



JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY  
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UNVEILING THE REVOLUTIONARIES:  
CYBERACTIVISM AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN  
IN THE ARAB UPRISINGS

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## **Unveiling the Revolutionaries**

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## Unveiling the Revolutionaries

*“I, a girl, am going down to Tahrir Square, and I will stand alone. And I’ll hold up a banner. Perhaps people will show some honor. I even wrote my number so maybe people will come down with me. No one came except ... three guys and three armored cars of riot police ... I’m making this video to give you one simply message: We want to go down to Tahrir Square on January 25. If we still have honor and want to live with dignity on this land, we have to go down on January 25. We’ll go down and demand our rights, our fundamental human rights... If you think yourself a man, come with me on January 25th. Whoever says a women shouldn't go to protests because they will get beaten, let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on January 25th ... Sitting at home and just following us on news or Facebook leads to our humiliation, leads to my own humiliation. If you have honor and dignity as a man, come ... If you stay home, you deserve what will happen to you ... and you’ll be guilty, before your nation and your people ... Go down to the street, send SMSs, post it post it on the ‘net. Make people aware ... It will make a difference, a big difference ... never say there’s no hope ... so long you come down with us, there will be hope ... don’t think you can be safe any more! None of us are! Come down with us and demand your rights my rights, your family’s rights.”*

Thus was the call to action that 26-year-old Asmaa Mahfouz made in a video she posted to YouTube on January 18, 2011, which went viral and turned her into a symbol of the Egyptian revolution. A day later, 32-year-old Tawakkol Karman organized a protest in solidarity with the Tunisian people in downtown Sana’a that drew thousands to the streets in an unprecedented public demonstration by women. Young women have been at the forefront of the revolutionary uprisings that have toppled regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, along with the more protracted struggles in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. They were among the Twitterati and citizen journalists who became leading news sources—the protesters who took to the streets and the cybersphere to demand that their entrenched leaders step down, and the citizens who paid the ultimate price, being beaten to death and murdered in those regimes’ desperate attempts to cling to power.

This research introduces several of the key figures leading the revolutionary convulsions in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, and Yemen, and explores how young women used social media and cyberactivism to help shape the “Arab Spring” and its aftermath. The engagement of women

with social media has coincided with a shift in the political landscape of the Middle East, and it is unlikely that they will ever retreat from the new arenas they have carved out for themselves. Throughout the region, women have taken to the streets in unprecedented numbers, translating digital advocacy and organization into physical mobilization and occupation of public spaces in a dialectic of online and offline activism that is particular to this era. They have used citizen journalism and social networking to counter the state-dominated media in their countries and influence mainstream media around the world. In the process, they are reconfiguring the public sphere in their countries, as well as the expectations of the public about the role women can and should play in the political lives of their countries.

Several of the women who participated in and led the Arab uprisings were cyberactivists prior to the convulsions of 2011, but many more were inspired to become activists by the events happening around them. Although women young and old took part, it was the younger generation that led the way online. They helped organize virtual protests as well as street demonstrations and played bridging roles with the mainstream media, helping to ensure that the 24-hour news cycle always had a source at the ready. Twitter became a real-time newsfeed, connecting journalists directly with activists and becoming a key tool in the battle to frame the protests and set the news agenda, particularly in the international media like *Al Jazeera* and elite Western outlets. Media outlets repurposed citizen-generated videos on YouTube and photos on Flickr, while Facebook provided a platform for aggregating, organizing, disseminating, and building solidarity.

Women have played a central role in the creation of a virtual public sphere online via social media and blogs, but have also demanded greater access, representation, and participation in the physical public sphere, epitomized by the physical squares that represent the imaginary center of political life in their countries: Tahrir Square in Egypt and Benghazi, Libya; Taghir Square in Yemen; and the Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain. They tore down physical and social barriers between men and women, challenging cultural and religious norms and taboos and putting women's empowerment at the center of the struggle for political change. As one blogger put it, "The most encouraging feature of the current upheaval is the massive participation of women;

not only the young educated women who uses (sic) the Internet but also the grassroots uneducated older women from rural cities.”<sup>1</sup>

Among the iconic figures of these Arab revolutionary uprisings are several women who are inextricably linked with the new media platforms that have fundamentally shifted the balance of power. Not only have cyberactivism and social media platforms shifted the power dynamics of authoritarian Arab governments and their citizenry, but they have also reconfigured power relations between the youth who make up the majority of the population and the older generation of political elites who were overwhelmingly male and often implicated in the perpetuation of the status quo.

While women and men struggle valiantly to bring about political change, the cyberactivists stand out for their use of new media technologies and access to platforms that transcended national boundaries and created bridges with transnational media and activists groups. The importance of these cyberactivist platforms could be seen in the way they became part of the lexicon of dissent. Esraa Abdel Fattah was known as “Facebook girl” for her role in launching one of the most important opposition youth groups in Egypt, the April 6 Movement. Egypt’s Mona Eltahawy, Libya’s Danya Bashir, Bahrain’s Zeinab al-Khawaja and Maryam al-Khawaja, and many others became known as the “Titterati” as influential media and pundits dubbed their Twitter accounts as “must-follows.” This paper acknowledges the contribution of all women and men to the revolutionary struggles, but seeks to examine a particular subset of these revolutionaries in order to better understand the role women cyberactivists played and to make recommendations accordingly.

### Background

Cyberactivism refers to the use of digital media technologies and social media platforms for sociopolitical contestation. Yet cyberactivism, with its emphasis on the virtual public sphere, is not exclusive of traditional activism. In fact, it is better understood as a mode of contentious

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<sup>1</sup> Dalia Ziada, “Egypt’s Revolution—How Does It All Start?” *Dalia Ziada* (blog), February 3, 2011, <http://daliaziada.blogspot.com/2011/02/jan25-egypts-revolution-how-does-it-all.html>.

politics that relies on new media technologies for information dissemination, networking, and the construction of collective identities and joint grievances, organization, and mobilization. Cyberactivism typically has two key objectives that are the same across the region: to build domestic support and influence the Western policy agenda, often via the mainstream media. Despite the rise of social media and citizen-generated content, the focus of a significant proportion of cyberactivism revolves around influencing the mainstream media agenda, as an increasingly symbiotic relationship between citizen and professional journalism has developed throughout the Arab Spring.

The emergence of small media that rivals the scope and reach of mass media helped shift the balance of power between mainstream, authoritative state voices embedded in broadcast and print media, which are primarily male-owned, and alternative, individual voices embedded in the small media of blogs and mobile telephony. The mobile phone continues to be one of the most important tools for cyberactivists—in particular, camera-equipped, Internet-enabled phones—while Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, and blogs are the most important Internet-based platforms. Despite varying levels of Internet penetration in the region—with Yemen and Libya at less than 10 percent and Egypt (26 percent), Tunisia (36 percent), and Bahrain (57 percent) at varying levels—the size of the audience is less important than the fact that those among the audience included power brokers, journalists, the intelligentsia, and the West.<sup>2</sup> As anthropologist Jon Anderson notes, “the size of audience is sometimes less significant than the quality and nature of the audience reached for a given purpose.”<sup>3</sup> The blogosphere and social media spaces that made up the virtual public sphere privileged progressive, active youth over the entrenched leadership because the former are more technologically adept, diffusion occurred via friends, and they lacked other outlets for expression.

In the decade preceding the Arab Spring, Internet access in the region expanded from near nothing in 2000 to 40 percent of the population by 2010. By the time of the uprisings, there were more than 16.8 million Facebook accounts in the region representing about 13 percent of the

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<sup>2</sup> All Internet statistics from Internet World Stats, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Jon W. Anderson and Dale F. Eickelman, “Media Convergence and Its Consequences,” *Middle East Insight* XIV, no. 2 (1999): 9.

population, with Egypt accounting for 5 million of those accounts and Tunisia 2 million.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, youth made up a majority of users of these social media, with approximately 70 percent of the region's Facebook accounts belonging to people under the age of 29.<sup>5</sup> As the uprisings unfolded throughout 2011, a dramatic rise in social media usage occurred, with the number of Facebook users increasing by 68 percent between January and November, a doubling from the prior year that represented a penetration rate of about 10 percent of the population and made it one of the fastest growing regions on Facebook.<sup>6</sup>

Yet there is a disturbing gender divide on Facebook, with women making up only one-third of users in the region, whereas women make up one-half of users globally.<sup>7</sup> This is particularly concerning because of the relative gender parity of the blogosphere prior to the popularization of Facebook; in my study of the Egyptian blogosphere, I found that there was relative gender parity in terms of the number of women and men blogging, a finding supported by a Berkman Center study that analyzed a snapshot of Arab blogs in 2009.<sup>8</sup> The Arab Social Media Report attributed the divide to social and cultural constraints based impressions gathered from survey participants, but interviews indicate that access and technological literacy is a greater barrier to social media use among women.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Spot On Public Relations, January 2011, <http://www.spotonpr.com/egypt-facebook-demographics/>.

<sup>5</sup> *The Role of Social Media in Women's Empowerment* (Dubai: Dubai School of Government, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 3,12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Bruse Etling et al., *Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere: Politics, Culture, and Dissent* (Cambridge: Berkman Center for the Internet & Society at Harvard University, 2009); Courtney Radsch, "Core to Commonplace: The Evolution of Egypt's Blogosphere," *Arab Media & Society* Fall, no. 6 (2008).

<sup>9</sup> *The Role of Social Media*, 2012.



**Image 1.** Graffiti in Cairo, Egypt, that says “freedom” in SMS shorthand. Photo courtesy of Courtney C. Radsch.

Twitter similarly experienced rapid adoption in the region and quickly grew from about 3,000 Twitter users in the Middle East in 2009 to around 40,000 by mid-2010.<sup>10</sup> Nine percent of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Internet users said in a 2010 survey they used Twitter, with Egyptians representing 13 percent of the region’s users, the second highest usage after the United Arab Emirates (UAE).<sup>11</sup> Despite the small number of users, particularly as a percentage of the population, they were nonetheless at the vanguard of creating new and innovative uses for the service. Since the beginning, Twitter has been used in the Middle East to communicate with journalists, perhaps explaining the fact that users tweet about the same amount in English as in Arabic, with women more likely to do so than men.<sup>12</sup> A 2009 survey of Twitter demographics found that nearly 60 percent of respondents said they interacted most often with media and journalists, coming in just after friends at 70 percent, findings that recent field work and

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<sup>10</sup> Carrington Malin, “Twitter & Customer Service Survey,” Spot On Public Relations, March 29, 2010, <http://www.spotonpr.com/twitter-customer-service-survey/>.

<sup>11</sup> Carrington Malin, “Spot On PR’s Mena Twitter Demographics & User Habits Survey,” Spot On Public Relations, September 10, 2009, <http://www.spotonpr.com/menatwitterusersurvey/>; Carrington Malin, “Media Consumption & Habits of Mena Internet Users,” Spot On Public Relations, July 22, 2010, <http://www.spotonpr.com/mena-internet-user-habits-survey/>.

<sup>12</sup> *The Role of Social Media*, 3, 16, 20.



interviews indicate likely continued to hold true through the Arab Spring.<sup>13</sup> The Arab Social Media Report found that regionally, women used social media during the revolution about equally to raise awareness in their countries about the causes of the revolutions and to share and spread information with the world, whereas men focused more on the former.<sup>14</sup> Cyberactivists used social media networks to strengthen their network links with other cyberactivists, journalists, and transnational rights groups, providing a measure of protection and publicity when the regime attempted to arrest or harass them.

Despite the limited penetration of these social networks among the population at large, however, they played a disproportionately significant role in the political contention that rocked the region in 2011. By the time the Arab Spring uprisings took place, Facebook pages and Twitter hashtags were an integral part of any political protest, and became effective tools for influencing mainstream media coverage and organizing collective action, even in low-access countries like Libya and Yemen. The killing of Libyan president Moammar Ghaddafi, for example, ranked among the top ten trending topics on Twitter in 2011, along with the resignation of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak.<sup>15</sup>

Part of the power of these social media users was that they were connected to a broader network of activists, journalists, politicians, and ordinary citizens. For example, in the month following Mubarak's resignation, an average of 460,000 people worldwide were joining Twitter every day, representing an exponentially expanding network in which more than a billion tweets are sent every week.<sup>16</sup> Facebook, meanwhile, had more than 800 million users when the uprisings began, meaning the social networks activists plugged into were exponentially larger than at any time in human history. While most people may not be using social media for political activism, there is a significant number who are. Furthermore, social media blurs the line between the social and the political, enabling the activation of latent networks and varying levels of engagement in a cause.

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<sup>13</sup> Malin, "Spot on Pr's Mena Twitter Demographics."

<sup>14</sup> *The Role of Social Media*, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> See <http://yearinreview.twitter.com/en/hottopics.html>. Of course, people outside the region were tweeting about those events as well.

<sup>16</sup> Courtney Radsch, "The Revolutions Will Be Hashtagged: Twitter Turns 5 as the Middle East Demands Democracy," *Huffington Post*, March 29, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/courtney-c-radsch/the-revolutions-will-be-h\\_b\\_839362.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/courtney-c-radsch/the-revolutions-will-be-h_b_839362.html).

These technologies and information and computer technology (ICT) platforms operate according to a networking logic, drawing their power and potential from a connective informational logic that young Arab men and women proved particularly adept at exploiting. Online networks are composed of nodes and hubs that are scale-free, characterized by power laws and organized in modules. Duncan Watts, one of the principle architects of network theory, argues that power law distribution, rather than a bell-shaped curve of averages, best describes the nature of a network like the Internet where a few websites get a significant amount of traffic but most get very little or none.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the rich-get-richer phenomenon of power laws, in which established blogs, social media accounts, or nodes receive preferential attachment, means new users would likely connect to the more established and well-known cyberactivists in their blogrolls, follow their YouTube channel, or connect via Twitter or Facebook. Lina Ben Mhenni in Tunisia and Esraa Abdel Fattah in Egypt, for example, were early adopters of social media who established themselves as cyberactivists in the years leading up to the revolutions. They covered the uprisings in their home countries and ended up becoming hubs, receiving enormous amounts of media attention and ranking among the most influential blogs and media outlets in the region. As Albert-László Barabási, physicist and network theorist, notes, “new nodes prefer to link to the more connected nodes, early nodes with more links will be selected more often and will grow faster than their younger and less connected peers.”<sup>18</sup> This is why early adopters and particular bloggers continued to act as focal points throughout the revolutionary period. They became key nodes in the social media realm and garnered significant mainstream media attention, which certified them as credible and worth following, leading to even more linkages. As long as they remained active, they continued to garner the most links and the most press coverage, which reinforced their role as key nodes and influencers.

In the following section, I explore the three key facets of cyberactivism that were central during and following the uprisings: citizen journalism, mobilization, and organization.

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<sup>17</sup> D. J. Watts, *Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Albert-László Barabási, *Linked: How Everything Is Connected to Everything Else and What It Means* (New York: Plume, 2003), 87-88.

### Citizen Journalism and Symbiosis with Mainstream Media

Many of these women cyberactivists chose citizen journalism as the primary mode of contestation in their battles with entrenched regimes. One young woman named Fatima, but better known by her blog name Arabicca, labeled 2011 the “Year of Citizen Journalism.”<sup>19</sup> Citizen journalists radically shifted the media ecosystem and informational status quo by witnessing, putting on record, and imbuing political meaning to symbolic struggles to define quotidian resistance against social injustice, harassment, and censorship as part of a broader movement for political reform. As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu aptly observed, “The simple report, the very fact of reporting, of putting on record as a reporter, always implies a social construction of reality that can mobilize (or demobilize) individuals or groups.”<sup>20</sup> Information and events do not inherently have political meaning or importance, but rather must be interpreted, framed, and contextualized before becoming imbued with significance and import, a process in which journalists play a central role. As one of Egypt’s leading cyberactivists and citizen journalists astutely notes on the front page of his blog: “In a dictatorship, independent journalism by default becomes a form of activism, and the spread of information is essentially an act of agitation.”<sup>21</sup>

Cyberactivists sought to influence domestic media and counter the pro-regime framing of the uprisings. Indeed, one of the primary goals and successes of citizen journalism in the lead-up to the Arab uprisings was creating awareness among people about their rights and the excesses of the Arab regimes. In Egypt, the state-run media refused to even cover the uprising in the early days or would blatantly misreport information, while in Bahrain the lack of independent media meant that the regime’s framing of the conflict as sectarian in nature had no counterpoint except for citizen media. Because of lingering distrust of the mainstream media in Libya, cultivated over the 42 years of Ghaddafi’s rule in which he controlled and manipulated the media, people rely on personal connections and relationships in assessing the trustworthiness of news and information. “Facebook is more trustworthy than the media,” one young Libyan woman told me. Bahraini writer Lamees Dhaif embodies this shifting typology of journalism, blurring the lines between

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<sup>19</sup> We spoke together in Denmark at a May 2011 conference titled “Cyberactivism Changing the World?”

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television* (New York: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1998), 21.

<sup>21</sup> See the home page of *3arabawy* (blog), <http://www.arabawy.org/>.

professional and citizen journalist as she continues to speak out in the media against the abuses of her government, even as she blogs and tweets to an audience far bigger than the largest circulation newspaper in her home country. She dismissed the Bahraini authorities' attempts to silence her, noting that she has almost 60,000 followers on Twitter and 43,000 subscribers to her blog, whereas the largest circulation newspaper in Bahrain prints only 12,000 copies daily. "So if they don't want me to write in newspapers, who cares," said Dhaif.

In Tunisia, bloggers like 27-year-old Lina Ben Mhenni played a critical role in breaking the mainstream media blackout on the protests that erupted around the country after the self-immolation of a fruit vendor in the southern city of Sidi Bouzid. She was one of the first people to write about the incident and turned her blog, Twitter, and Facebook page into a virtual newsroom.

On December 17, 2010, tweets about Tunisia started appearing following the death of 26-year-old Mohamed Bouazizi, who had set himself on fire in protest against the humiliation and harassment he suffered at the hands of police as he tended to his stand; his story was familiar to many young men and women who heard about it via social media networks. Ben Mhenni, who blogs in Arabic, English, French, and German at *A Tunisian Girl*, called her friends for updates she then posted on social media and ended up deciding to go there herself to report. "I decided to share the grief of the inhabitants of Sidi Bouzid," she wrote on her blog.<sup>22</sup> Over the next several weeks she travelled the country, posting pictures and reports about the outbreak of street demonstrations and the violent responses by the regime. She relied on Twitter, Facebook, and her blog because, as she noted, only citizen media was covering the protests since the mainstream media only concerned itself with such uncontroversial news as the activities of the president and sports.<sup>23</sup>

Several Facebook pages were created in the wake of Bouazizi's suicide, such as the Arabic page "Mr. President, Tunisians are Setting Themselves on Fire," which garnered 2,500 fans within a

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<sup>22</sup> Lina Ben Mhenni, "Manifestation pour Sidi Bouzid," *A Tunisian Girl* (blog), December 25, 2010, <http://www.atunisiangirl.blogspot.com/2010/12/manifestation-pour-sidi-bouzid.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Lina Ben Mhenni, "Sidi Bouzid Brule!" *A Tunisian Girl* (blog), December 19, 2010, <http://www.atunisiangirl.blogspot.com/2010/12/sidi-bouzid-brule.html>.

day of its creation and 10,000 more a week later, helping to spread information about protests and providing an outlet for young Tunisians to express their anger.<sup>24</sup>

There were few foreign media in Tunisia at that time: *Al Jazeera* had one foreign correspondent on the ground, as did France24, while the U.S. media were completely absent. There were no American channels, and even the Arab and French channels heavily depended on social media content and YouTube video. There were reports that *Al Jazeera* relied on citizen-generated videos for more than 60 percent of its content during the weeks leading up to President Zine al-Abedine Ben Ali's ouster on January 14, 2011, although one senior media executive told me that in fact the station was 100 percent dependent on such content in the first couple of weeks of the uprising. Citizen journalists and bloggers like Ben Mhenni, therefore, played a critical role in reporting on the uprising and providing content to mainstream media.

As the uprising gathered strength, the regime engaged in a counter-information campaign and sought to discredit citizen media. Ben Mhenni, whose father was also a political activist, started blogging in 2007 and had already earned a reputation covering human rights issues and freedom of expression, so her credibility was established. She also knew how to bypass the censorship that rendered key social media sites, including YouTube and Flickr, inaccessible to those who were not as adroit at using circumvention tools. "The Tunisian government did not find another solution but to censor the websites disseminating the story and imposing a blockade on the city of Sidi Bouzid, where people are expressing their anger by protesting in the streets," she wrote on the activist blog Global Voices.<sup>25</sup> Tunisia was among the most sophisticated Internet censors in the world, leading Reporters without Borders to put the country on its list of "Internet Enemies" and Freedom House<sup>26</sup> to characterize its multilayered Internet censorship apparatus as "one of the world's most repressive."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Global Voices*, "Tunisia: Unemployed Man's Suicide Attempt Sparks Riots," December 23, 2010, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/12/23/tunisia-unemployed-mans-suicide-attempt-sparks-riots/>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Freedom House is a U.S.-based nongovernmental advocacy group that conducts research on democracy, political freedom, and human rights.

<sup>27</sup> *Freedom on the Net* (New York: Freedom House, 2011), 324; *Internet Enemies* (Paris: Reporters Sans Frontières 2009).

By 2011, 3.6 million Tunisians had Internet access and more than 1.8 million of them had a Facebook account. As one Tunisian *bloguese*<sup>28</sup> put it: “Everything happened on Facebook.”<sup>29</sup> Twitter was also an important tool; the Tunisian share-of-voice among MENA Twitter users rose significantly as protests erupted throughout the country, rising from about five percent on December 17, 2010, to more than 70 percent the day before Ben Ali fled the country.<sup>30</sup> That is, everything that happened in the streets was recorded and posted online, which flooded social media networks with news of the uprising. “Women were present in every stage and each action of the uprising,” Ben Mhenni told me. “They were present on the street [and] behind their screens.”

The same was true in Egypt, where women were among the leading cyberactivists and citizen journalists but were also present in the streets. Some were already established activists, like Esraa Abdel Fattah, who launched the April 6 Youth Movement in 2008,<sup>31</sup> columnist and commentator Mona Eltahawy; journalist Nora Younis, and activists Dalia Ziada and Zeinobia. Others came from politically active families, such as Manal Hassan and Nawara Negm, to name but two. These young women had participated in Kefaya,<sup>32</sup> directed campaigns for human rights and against sexual harassment, and were among the leaders of the April 6 movement.<sup>33</sup> They boasted thousands of followers on their social media accounts, including journalists and international nongovernmental organizations, even prior to the revolution. Thus their credibility was already established by the time the uprising started, facilitating the dissemination of information via social media and to the mainstream media.

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<sup>28</sup> The French term used for a female blogger.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in “Sidi Bouzid ou la révolte tunisienne organisée sur Facebook,” *Le nouvel observateur*, April 1, 2011, <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/vu-sur-le-web/20110104.OBS5680/sidi-bouzid-ou-la-revolte-tunisienne-organisee-sur-facebook.html>, translation by the author.

<sup>30</sup> *Using Social Share of Voice to Anticipate Significant Events* (San Francisco: Topsy Labs, 2012), 4. Share-of-voice analysis measures the social volume of keywords mentioned on Twitter, in this case #Tunisia compared to other MENA countries.

<sup>31</sup> The April 6 Youth Movement emerged out of the 2008 Facebook strike in solidarity with the Mahalla worker’s strike and became one of the leading youth movements in the country during and following the January 25, 2011, uprising.

<sup>32</sup> Kefaya, Arabic for *enough*, was a cross-ideational political movement that emerged in 2004 and enjoyed great symbiosis with cyberactivism in its early years but declined amid growing disillusionment in 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Courtney Radsch, “The Revolution Will Be Blogged: Cyberactivism in Egypt” (Ph.D. diss., American University, forthcoming).

According to a share-of-voice analysis, tweets from Egypt actually spiked on January 1, 2011, and drowned out nearly all other MENA country hashtags between January 25 and the day Mubarak stepped down on February 14.<sup>34</sup> #Egypt, #Mubarak, and #Jan25 were all among the top 10 global trending hashtags on Twitter for several days during the uprising. Mona Eltahawy, a renowned journalist and commentator living in New York at the time of the uprising, was a particularly important amplifier. With tens of thousands of followers in the English and Arabic speaking world, she helped bridge the linguistic divide, focus attention, frame events on the ground, and certify other cyberactivists. She became one of the key interpreters of the Egyptian revolution and the Arab Spring more broadly, and a hero to many of the young women in the region.<sup>35</sup>

Others became cyberactivists once the uprising began because they wanted to ensure that the Western world got an accurate account of fast-changing events. This became a central concern for women cyberactivists across the region. Egyptian activist Shima'a Helmy, for example, was an anonymous Egyptian blogger until January 25, 2011, according to her own account, when she defied her father and went to Tahrir with her siblings, braving arrest and harassment in order to ensure the uprising was covered from the ground.<sup>36</sup> "I was concerned with how non-Arabic-speaking media were portraying our story. I made contact with as many foreign journalists as I could—speaking to them and helping them out," she explained in an interview posted on her blog. "I would take as much footage as I could from the square, then go back home and upload it online. I did this nonstop for most of the 18 days. I didn't really sleep much, maybe only an hour a day." Although she was detained early on for documenting the protests, she nonetheless continued her work as a citizen journalist and used Skype to keep friends and family in the United States updated.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, 20-year-old Bahraini Asma Darwish, who I met on Twitter and eventually in Geneva where she was living in exile after fleeing her country in the wake of her family's arrest and

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<sup>34</sup> *Using Social Share of Voice*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Radsch, Courtney, "Revolution, Women And Social Media in The Middle East," *Huffington Post*, January 27, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/courtney-c-radsch/revolution-women\\_b\\_1235603.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/courtney-c-radsch/revolution-women_b_1235603.html).

<sup>36</sup> *I Write Here For You* (blog), <http://inalllanguages.blogspot.com>.

<sup>37</sup> "Egyptians are Hungry for Dignity," *I Write Here For You* (blog), January 30, 2012, <http://inalllanguages.blogspot.com/2012/02/egyptian-revolution-isnt-pro-democracy.html>.

activism, felt her role was to bridge the Arabic-English media divide. Like many young women, she was inspired to become active in human rights advocacy because of the injustice she felt over her family members' torture. She went on a hunger strike in June 2011, and started blogging about her experience on Twitter. Soon the media discovered her and she realized that since not very many Bahraini activists spoke English fluently, she could be more effective delivering their message of political reform to the world by blogging and doing media outreach than by demonstrating in the street. "I was quite interested in Twitter in a specific way because you can follow news and so many people can follow you back," she explained. "You can share news in a very efficient way." In several countries including Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen, the international media were barred from entering and/or were deported, so social media became the primary source of information and reporting on the uprisings, perhaps explaining why so many young women chose to tweet in English.

A very small percentage of the population in Libya and Yemen, much less the female population, was online in 2011-2012, meaning that the uses of cyberactivism were more limited than in neighboring countries where a critical mass of people were connected. Nevertheless, social media was pivotal in helping to spread support for a revolution internally, and to frame the uprisings for the rest of the world. The primary role of women was bridging the digital divide by providing information and coverage as citizen journalists to the mainstream media covering the uprising, ensuring the revolution was televised, YouTube'd, and tweeted.



**Image 2.** Libyan activists Sarah el-Farjin and Ibtihad. Photo courtesy of Courtney C. Radsch



## Unveiling the Revolutionaries

Cyberactivism enabled women to play a role in the revolution without going into the streets, translating street activism by men into cyberactivism by women. Libya, a far more conservative country than Tunisia or Egypt, was also far more deadly and relied on military action rather than peaceful protest, making women's participation in the streets during the uprising more problematic. Women cyberactivists largely stayed behind the scenes in their homes, taking mobile phone videos, pictures, and reports from the frontlines and putting them online as well as spreading information about what was happening elsewhere in Libya. Hana El Hebshi, for example, was widely recognized for her role in reporting firsthand on the siege of Tripoli; she was given the International Woman of Courage award by the U.S. State Department.<sup>38</sup> Other young women had to leave the country temporarily as the fighting continued, but stayed connected through Facebook and Twitter, keeping up with and spreading news. "Twitter was very important for staying up to date," explained Sara el-Farjin, who left Tripoli in June 2011 but returned shortly after the fighting ended.

Women cyberactivists specifically targeted international media like *Al Jazeera*, *CNN*, and the *BBC* in hopes of influencing public opinion and building support for NATO intervention. "New media had a major role in the Libyan revolution," el-Farjin added, noting that Twitter was the most important for her. "I couldn't have done this without social media. The world would not have known," 20-year-old Danya Bashir told me. Although Bashir said her father encouraged her to tweet and be politically active, other young women had to keep their cyberactivism secret from their fathers, brothers, and cousins. In those cases women used Facebook or Twitter aliases, which put them at a disadvantage with the media because credibility was harder to establish in the context of anonymity.

A Libyan in school in the UAE, Bashir began using Twitter extensively to provide information about what was happening on the ground during the uprising to journalists and activists around the world. She said she would "spam" Twitter superstars like Eltahawy, NPR's Andy Carvin, and Arab commentator Sultan al Qassemi, who all have tens of thousands of followers. They in turn amplified her activism by retweeting and "liking" her posts, spreading revolutionary

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<sup>38</sup> "2012 International Women of Courage Award Winners," U.S. Department of State, March 5, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/s/gwi/programs/iwoc/2012/bio/index.htm>.

coverage even as they certified Bashir as a reliable source. Similarly, in Yemen, only about 1.8 percent of the population was online when the revolution began, although about 38 percent had mobile phones. Many of those online included young women and men who used social media to connect with each other and with journalists and activists abroad.

Yemeni journalist Shatha al-Harazi called the Internet “a blessing” because in her country, women did not have the same access to information as men, although she cautioned that women could not simply “sit behind a computer.” She was one of several journalists summoned to meet with President Ali Abdullah Saleh during the uprising. Journalists also used Skype, for example, to provide interviews to media around the world, prompting Saleh to block access to the Internet-based phone service. Since there are so few Yemeni experts—much less journalists—based there, citizen journalists and bloggers played an important role in aggregating and disseminating information.

Yemeni-Canadian Maria al-Mansani started the Yemen Rights Monitor blog<sup>39</sup> in February 2011 to document human rights abuses and events on the ground as the popular uprisings there got underway, and to get around the media ban by posting user-generated content. She described to me how cyberactivists would upload videos to Facebook in “video dumps” that others would sort through and export to Twitter, the Monitor, and other key blogs, and most importantly to the international media. “Most Yemenis have access to satellite TV,” but not the Internet, she explained, so they would take pictures with their mobile phones and go to an Internet café in the city to upload. “And then these videos got onto *Al Jazeera* and then the whole world, including the village, could see itself,” because few had computers or Internet connections and thus could only see the human rights violations happening in their community via television, as they were trapped inside—particularly the women. “The revolution in Yemen started and was empowered by women,” said Mansani, who went on the work as a new media adviser to the transitional government.

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<sup>39</sup> See *Yemen Rights Monitor* (blog), <http://yemenrightsmonitor.blogspot.com/>.

### *Linking Cyberactivism with the Street*

Cyberactivists recognize that their activism does not end at the computer screen, but must go hand-in-hand with other forms of political engagement and be translated into physical manifestations of political protest. “Cyberactivism is not just work behind the screen, it is also smelling the tear gas and facing the security forces live ammunition,” noted Ben Mhenni in an interview. Many explicitly credited social media with changing the dynamics in authoritarian countries throughout the region, but acknowledged the offline work that must also go into human rights and political reform work. Throughout the region people took to the streets to demand change in unprecedented numbers, and in each case women figured prominently.

According to reports about previous protests in Egypt, women only accounted for about 10 percent of the protesters, whereas they accounted for about 40 to 50 percent in Tahrir Square in the days leading up to the fall of Mubarak.<sup>40</sup> Since 2004, Egyptian women have actively staked a claim in cyberspace, even as they took to the streets as part of the Kefaya movement in 2004-2006, the April 6 Youth Movement in 2008, and others—but never in the numbers that participated in the revolution. The 18-day uprising included women on a scale not seen before, and in many ways the cyberactivist movement helped lay the groundwork and change the mindset of a new generation of Egyptian youth. Veiled and unveiled women participated in the protests, provided support to the hungry and the wounded, led chants against the regime and more recently against the ruling military Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), opened their homes to protesters and cyberactivists, and slept in Tahrir Square together with their male compatriots. These women were not only secularists or liberals; the Muslim Sisters, the female wing of the *Ikhwan Muslimeen* (The Muslim Brotherhood), were also active. Muslim Sisters joined in the protests, discussing their ideas and leading collective actions, using their social media accounts to communicate their experiences and fight for their political ideals. As one activist noted: “The women of the Muslim Brotherhood, who are traditionally a silent group walking behind the chanting men, were joining with other people, discussing and exchanging

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<sup>40</sup> “Women Make Their Power Felt in Egypt's Revolution,” *The National*, 2011, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/middle-east/women-make-their-power-felt-in-egypts-revolution>.

with them—they were even up there, right at the front, leading cheers and chants. That is a radical shift.”<sup>41</sup>



**Image 3.** Screen grab from Al Said, live in Yemen ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X66GQ8OuEi4&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X66GQ8OuEi4&feature=player_embedded)).

This was particularly true in Yemen. Inspired by the success in Tunisia, 32-year-old Yemeni mother and free expression activist Karman rallied her friends to the street outside Sanaa University in an unprecedented public demonstration by a group of young women. Yemen is among the most highly patriarchal societies in the region and ranks (along with Saudi Arabia) as the country with the least respect for women’s rights.<sup>42</sup> Prior to 2011, women were “afraid to raise their voice above a whisper to a man,” according to Mansani. Filming the street protests and posting videos of the uprising on YouTube was just as revolutionary as the women who took to the streets in Yemen in unheard of numbers. Thousands of women, most

wearing the niqab or hijab, defied calls by President Saleh to remain at home and “protect their honor.” In one YouTube video, for example, a woman cries that women started the revolution and even if the men have given up, the women will continue marching until all their demands are met and all corrupt officials are expelled.<sup>43</sup> “Two years ago, they’d run away from the first camera, not have a voice and be home before curfew,” said Mansani. “Now they are walking for

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<sup>41</sup> See Mohamed el-Dahshan, *Egyptian Women Eye Revolutionary Role* (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> Sanja Kelly, “Hard Won Progress and a Long Road Ahead: Women’s Rights in the Middle East and North Africa,” in *Women’s Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress Amid Resistance*, eds. Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin (New York, NY: Freedom House; Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), <http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/270.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> *Yemeni Women Show No Sign of Abating*, YouTube video, 2:05, posted by PressTVNews, January 31, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54y3FM6wZeo>.

days alongside men to send a message to the world that they want to overthrow the government and reform the military.”

Tunisian women similarly took part in the demonstrations and took to the streets in numbers not seen in recent history, playing a coequal role in the revolution that ousted President Ben Ali on January 14, 2011, and setting off a tidal wave across the rest of the region. “Women shouted slogans, wrote articles, took part in the demonstrations, sit-ins, strikes, women were everywhere,” Lina Ben Mhenni told me. “Women were beaten, arrested, and even killed by the security force’s bullets.” Tunisia has the most rigorous protections for women’s rights in the Middle East region, according to Freedom House,<sup>44</sup> yet it was still somewhat unusual to see women taking to the streets and leading demonstrations.

In Bahrain, women had enjoyed greater access to the public sphere and formal political participation than many of their counterparts in the Gulf and elsewhere in the region, but it was still highly unusual to find young women in the streets as occurred on February 14, 2011, when the first demonstration in support of political reform took place. In the months that followed, several young women became the public faces of the revolution as they broke gender barriers by leading protests that were photographed or filmed. And they have remained there, with Zeinab al-Khawaja becoming one of the leading figures online and offline. Videos of her holding a peaceful sit-in in the middle of a traffic circle and being arrested by a group of police, both male and female, were circulated in near real-time via Twitter, as were pictures of her standing in front of a tank.

### *Inspiration and Mobilization*

Women played a pivotal role in inspiring their fellow citizens to take part in the uprisings, whether through admiration or confrontation. In her YouTube message (quoted at the beginning of this paper), for example, Egypt’s Asmaa Mahfouz played on the male sense of honor in calling for men to join her in the street, deriding men who stayed at home while “the more vulnerable sex” took to the streets and faced the riot police.

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<sup>44</sup> Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin, eds., *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010: Progress Amid Resistance* (Lanham, MD: Freedom House, 2010).

As they watched the fall of regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, Libyan youth started talking on Facebook about the need for revolution in their country. They wrote on each other's walls and started groups to inspire each other and build support for collective action. On February 17, 2011, a video of the protest in Benghazi spread like wildfire among the connected youth of Libya, who made sure it also got to the international media. "I must say that without Facebook and social media, there would not have been a revolution," one 23-year-old blogger from Misrata told me. "It was a revolution started on Facebook." Others inspired their fellow citizens with their fearlessness in the face of repression and willingness to traverse red lines.

Twenty-year-old Ayat al-Gomezi, for example, is a poet and wrote several poems critical of the ruling regime that she recited from the stage in Pearl Square in February and March 2011, when the protests first began.<sup>45</sup> She became one of the first women revolutionaries to gain international recognition following her arrest for incitement and insulting the royal family. "It's one of the things that I love about the Bahraini revolution," said Bahraini activist Maryam al-Khawaja in an interview, "that you had a female that became a symbol for the revolution, and it's not only the girls who look up to her, it's the men as well." People shared Gomezi's poems and videos of her performance via Facebook, Twitter, and Blackberry Messenger, and the YouTube video of her recital went viral as it spread like wildfire following her arrest.<sup>46</sup> Although she was the first Bahraini woman to be put on trial following the outbreak of political protests, she was not the last.<sup>47</sup>

### Sexual Violence as a Form of Intimidation

Women face specific threats and violence that their male counterparts for the most part do not, and they have paid a steep price as regime defenders and authorities have used sexual violence in an attempt to silence and intimidate them. Gender-specific threats and sexual violence—

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<sup>45</sup> See Ayat al-Gormezi, *The Freedom Poet* (blog), <http://ayat-algormezi.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>46</sup> YouTube video, 6:20, posted by mirsaisa, March 6, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8-qOerX3xI>.

<sup>47</sup> "Bahrain: Poet and writer arrested; fears for their safety," *English Pen* (blog), June 7, 2011, <http://www.englishpen.org/bahrain-poet-and-writer-arrested-fears-for-their-safety/>.

including brutal beatings during protests, so-called “virginity tests,”<sup>48</sup> degrading and brutal treatment including torture during detainment, and character assassination—specifically exploit cultural taboos in which female victims are seen as having brought dishonor upon themselves. Sexual assault, including rape, has become a defining feature of the uprisings in Egypt and Libya, but has also been used by regimes throughout the region as a tactic against the women who participate in protests and seek to break down gender barriers and cultural taboos. Cyberactivists also face intimidation and sexual harassment in the virtual public sphere, as they become the subject of virulent reputation assassinations and defamation campaigns, and receive threats on their social media profiles and blogs. Online defamation campaigns against women cyberactivists have been seen in Bahrain and Tunisia as well as Egypt. As women have come to play a central role in the uprisings, they have also become a target of the regime, which seeks to delegitimize their participation and calls for political reform by disparaging them and raising the potential costs of involvement.

In Egypt, for example, the police, security forces, and thugs harassed and assaulted women during the uprising, continuing the trend of targeting women that goes back to at least 2005, when there was a marked turn by the Egyptian government toward the use of violence against women. During the 2005 demonstrations against a proposed constitutional amendment, gangs of men allegedly hired by a member of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) attacked women journalists, including cyberactivists like Nora Younis, and female journalists, specifically targeting them in what Younis called a “sexist approach.”<sup>49</sup>

“A woman is just a body and [the regime] felt that a woman, she will never go back to the streets and men would feel humiliated and not go out,” she explained. But women stayed in the streets from 2005 onward, and during the protests were beaten and tear-gassed just like everyone else. One woman said the police were “particularly vicious to women. They target us. I’ve had my veil pulled off by one of them. In my own town of Menoufeya, a certain police officer would tell women who got arrested, ‘You come in as virgins, and I’ll make sure you leave as real

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<sup>48</sup> This is a procedure in which a woman is forcefully penetrated to see whether she bleeds in order determine if she is a virgin. At least seven women in Egypt were subjected to these “tests” by military officers who were not doctors following their arrests in Tahrir Square in March 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Radsch, “Core to Commonplace,” 2008.

women.”<sup>50</sup> Thugs attacked, beat, and ripped the clothes off of professor Noha Radwan during a mass demonstration in Cairo and killed protester Sally Zahran by clubbing her with a baseball bat; police killed a woman named Amira and ran over Liza Mohamed Hasan.<sup>51</sup> Samira Ibrahim, 25, was the only one of at least seven women subjected to “virginity tests” by the military in spring 2011 who filed a case against her perpetrators.<sup>52</sup> In December 2011, amateur mobile phone videos captured the beating of a woman by Egyptian security forces, who tore off her abaya and exposed her blue bra. Video and photos of the assault quickly went viral and the “blue bra” girl became a symbol of the continuing military repression and violence against women as people tweeted and Facebooked the attack. U.S. journalist Lara Logan was sexually assaulted while covering the protests in Tahrir, and during the November 2011 parliamentary elections, Egyptian commentator Mona Eltahawy was arrested and sexually assaulted by police. But rather than remain silent, these women and their compatriots who lived to bear witness have taken to the airwaves and cyberspace to tell their stories, refusing to back down. “Oppression begets solidarity,” one woman in Tahrir astutely observed.



**Image 4.** Screen grab of a citizen mobile phone video of an attack by Egyptian security forces (Stringer/Reuters/Landov; <http://www.npr.org/blogs/pictureshow/2011/12/21/144098384/the-girl-in-the-blue-bra>).

In Libya, pro-Ghaddafi forces used rape as a weapon of war. Eman Obeidi gained international fame when she ran into a hotel crowded with Western journalists and attempted to tell her story about being gang raped by Libyan troops, and was forcibly removed by regime loyalists who attacked the journalists attempting to intervene on her behalf. Rape is typically an unspoken crime in Libya that is seen as bringing shame on the victim rather than the perpetrator, and the

<sup>50</sup> Mohamed El Dahshan, “Egyptian Women Eye Revolutionary Role,” Institute for War and Peace Reporting, March 8, 2011, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/revolutionary-role-egyptian-women>.

<sup>51</sup> Nadine Naber, “Imperial Feminism, Islamophobia, and the Egyptian Revolution,” *Jadaliyya*, February 11, 2011, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/616/imperial-feminism-islamophobia-and-the-egyptian-re>.

<sup>52</sup> On March 15, 2012, a military tribunal acquitted the army doctor accused of performing the so-called virginity tests in a ruling seen by many civil society activists as a setback for women’s rights, and for human rights more generally.



men she accused later brought charges against her for accusing them of sexual assault. Her very public declarations broke cultural taboos and drew the world's attention to the use of rape during the Libyan uprising. Several media outlets captured her accusations and kidnapping as well as the attacks on journalists who attempted to help her on film. These videos provided fodder for YouTube pages and quickly went viral as the mainstream media-social media dialectic ensured wide distribution of the footage. Supporters created Facebook pages in Arabic and English, and hundreds of comments were posted in the first couple of days following her disappearance after she was forcibly removed from the hotel, although people continued to use the pages to comment on the Libyan revolution and other uprisings long after Obeidi fell from the headlines.<sup>53</sup> Many people came to her defense, such as a user named Hajar Ibrahim, who posted "Since Libya has such women, Libya will be free and it will win...!!!" on March 28, 2011, as the world sought information on Obeidi's whereabouts.<sup>54</sup>

Those who attempted to dispute her story alleged she was part of a Western plot or that she had not been raped at all in an attempt to discredit her, but they were repudiated and there were no comparative campaigns to discredit her. People around the world joined the online campaigns in support of Obeidi, with thousands of people "liking" her fan pages in the three days following her arrest,<sup>55</sup> creating Twitter hashtags to aggregate relevant tweets, blogging about her kidnapping,<sup>56</sup> and starting online petitions calling for her release. Yet the campaigns lacked any central organization or coordination, so the power of cyberactivism was diluted. One petition that aimed to get one million signatures got a mere 834,<sup>57</sup> while another one also fell short of its goal with only 5,601 signatures.<sup>58</sup>

Yet the video of Obeidi's altercation in the Rixos Hotel shows how women themselves were split in their support for the uprising; some disputed her accusations of sexual assault as unpatriotic

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<sup>53</sup> Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/emanobaidy>.

<sup>54</sup> Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/KLNA.EMAN?sk=wall>, March 28, 2011, at 8:18 pm.

<sup>55</sup> Ian Black, "Iman Al-Obeidi Faces Criminal Charges over Libya Rape Claim," *The Guardian*, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/29/iman-al-obeidi-libya-rape-claim-charges>.

<sup>56</sup> Eman Altahawy, *DrSonnet* (blog), [http://shayunbiqalbi.blogspot.com/2011/03/blog-post\\_884.html](http://shayunbiqalbi.blogspot.com/2011/03/blog-post_884.html).

<sup>57</sup> "Save Eman El Obedi—Victim of Rape by Gaddafi Militia," Care2 Petition Site, <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/1/save-eman/>.

<sup>58</sup> "Protect Eman al-Obaidi from Gaddafi," AVAAZ at change.org, [http://www.change.org/petitions/protect-eman-al-obaidi-from-gaddafi-regime#?opt\\_new=t&opt\\_fb=t](http://www.change.org/petitions/protect-eman-al-obaidi-from-gaddafi-regime#?opt_new=t&opt_fb=t).

and anti-Libyan. Several women who worked at the hotel attempted to silence her, and one of them even put a bag over her head to keep her from speaking out or being filmed.<sup>59</sup> The focus of those women and of the journalists' minds on trying to prevent journalists from filming Obeidi reveals how powerful images can be, particularly in their ability to go viral and help shape international opinion, which became crucial for building support for NATO action.

In Bahrain, the regime has targeted young women in what I call “cyber assaults,” which is the use of harassment and intimidation online to defame and “dishonor” women through the use of cultural framing and taboos. Bahrain has been particularly sophisticated in its attempts to counter the dominant cyberactivist narrative through the use of pro-government trolls, hashtag bombing, and surveillance.

Hashtag bombing refers to the hijacking of a Twitter hashtag, often one used for organizing conversations around an event, for the purposes of flooding that conversation with scurrilous or defamatory content. For example, 23-year-old Maryam al-Khawaja was one of more than two dozen speakers at the 2011 Oslo Freedom Forum, which used the hashtag #OsloFreedomForum for the two-day event that brought together activists from around the world. During and following Khawaja's segment, hundreds of vicious comments were made about her using that hashtag. The tweets accused her of being a traitor and a liar as well as a prostitute and anti-Islamic. Yet many of the accounts that generated the tweets had few or no followers and appeared to have been created for the sole purpose of spamming her—accounts known as trolls. The trolls attempt to equate activism with immorality, comparing reform efforts to other culturally inappropriate behavior such as sex or prostitution. Similarly, the hashtag #Bahrain has been at the center of online framing battles over the ongoing protests in Bahrain. Regime supporters as well as trolls will send messages discrediting Khawaja and other activists to Twitter users employing that hashtag to report on or support the protests.

Offline, Bahraini women have faced the same attacks as men, suffering arrest, assaults, and even torture. Bahraini police and security forces have also been accused of threatening women with

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<sup>59</sup> “Libya Crisis/Eman al-Obeidi/Channel 4 News (UK),” YouTube video, 3:12, posted by bbeloff, March 26, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvFLJtdxkhc>.

rape to force them to sign confessions.<sup>60</sup> Asma Darwish told me she left Bahrain in January 2011 because she received “threats of rape and murder.” A 32-year-old doctor who witnessed a sexual assault victim seek help during the February 2011 protests was arrested for providing medical assistance to protesters and subjected to mental and physical torture. Prison guards strip searched her; in written testimony she described how guards threatened her with rape and sexual harassment, finally prompting her to sign papers promising she would not talk to the media and that she had not been tortured.<sup>61</sup> Ayat al-Gomezi, the young poet, was also arrested and threatened with being “raped and sexually assaulted with degrading photographs of her put on the Internet.”<sup>62</sup> Her picture reportedly turned up on pornographic websites shortly thereafter. And Tunisia’s Ben Mhenni said that she was “harassed and threatened on Facebook and on my blog.” These threats of sexual violence and the humiliation of talking about taboo subjects like sex, not to mention strip searches, are designed to debase women while reinforcing gender inequality, cultural taboos, and social ostracism.

In Egypt, women protested in the streets and spent the night occupying the symbolic public places that became the centers of revolutionary activity, and yet during the 18-day uprising no women were harassed or attacked, according to interviews with participants and press accounts. Those two weeks were an anomaly, as both Mubarak’s regime and the ruling SCAF typically targeted women activists, specifically seeking to violate and intimidate them by deploying sexual violence against them and creating a permissive environment for sexual harassment. Thus it is not surprising, given that some of the most impassioned and inventive initiatives by and for women have revolved around this subject.

In Egypt, a group of volunteers created Harassmap,<sup>63</sup> a crowdsourcing mapping project launched in 2010 to track incidents of sexual harassment in the streets of Cairo by location, type, and frequency and provide real-time information about areas women should avoid, and to change

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<sup>60</sup> Patrick Cockburn, “Detained Poet Beaten across the Face with Electric Cable,” *The Independent*, June 11 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/detained-poet-beaten-across-the-face-with-electric-cable-2296137.html>.

<sup>61</sup> The author obtained a copy of the doctor’s written testimony to a human rights group in which she described her ordeal.

<sup>62</sup> “Detained Poet Beaten across the Face with Electric Cable.”

<sup>63</sup> See the Harassmap site at <http://www.harassmap.org>.

attitudes toward the problem in local communities.<sup>64</sup> Many people used this platform in the months following the uprising as sexual assaults became more common with the breakdown in security. In 2010, draft legislation that would criminalize sexual harassment was put in front of the Egyptian Parliament, but it was dissolved and replaced in the post-Mubarak era. Without the concerted effort by citizen journalists, cyberactivists, and women's rights organizations to document these cases and bring attention to the issue while building alliances with other concerned groups in the human rights community, it seems unlikely that Egypt would have made much progress in either changing mindsets or legal frameworks.

### Public Sphere

The Middle East is highly patriarchal, although the region varies in terms of women's formal participation in the public sphere. In Egypt, Bahrain, and Tunisia, women held parliamentary seats prior to the revolution and participated in economic life. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Libya, however, women were largely relegated to the home and not visible in the public sphere. Mass participation by women in street protests and political demonstrations was rare if not unheard of prior to the 2011 uprisings, when women young and old took to the streets across the region, slept in the squares, and climbed atop of the shoulders of men to rally the public. Pictures of middle-aged women tending their children in tents and stories of older women refusing the youth's protestations to go inside where they would be safer have become part of the revolutions' story.

But while women were relatively less visible in the streets and public squares prior to the Arab uprisings, over the past several years, young women have carved out a robust, participatory, and leadership role for themselves in cyberspace. In more conservative societies, women were able to "leave the confines of the four walls of her home," as one young Libyan put it, by going online, where they could access information, communicate with people outside of their physical social circles (they were often constrained by social mores and familial expectations from intermixing with men), and engage in collective action, from "liking" a Facebook post to coordinating

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<sup>64</sup> Author's conversation with Injy Galal and Rebecca Ciao, January 18, 2012, in Cairo.

donations among friends. “Cyberactivism has made activism on the street more acceptable,” explained Yemeni activist Maria al-Masani.

It also enabled young women in the more conservative countries of Libya and Yemen to participate in the revolutions because there are fewer strictures on gender mixing and female comportment online, and anonymity is an option—whereas it is not in most cities and villages, where extended family ties mean that it can be difficult to escape prying eyes and ears. Several Libyan and Yemeni women said that cyberactivism empowered them to be active in a way they could not be in the physical world. “Women are equal on the Internet,” more than one person told me. “In cyberactivism, men don’t get in physical contact with women, so a lot of women are in cyberactivism because their father says he would not want his daughter to go to a demonstration, but if she’s anonymously online then no one’s going to object to that,” explained Mansani, in an observation echoed by several other young women. An activist who wished to remain anonymous said her cousins would object to her cyberactivism, so she used a pseudonym; another explained that they would use codes to discuss what was happening on the ground in Libya because certain words like “NATO” were under surveillance. Libyan activist Sarah al-Firgani said new media pushed women to get involved more. “They were at home using Internet, they can speak freely and ... it changed the look of women in their community, the men respect them more and see they have a role to play to beyond family and children,” explained Firgani. “Women proved they can do what men can do, some women did more than what many men did.”

Bloggers and social media similarly changed the discourse about Yemen and challenged stereotypes in the international media, particularly with respect to women, observed Yemeni blogger Afrah Nasser. The emergence of women in cyberspace and in the streets challenged traditional hierarchies and carved out a new public space in which they could enact their identities, previously invisible in the public sphere, and claim a role in the political contestation underway in their countries. Through their virtual performances they created collective action frames, like those of Asmaa Mahfouz and Bahraini poet Ayaa Qurmezi, that mobilized their compatriots and prompted a new public conversation that included women as never before, collapsing traditional hierarchies of authority and power and forcing vast swaths of Arab society

to rethink what role and place women should have in the public sphere and politics in particular. Cyberactivism provided the opportunity for women to play a leading role online *and* offline because cyberactivism was fundamentally about linking virtual dissent with physical protest, influencing the mainstream media, setting the media and public policy agenda, and framing the debate about political rights and civil liberties, including the role of women.

The role of women in the public sphere has inalterably shifted over the past several months as women translated gains made in the virtual sphere to the embodied public sphere, of which squares in the capital cities were emblematic. Women participated in the Arab uprisings and reconstituted the role and position women occupy in the public sphere. While some countries, like Bahrain, Egypt, and Tunisia, had a handful of women parliamentarians prior to the revolutionary uprisings, others like Yemen and Saudi Arabia were virtual black holes in terms of women's public participation in the public sphere. Similarly, in Bahrain, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, the virtual instantiations of contentious politics—as well as the dialectic of the embodied and virtual public spheres that reconstituted women's role and image in Arab politics and society—provided new mechanisms for the articulation of their identities and brought new issues to the public agenda. Although Arab states have highly variable rates of Internet connectivity, social media—particularly Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube—have become central facets of young women's daily lives. Even in Yemen, where Internet penetration is a mere 10 percent, youth have clamored to join Facebook. “Everyone knows everyone else through Facebook,” according to Yemeni blogger Afrah Nasser, noting that it helped connect youth in various provinces so that they could unite in the revolution.

The Arab uprisings reveal a fundamentally different conception of the public sphere than the Habermasian democratic polis or the mediated public sphere created by transnational Arabic news stations portrayed by political scientist Marc Lynch. Women have played an undersized role in the public sphere, and particularly the formal political sphere, for much of the modern Middle Eastern state history. Many of the barriers to women's robust participation in the public sphere are sociocultural and religiocultural, as well as legal in select cases like Saudi Arabia. But women have adopted and adapted new media technologies to pursue personal and collective independence and freedom. Yet women's participation did not start and end with the initial

protests in the streets, but rather has continued to expand as youth in Egypt and Tunisia fight to consolidate the revolution, Bahrainis and Syrians fight to obtain political change, and Saudis continue to fight for even the most basic rights. As the uprisings continue, Internet access expands, and the popularity of Twitter and Facebook grows, new groups of women are becoming inspired to participate in the revolutions, both on and offline. “Blogging was not very popular before the revolution, but now thousands of people are creating them, creating Facebook accounts, because they are platforms for knowing what’s happening, and they don’t trust the news,” said Nasser.

Cyberactivism is both reflexive and reactive. For many women, posting on Facebook or blogging was the first time they had ever expressed their personal feelings publicly. Cyberactivism was a form of empowerment, a way to exert control over one’s personhood and identity, while gaining a sense of being able to *do* something in the face of a patriarchal hierarchy and an authoritarian state. “People are starting to say their views openly and freely because of social media, it has changed their mentality,” according to Afrah Nasser. As a blogger named Israa explained in an interview prior to the Egyptian uprising, blogging was “a way to spread our ideas and concepts to people and make things that can change our facts and conditions.” This sentiment was expressed by many women before, during, and after the revolutions. “The power of women is in their stories. They are not theories, they are real lives that, thanks to social networks, we are able to share and exchange,” said Egyptian-American activist Mona Eltahawy.

New and alternative media have given women new tools for articulating their identity in the public sphere, putting issues that were of particular concern to them onto the public agenda, and making their opinions heard, from straightforward online blogging platforms in the mid-2000s to mobile and microblogging in 2007, to the explosive popularity of the social networking site Facebook by 2008. Women have even made gains within the conservative Muslim Brotherhood, as evidenced by the recent comments of Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie at an *Ikhwan* press conference entitled “Woman: From the Revolution to the Prosperity.” “No one can deny the vital role the women played during the January 25 Revolution, whether as activists, mothers, or wives,” he said in his opening speech, noting that they “partook with men in everything.” Women, he

said, “made history, and with their success they gave the whole world a lesson about how to fight injustice and tyranny.”

As a result of technological developments and shifting epistemological commitments amid the Middle East uprisings, the Internet and digital media have contributed to the reconfiguration of the organizational logic of knowledge and power, as women cyberactivists defy the norms of their male-dominated, patriarchal societies. A particularly striking act of defiance against societal norms took place in late 2011. Aliaa Magda Elmahdy was not in Tahrir Square during the 18 days of the revolution, or during the March 9 women’s march. In fact, she did not take part in protests until May 27, when she said she decided that in fact she might be able to change the future of Egypt and could no longer remain silent.<sup>65</sup> She confronted stereotypes and expectations of what an Egyptian woman should do and be by posting a naked picture of herself, as well as drawings of nudes, on a blog that quickly garnered more views than any of the most famous cyberactivists. Within a month, her profile was viewed more than 1.1 million times. It was later posted on Twitter with the hashtag #nudephotorevolutionary. The tweet was viewed more than a million times, while Elmahdy’s followers jumped from a few hundred to more than 14,000.

“Put on trial the artists’ models who posed nude for art schools until the early 70s, hide the art books, and destroy the nude statues of antiquity, then undress and stand before a mirror and burn your bodies that you despise to forever rid yourselves of your sexual hang-ups before you direct your humiliation and chauvinism and dare to try to deny me my freedom of expression,” she wrote under the full frontal nude picture next to banner ads calling for the end of military trials for civilians and a picture of blogger Mikael Nabil, imprisoned by the SCAF for his criticism of the military.

Asmaa Mahfouz, of the YouTube video, was charged with a similar “crime” as Nabil. She had called SCAF, the military council in charge of the country, a “council of dogs.” But after a huge public outcry, a lot of it taking place on Twitter and Facebook, the military backed off and

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<sup>65</sup> Mohamed Fadel Fahmy, “Egyptian blogger Aliaa Elmahdy: Why I posed naked,” *CNN*, November 19, 2011, [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-11-19/middleeast/world\\_meast\\_nude-blogger-aliaa-magda-elmahdy\\_1\\_egyptian-blogger-nude-photo-kareem-amer/2?\\_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-11-19/middleeast/world_meast_nude-blogger-aliaa-magda-elmahdy_1_egyptian-blogger-nude-photo-kareem-amer/2?_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST).



released her and fellow blogger Loay Nagati on bail in August 2011. Referring to the Mahfouz case, Egyptians now use a new term: “released with a hashtag.”

### Post-Revolution: Organizing, Electing, and Participating

Zeinab al-Khawaja, best known by her Twitter handle @AngryArabiya, is another iconic figure who has been active from the start of the uprising and continues to push the limits of political expression in Bahrain, earning her the wrath of the authorities and the admiration of people around the world who interact with her on Twitter. Her sister, Maryam al-Khawaja, went into exile and shuttles between Europe and Washington, D.C., as advocacy director of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, the leading human rights monitoring group in the country. Their father was beaten, tortured, and sentenced to life in prison at a sham military trial and eventually went on a hunger strike that at this writing had been going on for more than a month. Yet they both continue their advocacy, one from inside the country and one from outside, using cyberactivism to ensure the world does not forget about the ongoing protest movement in Bahrain.



**Image 5.** A mobile phone photo of Zeinab al-Khawaja standing up to Bahraini security forces that went viral. Photo by @Mo7ammedMirza via Twitter.

In Libya, women seem to be more active than men in building civil society and, in particular, using social media to do so. New nongovernmental organizations, coalitions, and Facebook groups are sprouting up everywhere to deal with problems as local as the sewage in Lake Benghazi to those as complicated as the issue of federalism and elections. In many cases, young women said their

organizations grew out of Facebook pages or groups they started with friends.

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Ibtihad, a 26-year-old activist from Tripoli who was forced to leave Libya during the war, created a Facebook page with her friends because she felt she could not just sit and do nothing—she needed to take action. They began to lay the groundwork for an organization so that when she and her friends were able to return to Libya, they would have the foundation for a registered NGO. The Facebook group, which was open only to friends, adopted a policy of complete transparency and democracy. The 100 or so members of the group voted on everything, from the name to the logo to the program of work. They wrote a mission statement and bylaws, and when she returned in August 2011 they registered their new organization, which they named Phoenix, after the bird that rises again from the ashes, and the Arabic term that refers to beauty. They raised money from friends and acquaintances and posted an accounting online with pictures of everything they purchased with donated funds. After Ghaddafi's fall, as the country entered the transitional phase, Phoenix created a fan page that was open to all and took its online activism offline, holding information sessions and establishing a women's resource center. Such examples are common in Libya, where the youth have been inspired to lead their country to a better future in the post-Ghaddafi era. "We started Phoenix because our parents didn't let us interact with anyone, and we were just trying to help, so we started this Facebook group and we started adding trusted friends" who had gone abroad to collect donations of money and clothes, Ibtihad said.

Young women throughout the region agree that a fundamental mind shift must take place in order for women to make real gains, as for some women, authoritarianism is experienced in the private as well as the public sphere. Dalia Ziada underscored the challenges that still remain in Egypt, noting that a poll of more than 1400 people she helped conduct revealed that not a single one wanted to see a woman president one day. In their personal lives, young women must juggle their studies and family responsibilities (some of them are mothers and wives), and negotiate cultural expectations about women's roles. Carving out time for cyberactivism seems to have taken on more importance as social media use expanded, and as the uprisings spread.

Young women's space in the public sphere continues to be contested; the more liberal and secular among them and those advocating for women's rights are especially targeted. Lina Ben Mhenni, from Tunisia, said that "after January 14th, when demonstrations claiming secularism and the protection of human rights and women rights were organized, some bearded men shouted

that our natural place is the kitchen.” In Libya, young women have had to resist familial pressure to remain at home or stay off Facebook. And it is not just liberal, “progressive” women who are using digital and networked media platforms to reconfigure societal roles and expectations; a similar phenomenon is underway among conservative and deeply religious young women, such as of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.<sup>66</sup>

The blogosphere became the first public venue in which young Muslim Brotherhood women publicly enacted their identity as members of the banned organization.<sup>67</sup> Asmaa el-Erian, daughter of political bureau head and leading reformist Issam el-Erian, said she started blogging in 2007 to mark her presence and write about life with an imprisoned father, as well as to protest and draw attention to his case. Following Mubarak’s ouster and the Muslim Brotherhood’s sweeping victory in parliamentary elections, her father is now one of the foremost leaders in Egypt.

The diminutive 15-year-old Arwa al-Taweel was among the first *Ikhwan* sisters to create a blog in 2005, and helped pave the way for its members to participate in the blogosphere, having encouraged and trained dozens, if not hundreds, of her fellow *Ikhwan* to blog, including several who participated in the revolution. Her blog, *Ana Keda*—an expression that she translated as meaning something to the effect of “That’s How I Am” or “I Am Enough”—and later her tweets and Facebook updates became a venue for political activism and articulation of her Islamic faith and in many ways defined her, she told me. She became known as a blogger and cyberactivist, recognizable to strangers because she posted a photo on her blog. Blogging was both personal and political, but she shied away from the public critique of the *Ikhwan*’s 2007 party platform in favor of more personal reflections on life, love, and poetry. But given her father’s reputation and her own activism as a citizen journalist for *Al Jazeera Talk* and *Al Destor* and her active support for Gaza, the former could hardly be separated from the latter. In 2008 she told me she would refuse to stop being a cyberactivist if and when she got married, a promise she ended up keeping when she broke off her engagement with a man who wanted her to stay at home more often.

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<sup>66</sup> Courtney C. Radsch, “Bloggers & Believers: Dynamics of Activism and Identity in the Muslim Brotherhood,” in *Information Evolution in the Arab World*, eds. Adel Iskander, Leila Hudson, and Mimi Kirk (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

Defying the traditional role of Muslim Sister as stay-at-home wife, she vowed to travel and remain politically active, and last year found a husband who would support her. In the wake of the revolution she even professed an interest in running for parliament when she turned 30.<sup>68</sup>

The translation of online experiences and relationships into the “real world” blurred the lines between public and private life, and provided new and varied opportunities for women to expand their circles and interact with people they never could have otherwise. Such translation also contributed to attempts to claim control over the articulation of the female identity. Feminist reinterpretations clashed with conservative traditionalists seeking to maintain hegemonic control over the representation of women and their proper roles in society. Blogs and social media made the invisible visible, gave voice to the voiceless, and embodied a commitment to free expression and *ijtihad*, or independent judgment. “This is a revolution of making our voice heard,” said Afrah Nasser, noting that half of Yemen’s population is under 18. “We are now creating a new form of political awareness in Yemen that has never been talked about before, [a] new form of politics,” she added, pointing out that the fact she had been invited to speak at an international conference on Arab women and cyberactivism was proof of such change. In her country, women played an unprecedented leadership role in the uprisings, recognized by the awarding of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize to Yemeni journalist and human rights activist Tawakkol Karman for her role in inspiring the democratic uprising in her country, which grew from 20 women journalists who gathered to protest the day Tunisia’s president Ben Ali fled the country to tens of thousands in the weeks and months that followed.

Internet-mediated public articulations and interactions are creating a new definition of how politics will be done and who can participate, opening up new venues for the participation of women and politicizing social issues such as sexual harassment and sexual identity. These virtual, and embodied, human interactions, what sociologist Jeffrey C. Goldfarb calls “the politics of small things,” opened a space for freedom of expression and sociopolitical action, creating a virtual public sphere in which new discourse, practices, and identities are articulated, giving

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<sup>68</sup> Dialika Krahe, “Visions of Female Identity in the New Egypt,” *SpiegelOnline*, 2011, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,druck-754250,00.html>.

women the chance to have their say.<sup>69</sup> As one young woman put it: “We were using social media to establish a virtual place, a virtual world, where we could all come together and discuss ideas and do the stuff that we’re not able to do in public. This is how the whole thing started.”<sup>70</sup>

Women have carved out new spaces for debate and discussion in the public sphere, both physically and rhetorically, through activism on the streets and online through agenda-setting and framing as they erased red lines that had previously kept topics like torture, political succession, and sexual harassment off limits. They are unlikely to retreat from the public sphere no matter the outcome of the revolutions. And one of the first points of contention will be defining the rights of women in constitutional and legal reforms, as well as ensuring their equal representation and participation in elections.

### *Political Rights and Elections*

Because of gender quotas, all parties in the transitional countries of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya were required to include women candidates on their lists, turning the issue of quotas, ballot design, and campaigning into a focus of post-uprising cyberactivism throughout the region. There does not appear to be consensus on the issue of women quotas for parliamentary elections. Some people, young women included, argue that elected representatives should be the best candidates regardless of gender; others ask why they should accept quotas of less than 50 percent, given that women are half of the population. Egypt had a 25 percent quota in a post-Mubarak election, yet women won only two percent of parliamentary seats, less than the percentage held under Mubarak. Libya’s first version of the new electoral law required only 10 percent, whereas Algeria reserves 30 percent of parliamentary seats for women. Tunisia’s new law required party lists to alternate equally between men and women, but only 22.6 percent of seats were won by women in the October 2011 election. According to a January 2012 article in *Foreign Policy*, women are represented at twice the rate in Middle East countries with quotas than those without.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *The Politics of Small Things: The Power of the Powerless in Dark Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>70</sup> Michelle Rikken-Ransom, “Interview: Shima’a Helmy and the future of revolution,” Pop!Tech, October 22, 2011, [http://poptech.org/blog/interview\\_shimaa\\_helmy\\_and\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_revolution.html](http://poptech.org/blog/interview_shimaa_helmy_and_the_future_of_revolution.html).

<sup>71</sup> Aili Mari Tripp, “Do Arab Women Need Quotas?,” *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2012.

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Middle East countries that have quotas have more than twice the rate of representation (19 percent) when compared with countries where women are permitted to run for office but do not have quotas (8 percent). In fact, five Middle Eastern countries even have higher rates of female legislative representation than in the United States, where women hold 16.5 percent of congressional seats. Gender parity laws, however, do not necessarily translate into electoral success. Not a single woman was directly elected in the first round of Egypt's election for the lower house of Parliament in November 2011. Twenty-nine-year-old Dalia Ziada ran for Parliament in the first post-Mubarak elections as a candidate for the Eladl Party. Although she did not win, she said she believes that elected representatives should be the best candidates regardless of gender.

Women have not been sitting quietly and allowing male-dominated committees and legislatures have a free pass, and have been vocal in demanding their rights as the uprisings transition into institutionalized politics. In Libya, advocates created the Libyan Women's Platform for Peace (WPP), which has been active in the fight against a draft electoral law that would give women a mere 10 percent of legislative seats. A coalition of civil society groups including the WPP issued a protest and demanded a 40 percent quota in the new parliament. But as 20-year-old Libyan cyberactivist Danya Bashir asked, why should they accept quotas of less than 50 percent, given that women are half of the population? Zahara Langhi, a women's rights activist from Benghazi, and her friends started a Facebook group to focus on the issue and launched a coalition focused on ensuring gender equality in the elections and ballot design. Although she lives in Cairo much of the time, she is so active disseminating information via social media that most people assume she is in Libya. "People thought during the election that I was in Libya, in Tripoli, in the meeting!" she exclaimed, discussing the parliamentary elections. Given the lack of transparency and information provided by the National



**Image 6.** Zahara Langhi and her colleagues at a women's conference in Benghazi. They are on Facebook and their mobile phones as they push to get a redesigned ballot for Libya's elections. Photo courtesy of Courtney C. Radsch.

Transitional Council, cyberactivists like Langhi and Bashir play a key role in disseminating and framing information as well as mobilizing other activists. Bashir, for example, calls herself the first female president in Yemen on her Twitter profile.

In Yemen, however, women were initially cut out of the National Transition Council, according to Maria al-Masrani, the Yemeni blogger and human rights activist who said she is advising the council on its social media strategy. “The revolution in Yemen started and was empowered by women,” said Masrani, who founded the Yemen Rights Monitor blog in February 2011 to document human rights abuses and events on the ground as the popular uprisings there got underway and to get around the media ban by posting user-generated content.<sup>72</sup> Before the uprising, she said, people focused on whether the one woman who was in Parliament was wearing a veil or showing too much hair. But she said she worries about whether the gains made by women, who defied tradition to take to the street and refused calls to remain at home, will continue. “Women's participation was valued during the revolution, but now, as top government positions are awarded, a female voice is seldom heard,” said Masrani.

Nowhere, perhaps, is the voice of women more silenced than in Saudi Arabia, the country that ranks dead last with respect to women's rights and among the “worst of the worst” with respect to political rights and civil liberties.<sup>73</sup> One of the driving forces behind the campaign to give women the right to vote in the kingdom is 32-year-old women's rights activist Manal al-Sharif. She described her efforts to gain Saudi women their rights, most famously the right to drive, as being built on cyberactivism and inspired by women she met through Twitter. “I chose driving because mobility is a basic need,” she said, adding that driving by women is not technically illegal and is culturally, rather than legally, banned. “There is no law prohibiting women from driving.” She said she was issued a ticket for driving without a license, “which means then it must be allowed,” prompting her to file a lawsuit that made her the first and only woman to make such an appeal. The campaign for the right of women to drive, #women2drive, that she

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<sup>72</sup> *Yemen Rights Monitor* (blog), <http://yemenrightsmonitor.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>73</sup> Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin, eds., *Freedom in the World 2011* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011).

launched on YouTube and Facebook last summer garnered worldwide media attention and landed her in jail for nine days.<sup>74</sup>

### Concluding Thoughts

Despite the region's democratic uprisings, many countries—including Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen—experienced backsliding in Freedom House's 2012 annual survey of political rights and civil liberties because of crackdowns on pro-reform activists. Tunisia was a bright spot in a region that continues to rank among the least free in the world, moving from “Not Free” to “Partly Free” on the Freedom House 2012 survey amid the successful democratic consolidation that took place in the wake of Ben Ali's ouster last year. Egypt continued to rank as “Not Free” amid continued repression by the ruling military power. Thus the struggle to consolidate revolution and enact meaningful reforms remains a challenge that young women will continue to be involved in; they will undoubtedly continue to use new media technologies to participate in and influence the future trajectory of their countries.

The Arab Spring is not just a political revolution; it is a social, sexual, and potentially religious one as well. Women cyberactivists are upending traditional hierarchies, reinterpreting religious dogma, breaking taboos, and bringing new issues into the public sphere even as they push to redefine the cultural mores between public and private spheres.

The tension between privacy versus publicity, activism versus journalism, professional versus amateur, physical versus virtual, and conformity versus *itjihad* are at the epicenter of the revolutionary transformations underway throughout the region. Social media and the Internet enabled young women to play a central role in the revolutionary struggles underway in their countries, whether as revolutionaries, citizen journalists, or organizers. As Internet access increases, as mobile phones are increasingly able to connect online, and as social networking expands, cyberactivism will continue to be a central form of contestation even as new platforms and strategies develop. Ensuring that women receive education and training, as well as

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<sup>74</sup> See, for example, “Manal Al Sharif driving in Saudi Arabia,” YouTube video, 8:40, posted by amworldtodaypm, May 27, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sowNSH\\_W2r0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sowNSH_W2r0); and the Facebook page of women2drive at <https://www.facebook.com/Women2Drive>.



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expanding their legal and political rights, will help consolidate the sociopolitical gains of the Arab uprisings. With the widespread recognition of the role young women played in the uprisings, there is little doubt they will work to secure their role in the post-authoritarian order that is in the process of emerging in the region.

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