

RIDING THE CYBER WAVE: How Feminist Activism Develops Strategies against Gender-Based Violence

*Mariam Mecky**

In the past decade, social media has become a vital mode of activism against gender-based violence around the world and particularly in the Mediterranean region with the revolutionary moments in 2011. Naturally, there has been a noticeable focus since then on the role of social media in bringing about social change in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Gender issues and activism around gender have been similarly under the spotlight, although feminist and women's organisations had been advocating for social change prior to 2011. This policy brief aims to capture the multifacetedness of online feminist activism using Egypt as a case study, as the country witnesses an important dynamic of activism that mirrors aspects of similar activism elsewhere in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

This brief asserts that online activism constitutes a strategic and influential tool for current feminist and women's organisations facing material constraints to bring about social change. It commences with a brief overview of the development of feminist activism in the context of the Middle East at large and Egypt in particular. The next section zooms into online feminist activism around gender-based violence in Egypt, analysing two cases. The potential and limitations of online feminist activism are subsequently tackled. The brief concludes with recommendations around online feminist activism, highlighting the importance of supporting and facilitating online activism around gender-based violence.

Egyptian Feminist Activism Going Online¹

Feminist activism in the Middle Eastern region and Egypt specifically is traced back to the late 19th century with the liberation movements (Al-Ali, 2003). Such rich activism has

*Independent Researcher

¹ Due to the space limitations of this policy brief, it is not possible to discuss the history of feminist activism in the MENA region with a focus on Egypt at length. For a thorough background, please see Al-Ali, N. (2003); Al-Ali, N. (2000); Tadros, M. (2016).

developed into diverse modes of organising, from informal and formal to autonomous and semiautonomous groups and from collective movements to state feminism and non-governmental organization (NGO) activism. Notably since the 1990s, many feminist and women's groups in Egypt have centred their work on advocating against gender-based violence in the public and private sphere (Abouelnaga, 2015). Those diverse groups have employed several strategies and actions to combat gender-based violence, mainly awareness-raising activities and legal advocacy campaigns (Mecky, forthcoming). It is important to note that domestic violence per se, and as such gender-based violence in the private sphere, is not criminalised in Egypt. Sexual harassment, as a form of violence in the public sphere, was criminalised only in 2014.

In the past decade, visibly since 2011, feminist and women's mobilisation in Egypt has largely resorted to online tools such as social media, mobile applications, websites and platforms, blogs, as well as online mapping. This development has coincided with the visible decentralisation of feminist activism since 2011, with the rise of young feminist activists' groups not just stemming from the capital or major organisations (Zaki, 2019).

The shift to using online tools specifically around gender-based violence was not aimed only at mobilising online but also at developing large-scale awareness-raising campaigns, legal advocacy and pushing such issues to become part of mainstream public discourse (Skalli, 2014). In particular, young feminist groups advocating against gender-based violence in Egypt have capitalised on online tools, for instance launching campaigns where the different survivors of gender-based violence spoke about their experiences (Zaki, 2019).

Focusing on Young Feminist Groups in Egypt

This section unpacks the dynamics of young feminist activism around gender-based violence in Egypt on the basis of two examples: HarassMap and Birah A'mn. These initiatives are selected as they epitomise the complexity and dynamism of both organised and informal young feminist online mobilisation.

HarassMap was founded in late 2010 as a volunteer-based NGO working against social normalisation of sexual harassment (Abdelmonem & Galan, 2017). At that time, sexual harassment was not criminalised by Egyptian law. HarassMap was launched as a mapping system used anonymously online and through SMS to report cases of sexual harassment. Its main aim was to engage the public against sexual harassment by reporting, to showcase the extent of sexual harassment at a time of denial of its existence, as well as to urge a collective stand against it to create a zero-tolerance environment (HarassMap, n.d.). The reports currently displayed on HarassMap's website show that most incidents occur in urban areas, in particular in Cairo, with 1,300 cases reported.²

² The timeframe for the reports is not specified.

Later on, HarassMap complemented its efforts with offline community mobilisation working with the different sectors of society, such as students or corporate employees and local initiatives. Offline work included workshops and trainings consolidating the decentralisation of HarassMap work and increasing its outreach in the different governorates beyond the capital (Abdelmonem & Galan, 2017; HarassMap, n.d.). Currently, utilising social media for awareness-raising and campaigning purposes is a critical part of HarassMap. One of the examples is its recent campaigns on consent, which focused on developing a viable translation of the concept of consent in Egyptian colloquial Arabic that fits the Egyptian culture, as well as on increasing awareness through comics, demonstrating hypothetical situations in public and private spheres.

The functioning of HarassMap, including strict protection of anonymity of its users and, as a result, a growing popularity of the application, led to replication of this idea in over 80 countries around the world including Turkey, Lebanon and Morocco from the Euro-Mediterranean region, as well as Japan, the US, Cambodia, Nigeria and Iran (Harassmap around the world, n.d.). This replication shows the viability of online engagement tools to mobilise against sexual harassment, despite the different contexts.

Birah A'mn, translated as Safe Haven, is a feminist initiative established in 2016 by young women from different governorates from Upper Egypt, Alexandria, Beheira and Greater Cairo, and part of a young feminist network consisting of five other young feminist initiatives around the country. Birah A'mn works against all forms of domestic violence acknowledging the different priorities in local communities on domestic violence, from forced marriage to unlawful disinheritance of females to males. The initiative's activities are focused predominantly online. Birah A'mn was launched initially as an online campaign with a hashtag advocating for freedom of the detainees inside Egyptian homes. Its rationale is rooted in rejecting all forms of violence from state violence, which was widely condemned specifically since 2011, to family violence, which is widely tolerated, and hence this campaign advocated against gender-based violence both from the state and the family (Mecky, 2019).

The launch of Birah A'mn shows how social networking sites can be used to advocate against gender-based violence by sharing testimonies and spreading information, and in that process showing how violence in the private sphere relates to women's subjectivity and political awareness. In this case, the use of digital tools was aimed at promoting solidarity with the survivors, establishing alliances between feminist groups and putting in the spotlight all forms of patriarchal violence by state and non-state actors (Mecky, 2019). In that vein, relying on testimonies holds significant prospects "for the development of feminist solidarity and consciousness, and even, social change" (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2018). Birah A'mn exemplifies how online feminist activism can adapt and evolve, as the initiative started as an informal campaign resulting in an organised initiative.

The initiatives created by young feminists represent modes of feminist activism that expanded mobilisation beyond the standard forms, such as offline protests and lobbying to online spaces. As such, experiences of gender-based violence and testimonies of survivors have been shared through social media, including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. These experiences are also gathered in studies disseminated online (for instance, HarassMap report Awel Mara Taharosh, translated as First Time I Was Harassed). Digital tools, such as maps, and online data gathered therein, have been used to further raise awareness about the scale of the problem (Skalli, 2014). The shift to online spaces helped boost public debate on gender-based violence and made this issue a part of mainstream public discourse. Such a shift is not only limited to young feminist groups but also includes many long-established NGOs, which have been increasingly focusing their advocacy work online. For instance, an Egyptian NGO, the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA), launched in 1995 to provide support services to women, has switched their advocacy campaigns online; with their recent campaign focused against marital rape (Mecky, forthcoming). Online tools such as blogging, campaigns on social media and hashtags have therefore become strategic instruments for awareness-raising or legal advocacy.

Potential and Limitations of Online Activism

The increased use of online tools by feminist groups and activists has the objective of overcoming various constraints in their mobilisation against gender-based violence. In Egypt, the resort to online spaces is a result of several factors including limited resources, constrained access to mainstream media and public space overall. Online tools allow much more extensive dissemination of information and knowledge, significantly exceeding the impact of standard means, such as events, development projects of limited outreach or street protests (Zaki, 2019). In that respect, online activism is a strategic tool in the light of an offline space that has limited access to civic engagement and lacks access to traditional forms of feminist organising. Moreover, while visibility online may constitute a threat for feminist activists of cyber sexist or political attacks, online platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are still regarded as safer in comparison to on-the-ground activities (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2018).

Using online tools and ICT helps overcome geographical location and class, as well as allowing solidarity networks to be established across class and race locally, nationally and internationally (Zaki, 2019, p. 79). Online feminist activism thus has the potential to generate support for feminist issues while highlighting the extent of sexual violence (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018). This has been, for instance, the case of Birah A'mn, which brought together women from the different backgrounds to denounce gender-based violence, while accounting for its different forms in local contexts. In that respect, online feminist activism, through personalised content and experiences, provides an opportunity to increase public engagement and awareness (Newsom & Lengel, 2012).

Online campaigns further a larger understanding of gender-based violence, paving the way for this violence to be perceived as a large structural issue rather than as a merely individual case (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018). This was a key objective for HarassMap, where the reports on the map highlighted the scope of sexual harassment at a time when it was often dismissed and considered as a singular incident (Mecky, forthcoming). Thus, online activism disrupts the silence around gender-based violence and works on challenging its social normalisation and myths surrounding it.

Nevertheless, online activism around gender issues encounters a number of limitations. A major challenge is the accessibility of internet in various marginalised areas (Melki & Mallat, 2014) particularly in a country with deteriorating socioeconomic conditions such as Egypt. It is often contended that using online tools in activism is inadequate considering structural constraints, such as low economic levels, literacy rates and gender parity (Melki & Mallat, 2014). While this is often valid, in a restrictive environment with increased social media activity online activism represents a crucial opportunity (Brimacombe et al, 2018). According to recent statistics published in February 2019, it is estimated that in Egypt there are around 40 million Facebook users (State of Social Media '19, 2019). Additionally, according to the last segregated statistics according to age, the largest age group on Facebook is 18-24, followed by the users aged 25-34 (Egypt's digital report, 2017). Therefore, despite the limitation of accessibility, online spaces hold potential to foster public engagement and mobilisation and challenge the status quo (Newsom & Lengel, 2012).

The increased online activism impacts the general landscape of offline activism, challenging the environment of mainstream media especially in the context of Egypt. It is essential not to consider online and offline feminism as two contrasting binaries but as a continuum of activism and mobilisation around feminist issues (Jackson, 2018). Feminist mobilisation operates in online and offline spheres adjacently as feminist agency constantly pushes for social change. Utilising social media to promote solidarity and shed light on silenced or "hushed" issues such as gender-based violence garners support locally, sparks public discussions and grabs international media attention (Brimacombe et al, 2018). Online activism encompasses the potential to amplify feminist voices to both local and international audiences. Such activism, in turn, may prompt bottom-up action and is able to exert pressure on mainstream public discourse and policy-makers as a result of international attention (Ibid.). This, for instance, occurred around sexual harassment in Egypt after 2011 (Skalli, 2014), where activism around sexual harassment stretched from "small-scale workshops, reports, documentation" that reached few people to more effective measures reaching a larger public (Abdelmonem & Galan, 2017, p.155). This resulted eventually in the criminalisation of sexual harassment in 2014 after a decade of work by feminist and rights groups (Roushdy, 2016).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The different cases of activism surveyed above highlight in particular the significance of the mobilisation around gender-based violence. Although it may seem an issue-based mobilisation, feminist online mobilisation expands past the established realms of activism and is characterised by a political awareness that acknowledges intersecting struggles across race and class. In that vein, it does not only constitute an opportunity to raise awareness but holds the potential to push for and translate into on-the-ground action, such as influencing policy-making or public engagement. Within that process, this activism contests the wider patriarchal violence while navigating through the structural constraints, exceeding certain traditional venues for activism and manoeuvring the restrictive environment in certain cases.

Supporting online mobilisation, hence, is crucial for social change in the context of Egypt and elsewhere. To support feminist groups in navigating the different socio-political environments, it is imperative for policy-makers at home and abroad to provide platforms for engagement and discussion nationally and globally around gender-based violence as well as to ensure freedom of information and expression, taking protective and preventative measures against all types of cyber attacks or censorship.

It is central for policies to be informed by the work and perspectives of the different types of feminist activism that encompass nuanced understandings of class, gender and race beyond the scope of issue-based mobilisation. Thereby, the different policy-makers, from lawmakers to the different officials, can facilitate and support such activism by ensuring the visibility of local feminist activists in the different locations accounting for diverse voices and intersecting issues. National policy-makers tend to pay little attention to young feminist activism, as very often local young female activists are excluded from the policy conversation. This often results in policy discussions that do not regard the specificities or needs of local communities and, consequently, implemented policies and procedures are ineffective. This is crucial in the light of feminist activism in Egypt pushing for a comprehensive law on violence against women as well as shedding light on the issue (Mecky, 2019). It is also important in other contexts with regards to enactment and application of laws around gender-based violence, and maintaining them at a time when there is a retreat on gender issues.

Feminist activism utilises online tools for advocacy and mobilisation to reach a wider audience than traditional means, navigating structural limitations, garnering support and solidarity across borders and instigating connective action. In contexts of limitations over public space, or crackdowns on feminist issues, online activism constitutes an instrumental tool for feminists.

References

ABDELMONEM, A. (2015). Reconceptualizing sexual harassment in Egypt: A longitudinal assessment of el-Taharrush el-Ginsy in Arabic online forums and anti-sexual harassment activism. *Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research*, 1(1).

ABDELMONEM, A. & GALÁN, S. (2017). Action-oriented responses to sexual harassment in Egypt: The cases of HarassMap and WenDo. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 13 (10), 154-167.

ABOUELNAGA, S. (2015). Reconstructing gender in post-revolution Egypt. In El Said, M., Meari, L., & Pratt, N. (Eds.), *Rethinking gender in revolutions and resistance: Lessons from the Arab world*. London: Zed Books.

AL-ALI, N. (2003). Gender and civil society in the Middle East. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 5 (2), 216-232.

BRIMACOMBE T, KANT R, FINAU G, TARAI J, & TITIFANUE J. (2018). A new frontier in digital activism: An exploration of digital feminism in Fiji. *Asia Pac Policy Stud.* 5, 508–521.

HARASSMAP AROUND THE WORLD. (n.d.). HarassMap. Retrieved from <https://harassmap.org/en/around-world>

HARASSMAP OUR STORY. (n.d.). HarassMap. Retrieved from <https://harassmap.org/who-we-are/our-story>

JACKSON, S. (2018). Young feminists, feminism and digital media. *Special Issue on Feminism & Psychology*, 28(1), 32–49.

MECKY, M. (2019). Challenging the bargain: Feminist mobilization, the state and the criminalization of gender-based spousal violence in Egypt. Special Issue on Gendered Resistance. Arab Council for Social Sciences.

MECKY, M. (Forthcoming). Mobilization around Khul' law & Personal status law. Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University in Beirut.

MELKI, J. & MALLAT, S. (2014). Digital activism: Efficacies and burdens of social media for civic activism. *Arab Media & Society*, 19, 1 -15.

MENDES, K., RINGROSE, J., & KELLER, J. (2018). #MeToo and the promise and pitfalls of challenging rape culture through digital feminist activism. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 25(2), 236–246.

NABER, N., & EL-HAMEED, D. A. (2016) Attacks on feminists in Egypt: The militarization of public space and accountable solidarity. *Feminist Studies*, 42(2), 520-527.

NEWSOM, V. & LENGEL, L. (2012). Arab women, social media, and the Arab Spring: Applying the framework of digital reflexivity to analyze gender and online activism. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13(5), 31-45.

ROUSHDY, N. (2016). Sexual harassment: Egypt. *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*.

SKALLI, L. (2014). Young women and social media against sexual harassment in North Africa. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19(2), 244-258.

STATE OF SOCIAL MEDIA '19. (2019). Crowd Analyzer. Retrieved from <https://www.crowdanalyzer.com/hubfs/State%20Of%20Social%20Media%20Report%202019/State%20Of%20Social%20Media%20Report%202019%20-%20English.pdf>

SORBERA, L. (2014). Challenges of thinking feminism and revolution in Egypt between 2011 and 2014. *Postcolonial Studies*, 17(1), 63-75.

TADROS, M. (2016). *Resistance, revolt & gender justice in Egypt. First ed.* Syracuse. New York: Syracuse University Press.

WAEL, R. (2018). First time I was harassed: Hashtag testimonies of child-sexual violence. HarassMap.

ZAKI, H. (2019). Young feminist groups: Towards a decentralized feminist movement? In El Khawaga, A. (Ed.), *Community Activism in the Region* (78-82). Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, American University in Beirut.