This is perhaps even more the case with regard to gay-lesbian communities around the region, for whom the Internet provides a vital means of moral support as well as points of personal contact. [25]

Of course, the Internet serves as a platform for a variety of women's voices and worldviews. One cannot say definitively that they are substantively different

from men's, simply by virtue of their femininity. Moreover, not all women, and not all classes in society even have access to the Internet. Nonetheless, the proliferation of "women's space" and "women's voices" on the Internet has clearly expanded the discourse regarding the need for social change in the region, with an eye to shattering the glass ceiling that hovers over women[26] in order to insure them their fundamental rights.

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[2] <<http://twitter.com/ghaidaa>>; <http://twitter.com/nawal_saad>; <<http://twitter.com/Sa4a>>; <<http://twitter.com/YasmeenAbuamer>>; <<http://twitter.com/rose1990>>; <<http://twitter.com/amany86>>; <<http://twitter.com/emanabdelmonem>>; <http://twitter.com/sara_dds>.

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