Digital activism for women’s rights in the Arab World
By Aline Sara

Figure 1 “The uprising of Women in the Arab World” Facebook group logo
Introduction:

By now, the ways in which the internet has revolutionized communication worldwide have long been documented, analyzed and adequately proven. In 2011, the internet's role in regime change made headlines as a wave of uprisings, frequently associated with the concept of "Twitter Revolution," swept across the Arab region, revealing the World Wide Web's power to document abuses, spread information, and rally masses to topple decades-old dictatorships. Back then, these mobilizations included men and women. Four years later, however, the very women at the forefront of a revolution now face a setback when it comes to claiming their rights in an often conservative and patriarchic society. Indeed, despite what some hailed as an awakening in 2011, the Middle East continues to rank lowest on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report's Economic Participation, Opportunity and Political Empowerment subindexes. Reports continue to emerge on issues ranging from honor crimes to sexual-based violence, with some arguing women's plight in the region is in fact worse than pre-Arab Spring.

Just as back then, the masses used the internet to push for regime change, women and their supporters are using the web to confront patriarchy and claim equal rights. From Yemen to Tunisia, Aleppo to Cairo, advocates in the Arab World are mastering modern-day technology in what is being dubbed cyber dissidence and digital activism. Drawing on online campaigns, social media pages, web-based platforms and other tools of the internet era, this paper will explore several cases following the 2011 uprisings to show how the internet, and notably online social media, has empowered Arab women. Recent studies argue that today's social movements rely heavily on new media and social networks to generate protests, which, in turn contribute to fostering change. These online manifestations, argues Fanenbruck, require interactivity, awareness and mobilization, three critical elements to successful campaigns, which this paper will briefly discuss in its first part. This paper will then explore specific case studies pertaining to women in the Arab World aligned along three main axes; namely (1) calling for legislative change, (2) confronting sexual harassment and gender-based violence, and (3) condemning patriarchy and religious conservatism. By considering the content, format, and when possible, the impact of each case, the research will show that online activism has revolutionized Arab women's struggle for equality. This paper defines social movements as a system of collective actions by people who are consciously aiming for or against a particular change. The author will also briefly examine internet-generated challenges and limitations all while acknowledging the importance of coupling digital activity with action offline.

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4 Fanenbruck, Gloria. The Role of New Media in Protest Organisation. Erasmus University, 2010.p .22
I- The elements of online social movements

In her 2009 thesis, Fanenbruck examines the role of new media in protest organization, based on the climate change protest in advance of the 2009 United Nations Climate Summit in London. Arguing that mobilisation constitutes the movement organisers' final goal, Fanenbruck notes that "interactivity and awareness are necessary to build up for the largest mobilisation of protesters possible, as a large turn-out is more likely to help achieve the aims of the protest." She explores three forms of interactivity, namely user-to-user, user-to-document and user-to-system, stressing social media's contribution to direct communication and a "vivid virtual exchange" and describes the internet's value in disseminating information and raising awareness, pre-requisites to mobilization. She also addresses the challenge of translating online enthusiasm to concrete action. 

Interactivity

Without a doubt, internet kindles interactivity. The World Wide Web is –by default— a borderless, limitless platform that connects individuals around the world. This can shatter otherwise strong cultural barriers, instigate controversial debate, and expose critical data, leading to an eruption in transmissions of possibly revolutionary ideas. 

While pre-internet existing NGOs are increasingly milking the virtual realm to their advantage, certain organizations are born as a result of the web, complementing their cyber-work with activities on the grounds. One such example is the five-year old Avaaz.org, self-described as a "global web movement to bring people-powered politics to decision-making everywhere." According to the NGO, "previous international citizens' groups and social movements have had to build a constituency for each separate issue, year by year and country by country, in order to reach a scale that could make a difference." However, "today, thanks to new technology and a rising ethic of global interdependence, that constraint no longer applies."

To be sure, through the internet, netizens worldwide form global alliances. Social media, interactive by nature, further enables users to share, like, and spread news, statuses, or information at a rapid pace. Information exchange is fundamental to social movements, which rely on sharing data to defend a given cause. This has been especially helpful to women of the Arab World whose issues are typically kept silent and deemed taboo. As discussed by Tatomir in her paper entitled Arab Women and the New Social Media:

Online activism provides the potential for empowerment to marginalized voices, provides the opportunity for cross-boundary dialogue, and provides an impetus for social change. Online feminist activist spaces attempt to provide the possibility for enacting the ideas of

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7 Fanenbruck, p. 23
8 Fanenbruck, p. 27
9 Howard, Philip N., et al. "Opening closed regimes: what was the role of social media during the Arab Spring?" (2011).
12 Fanenbruck, Gloria. *The Role of New Media in Protest Organisation*. Erasmus University, 2010. p. 27
gendered dialogue. Therefore, online feminist activist spaces are an excellent starting point to build a discussion of gendered identity and dialogue online.13

Another interactive aspect of the internet is crowdmapping, which relies on contributions by ordinary citizens to a mapping scheme that documents a given issue and is now widely used by NGOs today. Crowdmapping alters information flow's direction, empowers people through open source technologies, all while creating a new space for partnership and exchange.14

Awareness

In a pre-internet era, an incident taking place in a remote Arab village could have at worst been deprived of coverage, at best been captured on video and exposed through traditional, frequently-subject-to-government-control, media channels.

The internet has given birth to citizens' journalism, in which people document, create, and choose which information to disseminate. As such, Syrians upload videos documenting the Assad regime's abuse in their otherwise isolated and cordoned off country.15 Similarly, the image of Egypt's mutilated Khaled Said makes the rounds on Facebook, galvanizing people to come to protest their authorities' barbarity in the streets as in the January 25 uprising.16 In 2012, the story of a Moroccan girl who committed suicide after being legally forced to marry her rapist was widely publicized on Twitter under the hashtag #RIPAmina17 The internet gives citizens new avenues through which to access information, bypass state-controlled media, and debunk truths that other actors—notably local authorities—might rather conceal. To a certain extent, the internet provides a special, untraditional, "luminal third space" void of traditional customs and legislation, in which fearless and ordinary citizens speak up.18

For Arab women, whose struggles are frequently marginalized and socially taboo, the internet is a particularly important game-changer. Once online, an otherwise locally ignored campaign can be picked up internationally, somewhat forcing it on to the national agenda and bypassing censorship that is often grounded in religion or social constructs.19 Country media can "censor" feminist movements by depriving them from air time or distorting their message, however citizen journalism avoids this challenge via the internet20. The internet shifts Arab's women's issues from the private to the public, from the local to the international.21

Mobilization

14 http://www.ushahidi.com/mission/
20 Ghattas, Abir. Interview
In 2011, the famous Facebook page "We are all Khaled Said" was critical in mobilizing hundreds of thousands of Egyptians to demonstrate against police brutality. A 26-year veiled Asmaa Mahfouz allegedly inspired thousands of youth to take to the streets when she uploaded a video of herself on YouTube, urging fellow citizens to join the protests. "Digital media technologies not only set off a cascade of civil disobedience across Egypt, but made for a unique means of civic organizing that was replicated around the region," writes Howard. Beyond Egypt, the internet has been used to push for action for causes worldwide, such as during September 2014's March for Climate Change that gathered hundreds of thousands throughout the streets of New York. Via the web, activists recruit, plan, organize and strategize physical protests, a fundamental component that generates media attention, instills pressure, and eventually, helps push for long-term change.

By engendering interactivity, heightening awareness and facilitating mass mobilization, the internet has thus facilitated social movements in ways that are both obvious but at times a bit more obscure. The web breaks silence and sheds light on the taboo, and is accordingly, a formidable source of empowerment for Arab women, whose issues are especially prone to being marginalized, ignored or silenced. The following part will look at eight such examples throughout the region.

II- Case studies- part 1: Pushing for legislative change

#Women 2 Drive Campaign- Saudi Arabia

In May 2011, a then 31-year-old Manal Al Sharif filmed herself driving in Saudi Arabia, a country that bans women from getting behind the wheel. The video, in which she encourages women to learn how to drive, was then posted on YouTube, point from which it went viral. Sharif was arrested and subsequently released, increasing the buzz around her case. The incident brought the plight of Saudi women to the forefront with global coverage on social media, activist networks, but also in major papers worldwide, sometimes in comical forms.

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Sharif's action came as part of the "Women2drive" campaign, which garnered some 18,000 “likes” in a few months. Having received thousands of death threats from conservatives and supporters of the Saudi regime, she was also internationally recognized for her courage (Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent, one of *Time* magazine’s 100 most influential people of 2012), serving as an inspiration for human rights activists worldwide. By the fall of 2012, Sharif’s own Twitter and Facebook accounts had some 2,888 and 17,865 followers, respectively.

Over the following years, thousands of women followed in Sharif’s footsteps, and in October 2014, at least 60 women with international drivers’ licenses drove as part of another major mobilization against the ban.27

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It is worth noting, that in 2007, another Saudi woman, Wajeha al-Huwaider had already pushed for women’s right to drive in a petition addressed to King Abdullah. She had even posted a video of herself driving on International Women's Day in 2008 to YouTube. However, two factors distinguish her actions from Sharif's, namely (1) that they occurred pre-Arab Spring and that (2) the movement did not have a Facebook page, thus highlighting the potentially critical nature of online social media.

In November 2014, the Saudi government opened an unprecedented discussion around the issue of women's driving, voicing a possibility for women aged 30 and up to drive during specific hours of the day. While women in Saudi Arabia continued to be banned from getting behind the wheel, the campaign to drive had resonated globally, transcended local and regional borders and has brought the issue on the international agenda. While difficult to pinpoint the exact source of such a shift in Saudi discourse, many contributing aspects are grounded in the internet and particularly online social media and digital activism.

#RIPAmina- Morocco

A significant case in which the internet helped yield awareness, interactivity, mobilization and an eventual full-on change in legislation is that of Morocco’s Amina Filali. In 2012, news came out that the 16-year-old poisoned herself to death six months after being forced to marry her alleged rapist. The marriage was ordered by her parents to salvage the family’s honor, and the culprit, in marrying his victim was able to get away with the crime.

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The story sent local and international shock waves, while the Facebook page "We Are All Amina Filali," (parallel to Egypt's "We are all Khaled Said" Facebook Page) was quickly established urging an amendment of Article 475 of the penal code in which a loophole exonerates rapists of underage girls by letting them marry their victims. The #RIPAmina hashtag gained significant traction on Twitter while physical protests took place country-wide. An online petition calling for the law's repeal by internet-based NGO Avaaz garnered over 800,000 signatures. Filali's story also served as an inspiration for a documentary that gained popularity through its Facebook page and eventual release in 2013.

Two years after the incident, with the pressure of unwavering activists and NGOs, Morocco's parliament unanimously voted in favor of amending Article 475 of the penal code. While Morocco is known for an already ebullient civil society, notably pertaining to women's rights, the internet's role was undeniable in shedding light on the tragedy, both locally, and globally. Through social networks, activists, journalists and followers of Amina's cause named and shamed the government's endorsement of an unjust law, contributing to the Moroccan parliament's decision to enact a full-on legislative change.

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III- Case studies-part 2: Sexual harassment and gender-based violence

#Harassmap- Egypt

According to experts, harassment has reached record highs in places like Egypt, where religious conservatism is rising in direct reaction to globalization, poverty, and increasing western influence, among other factors.\(^{33}\)

Founded in 2010, Harassmap combines online and offline action by mapping the different locations where women are being harassed: anything from groping to catcalls to full-on rape. Using the Ushahidi platform, the online crowdmapping component is complemented by psychological support to harassment victims, by volunteerism in neighborhoods to engage “perpetrators” and raise awareness, and by other advocacy projects, such as the creation of a video in which Egyptian men condemn harassment and allude to its unmanliness.\(^{34}\)

In June 2012, Harassmap helped launch the #endSH (end sexual harassment) twitter campaign in Egypt and Lebanon, while in the spring of 2014, the NGO launched the "don't be silent" campaign to emphasize the criminal nature of sexual harassment.\(^{35}\) Today, Harassmap has over 21,000 followers on Twitter. It has also collected a number of international awards.\(^{36}\)

In addition to making international headlines, Harassmap has also inspired the Safe Streets campaign in Yemen and similar initiatives in other Arab countries, calling to speak out against sexual harassment. Besides raising awareness and pushing for legislative change, Harassmap is working on changing the cultural view (and mostly acceptance) of harassment in the region, an arguably harder task given the centrality of the concept of family honor and taboo nature of sexual crimes.

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\(^{34}\) Egyptian men criticizing harassment video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72RGtkwRMqU


Though very general, included within the category of sexual harassment is the case of journalist Mona Eltahawy and impact of her tweeting in 2012 after being sexually assaulted by Egypt’s army during a protest in Tahrir Square. Upon her release, she instantaneously tweeted the details of her attack, broadcasting the experience to over 160,000 followers, in sometimes crude detail. The live component of her tweeting and raw, unaltered description of an otherwise taboo incident added traction to her case.

![Figure 4: A sample tweet recounting El Tahawy's assault.](image)

Though difficult to quantify, that a single tweet of hers was instantaneously blasted to thousands of followers speaks the influence she holds, one that is especially powerful given she is an Arab-American prominent journalist on Arab and Muslim issues. At the same time, the Egyptian authorities were entirely powerless in the face of her actions.

Today, with over 200,000 followers on Twitter, it is undeniable that Eltahawy's influence is directly related to the internet. Her story helped further break the silence on sexual violence, which remains taboo in Egypt, and echoed the incident of Lara Logan, another American reporter who was similarly assaulted in Tahrir Square in 2011.

The combination of the above mentioned activism, all of them grounded online, have rendered the topic sexual harassment in Egypt almost common knowledge. It has become such an infamous issue that the *New York Times* gave the topic front page coverage, side-by-side with the local American news on the day of the 2012 US elections.

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@SalwaendSH - Lebanon

“The Adventures of Salwa” is another campaign from Lebanon whose focus lies in responding to sexual harassment also via a website whose main character Salwa, represents a fearless young girl who fights to aggressions. Once again, the project relies on the web as a venue for communication, exchange of information, experiences, and ideas among the public on the taboo topic.

Figure 5: The heroine of the Adventures of Salwa

#WomenUnderSiege - Syria

Finally, US-based NGO Women Under Siege is also using the Ushahidi platform to investigate how rape and other forms of sexualized violence have been used in genocide and conflict settings worldwide over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries.\(^{40}\)

In collaboration with Syrian activists, the project maps rape and sexual violence in the ongoing Syria war to generate periodic reports that can thereafter serve as a basis for future prosecutions or assistance programs to those who have been targeted. By anonymously submitting a claim online, rape victims can report on a traditionally taboo matter with greater ease, serving as “a journalistic megaphone for victims of violence” that furthers discussion around rape as a war weapon. Such type of internet based crowdmapping serves as additional sources to policy makers, lawyers, social workers and more.

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IV- Case studies-Part 3: Denouncing patriarchy

#nudephotorevolutionary

The decision of a 20-year-old Egyptian to post a photograph of herself naked on her blog made for an especially sensational and controversial case in October 2011. Such an ambitious act would have been much more difficult to undertake offline.

“I am not shy of being a woman in a society where women are nothing but sex objects, harassed on a daily basis by men who know nothing about sex or the importance of a woman,” Aliaa Magda Elmahdy told BBC41, when asked about her indecent exposure in a country where an estimated 80% of women are subject to some form of daily harassment.42 Within just a few hours, the black and white photo went viral on Twitter (hashtag #nudephotorevolutionary) and was viewed over a million times. In that same time span, Elmahdy’s followers went from a few hundred to 14,000, overnight, with today some 42,000 following the young feminist's twitter account.43

“Most Egyptians are secretive about sex because they are brought up thinking sex is something bad and dirty, and there is no mention of it in schools,” Elmahdy told the BBC, alluding to the fact that sex-education is close to absent in the Arab World,44 reflective of how issues pertaining to sex remain a matter of the private sphere throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

43 Aliaa El Mahdy Twitter handle https://twitter.com/aliaaelmahdy
Both conservatives and liberals alike reacted angrily, the latter of the two claiming the rebel had tarnished the uprising’s image. Granted her action’s controversial nature, it helped forward the issue of patriarchy, misogyny and sexuality in the Arab society to the forefront.\textsuperscript{45} Her act would have been significantly more difficult to perform offline.

@UprisingOfWomen

Also, in the fall of 2011, a web-based movement for women in the Middle East garnered particularly significant attention, locally and internationally, when Facebook momentarily suspended the group’s activity\textsuperscript{46}. Following the momentum of the Arab Spring, “The Uprising of Women in the Arab World”\textsuperscript{47}'s founders sought to raise awareness and foster solidarity on women's issues in the region.

A year after its creation, the group organizers invited followers to take photos of themselves with a sign that reads "I am with the uprisings of women in the Arab world because..." to be completed by each participant as pleased, fueling the page's popularity. Dana Bakdounis, a then 21-year old Syrian living in Saudi Arabia, ignited a fire by posting a photo of her unveiled self holding her passport book. The document was open along her photo page, in which she is veiled. She carried a note that stated: "I am with the uprising of women in the Arab world because, for 20 years, I wasn't allowed to feel the wind in my hair and [on] my body."\textsuperscript{47}

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\textsuperscript{47} Facebook page, The Uprising of Women in the Arab World, post by Dana Bakdounis
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The controversial photo was censored, while the Uprising's Facebook page was momentarily suspended from the social network. In response, the owners resorted to another form of online action, tweeting about the scandal, desecrating Facebook, and urging support for Bakdounis under the #WindtoDana hashtag, generating even further media. Facebook caved into the pressure and officially apologized for suspending the group's account, allegedly a result of accumulated "report" cases filed by Facebook users, mostly male conservatives from Saudi Arabia. As of December 2011, the "Uprising of Women in the Arab World," now a token symbol of women’s struggle in the region, had amassed over 80,000 "likes". Today the count is at 118,000, symbolic of women’s rights centrality as a discussion topic in the Arab World today. 

50 Uprising of women in the Arab World Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/intifadat.almar2a?fref=ts
The abovementioned cases have all contributed to kindling a discussion on women’s issues and patriarchy in the region, giving them a priceless space in which to vent, network and break the silence around their situation.

While this is not the focus of the paper, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of online activism and the importance of coupling it with action on the grounds. For one, social media functions according to algorithms. Accordingly, those already supportive of a given cause are more likely to visit a campaign page than others. "Breaking the cycle of traditional and expected followers remains challenging. Also, just as movements condemning conservatism are popping up online, women with conservative views are also arming themselves with their smart phones, laptops and tablets to create their own catchy campaigns, as demonstrated by a recent UAE conservative dress movement. Known as the UAEDressCode, the group’s Twitter handle states that “Freedom and Respect are given as long as you are not abusing them. Support #UAEDressCode for decency in public and for the UAE."52

Moreover, despite web-based advantages to activism, it is important to recognize the internet’s limitations. Governments can pull the plug on its citizens, as did ousted President Hosni Mubarak back in 2011.53 Regimes are also increasingly savvy at blocking certain websites, the Syrian and Saudi qualifying among the ten most restrictive.54 Other leaders use brutal web-based tactics to filter opposition websites and arrest cyber-dissidents, such as in Bahrain and several other Arab nations.55

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52 @UAEDressCode Twitter campaign, https://twitter.com/uaedresscode
Conclusion:

Based on the aforementioned cases, the internet has undeniably revolutionized the ways in which activists address, document, raise awareness and mobilize for a cause. For women in the Arab World, this is especially remarkable given the taboo around sex, gender and sexuality in the region. The web equips activists with new tools in a virtual space that transcends local norms and restrictions, and provides greater ease, freedom, and to a certain extent — protection — when addressing highly controversial topics. The internet also enables the rapid transmission of an idea, of naming and shaming, and of calls to action, reflective of the interactivity, awareness and mobilization needed for a successful online campaign for political or social change.

The women's driving campaign in Saudi Arabia and the campaign to change Article 436 of the Penal Code in Morocco both played a role in helping change or fully change a given legislation. Crowdmapping projects, such as Women Under Siege and Harassmap have enabled activists to move beyond awareness by taking it up a notch, enabling victims to report their story to the public through an online platform that can eventually be used by policy makers, lawyers, diplomats and more. On a more nebulous front, several campaigns are working to change cultural perceptions, a much harder and less easily measurable task. In making a buzz around taboo issues, such as witnessed with the Uprising of Women in the Arab World Facebook page, one stirs attention, generates debate and raises awareness, all precursors to any future offline action and potential concrete change. While the latter form of activism remains difficult to measurable, online discussions and campaigns contribute to the momentum and overall awareness that might at one point be the very tipping point before a major wave of change.

Granted the internet has opened a number of new doors for grassroots movements, it has also opened avenues through which regimes can further stifle their people. While in 2011, Arab youth was arguably ahead of the game with regards to using the internet as a tool for change, local authorities are catching up. They too are equipped with web-based means of responding to both online and offline actions, as exemplified by a new, at times chilling wave of digital repression. Accordingly, it is no surprise that in December of 2013, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 68/167 that addresses the negative impact of surveillance and interception of communications on human rights. Moving forward, online activists must take measures to protect their digital rights, a now emerging theme within the contemporary human rights discourse.

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