



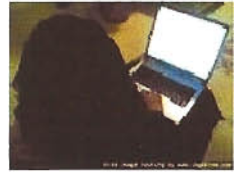
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Egyptian blogs begin new conversation for women

Print

Like many people living in countries where expressing unorthodox views can be difficult, Egyptians have turned to the Internet. The recent surge in blogging has given many Egyptians the opportunity to voice opinions about a range of subjects. Women in particular have tapped into the blogosphere, and female bloggers speak up on relevant issues facing women, considerably more confident than if they were to voice these opinions using a less anonymous medium.



John Hendel reports for Index on Censorship

Describing the realities facing Egyptian women is a difficult task. On the whole, the situation for women has improved considerably in Egypt. In 2000, President Hosni Mubarak created the National Council of Women to promote 'development and empowerment of women' and for 'the advancement of women', among other objectives outlined on the council's website.

According to Mubarak, women in Egypt have secured significant advances in many sections of society over the last few years. The appointment of the first woman judge, legislative reforms amending the personal status law, the nationality law giving equal rights to children born to an Egyptian mother, the issuance of the Family Courts Law, the Family Insurance Fund, and the amendment of the alimony and children custody laws are among the improvements and achievements the president cited in a speech at the fifth Conference of the National Council of Women in March 2005.

These progressive signs suffer setbacks from another issue relevant to all Egyptians: freedom of expression. Dalia Ziada is a 25-year-old human rights activist, translator, and writer from Cairo, and described what she calls the death of freedom of expression in Egypt.

According to Ziada, journalists are subject to 'masked' censorship. The Press Act was amended last year, but, she says, 'journalists are still calling for more freedom, independence, and legal protection... the torture of poor citizens in police stations has reached its maximum limit during the last years. Thanks to blogs and active bloggers, the torture crimes were disclosed to the world.'

Ziada herself keeps a blog in Arabic and works to publicise grievous rights violations. She helped find a lawyer for the 22-year-old Kareem Amer, the blogger and former law student sentenced on 22 February 2007 to four years in prison for his blog writings. He was the first person to be imprisoned for the crime of controversial blogging in Egypt, which sets a disturbing precedent. Global protests shouted down his arrest and detention to no avail.

Blogs forced to play the role of journalism

Violent sexual harassment of women has been a problem in recent years in Egypt and often blogs expose these incidents shortly after they occur. Large groups of men pursued and attacked women in the streets on both Eid celebrations in 2006, according to several blog accounts and an article on Global Voices Online. On 24 October during Eid ul-Fitr, men assaulted several women in downtown Cairo, one of whom created a blog called 'Wounded Female from Cairo' shortly afterward to discuss the event. When describing the harassment, she directly addressed the attackers. She blamed them for casting Islam in a bad light, and said that treating women with contempt instead of regarding them as sisters and offering them protection is in direct opposition to behaviour expected from responsible Muslim men. 'You're putting Islam in the worst image ever in front of the world!!...they don't even deserve to be called human beings', she writes in her blog.

Yet the media of Egypt reported little on the Eid attacks and word of them spread primarily through blogs such as 'Wounded Female from Cairo's and others. Almost 1,500 Egyptian blogs are linked on the Egyptian blog ring www.egybloggers.com, with 900 blogs awaiting approval. YouTube videos of the attacks also contributed to a grassroots journalism movement that compensates for considerable censorship in mainstream media.

Mohamed Hashem, the director and owner of Dar Merit Publishing House, suffers daily harassment, Ziada said. She said he has a courageous policy of publishing critical and politically controversial books and that several of those books are banned in Egypt.

'One of these banned books is about leftism and leftist groups in Egypt', Ziada said, 'and another book is about the memories of a peasant woman who strove against a feudal family in lower Egypt, in 1970s'.

Blogs strive to fill the gaps in official news coverage and also provide an outlet for emotions and debates bursting to come forth. One Egyptian woman, whose blog bears the handle 'Nora', expressed frustration in a 15 November blog entry over the inconsistency with Egyptian companies' policies over hiring veiled or non-veiled women. Two companies had considered hiring her, but one only wanted veiled women and the other wanted expressly non-veiled women.

'Twice, I was judged based on my appearance, albeit differently,' the woman wrote. 'How could such policies exist?? I mean, isn't this just plain discrimination!!'

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Thriving new forum for free debate endangered

The fresh dialogue in the Egyptian blogosphere provides a vital forum for the Egyptian community, especially for women and stories not reaching the mainstream media. The recent case of Kareem Amer potentially endangers this trend. He himself pushed for women's rights and secularism in his blog entries. On his still-active blog profile, Kareem mentioned he had hopes of opening a human rights activists law firm one day, hopefully including lawyers sharing his views. 'Our main goal is to defend the rights of Muslim and Arabic women against all form of discrimination and to stop violent crimes committed on a daily basis in these countries', Kareem wrote.

If the Egyptian government continues to put its champions of women's rights behind bars and to censor blog content, the future looks grim for the flourishing new blogosphere. Like the blogs shedding light on sexual harassment, the recent case of Kareem Amer threw a spotlight on Egypt's human rights violations through grassroots activism. By the time of his sentencing, major newspapers around the world turned the imprisoned blogger story into a major headline. Whether international pressure will push back Egypt's recent acts of repression and open their culture of silence remains to be seen.

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