Shifting Dynamics of Safe Spaces for Women in Revolutionary and Post-Revolutionary Egypt: A Reflection on the Article, "We are not Women, We are Egyptians"

Cherry Muslim[1]

[1]SHORT BIO
Cherry Muslim is a lecturer in Islamic Studies and Comparative Religion within the Religion Department of the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics (SRPC), UKZN-Howard College, Durban, South Africa. She is the Director of the Islamic Studies Research Unit, SRPC, UKZN and is presently completing her PhD in the intersectionality of Islam, gender, cyberspace, and power.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
Religion Department of the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics (SRPC), UKZN-Howard College, Durban; muslim@ukzn.ac.za

ORCID:
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3426-742X

ABSTRACT
In her article, Nadia Taher (2012) illustrates that, during the Egyptian revolutionary protests that took place during January/February 2011, women were accorded an egalitarian and safe space in Tahrir Square, Cairo, as Egyptians. This is affirmed by Egyptian women who stated, "We are not women, we are Egyptians." For 18 days the women shared the public space with men in protest, demanding social and political transformation from an oppressive regime. No sexual harassment cases were reported during this time – an important fact in a society where, on a daily basis, women are sexually harassed on the streets, depicting an underlying consequence of the patriarchal domination often informed by a Muslim/Islamic religious interpretation. Yet just a month later, in March 2011, for International Women's Day, the dynamics shifted (regressed) where safe public spaces for women as revolutionaries and women as women were once again unsafe and Qur'an waving protesting Muftis leading a group of men, insisted that the women's demands were unjustified and that they "should go back home and to the kitchen." This article reflects on the concept that women are expected to reimagine their gender to be accorded full recognition, participation, and safety in public spaces from within patriarchal frameworks for a limited time or for specific situations. The article proposes that cyberspace can be an alternative safe, public space of recognition, participation, and counterpower beyond patriarchal limitations, not only for revolutionary women, but for women *per se*, yet simultaneously suggesting that, within the post-revolutionary Egyptian state, such safety and power are severely censored.

KEYWORDS
online-offline activism; gender; Egypt; social movements

Introduction

This article, which is partially lifted from my PhD thesis, uses as its starting point, Taher's article, "We are not women, we are Egyptians,"[1] where she suggests that, for Egyptian women, being safe in a public physical/offline space is possible when they act as revolutionaries, but not for women as women. In light of this, I begin by giving an overview of the dynamics of protest spaces for women, starting with the Egyptian

---

1. Nadia Taher, "We are not women, We are Egyptians." *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* 16, no.3 (2012): 369-76.

uprising (Arab Spring) followed by the predominantly women protests that were held thereafter. In the second part of the article I look at the negotiations of space in respect to Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of patriarchal bargaining. Thereafter I discuss cyberfeminism and cyberactivism in light of the cyberspace vlog (this being a public space within the communication network system/online space) of Asmaa Mahfouz, which is hailed as "the vlog that sparked the Egyptian Revolution" in relation to Saba Mahmood's subversive piety. Finally, I reflect on whether cyberspace can be an alternative safe, public space of recognition, participation, counterpower, and safety beyond patriarchal boundaries, not only for revolutionary women, but for women *per se* and, if such power and reimagining can be retained in post-revolutionary contexts.

Egyptian Revolution: A Synopsis

Historically, Egypt is no stranger to protests – yet a countrywide unified participation (with large-scale protests in which men and large numbers of women protested together) has never occurred. From Huda Sha'a-wari[2] who was one of the first voices in the emerging women's rights arena in the early 1900's, to political antagonisms between secular and religious ideological institutions, Egypt has weathered all forms of protest. In the last two decades, protests in Egypt have been on the increase. Political and social concerns, women's rights, and labour issues have all been core to the demonstrations which were a result of three decades of the Hosni Mubarak regime. Women were visible and active participants in all of these (albeit on a far smaller scale than men), even with the knowledge of the dangers they could incur in a country that publicly and privately hinges its status of nationhood/patriarchy on the honour of women.

The Egyptian Revolution was an uprising where the citizens of Egypt (all classes, genders, religious and age groups) united for a common cause: they demanded a nation free of dictatorship – where poverty and high unemployment could be reduced and human rights (and by extension more effective women's rights) and democratic political elections could be possible. With this came shifting identities and transformations of both individuals and collectives – of who they were and what they wanted for the future. The 6 April Youth Movement was, amongst others, one of the proactive organisations that motivated demonstrations through the use of social media. This organisation was founded in 2008 by a group of

---

[2]   Huda Sha'awari founded the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923.

young educated men and women (Asmaa Mahfouz and Mohammed Adel being two noted founders) who had rallied behind the labour protests in 2008. They were computer savvy activists, as a number of them have received training from the organisation CANVAS (Centre for Applied Non-Violent Action and Strategies) created by *Otpor's* leader Srdja Popovic of Serbia, who overthrew Slobodan Milosevic in 2000.[3] The basic principles of the organisation were unity, planning, and non-violent discipline for mobilisation, with new communication technologies being the pivotal resource in disseminating these methods.

Negotiations of Offline Space: In Tahrir Square, "We are not women, we are Egyptians"

It therefore happened that the social media were given the credit for enabling, mobilising, and organising the mass demonstrations. On 25 January 2011, millions of Egyptians descended on Tahrir Square (Liberation Square) and stayed for 18 days until Hosni Mubarak stepped down from rule. For the protestors the Square was not a gendered space, but a space of nationalist identity, a space that went beyond gender. This was in direct opposition to how public space is normatively viewed. Men and women voiced and felt the shift in dynamics and identities, as they invoked the cohesive right to occupy the space together. At this point it is important to state that it was the way in which women were seen that invoked this right and that presented the dilemma for continued participation. Said one protestor: "No one sees you as a woman here; no one sees you as a man. We are all united in our desire for democracy and freedom." This was affirmed and extended by a young woman who said to Nadia Taher: "We are not women, we are Egyptians." According to Ng,[4] Egyptian bloggers wrote that male protes-tors praised the women on the frontlines by stating, "You are such a man," indicating that some men permitted the presence of women in the public space because they viewed them at that moment as men.

It is the statement "we are not women" which alerts us to the type of "gendering" (and non-gendering) that occurred in the offline public space of the Square (discussed below).

---

[3]   Tariq Ramadaan, *The Arab Awakening* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 6; Rose Marie Berger. "Nothing Spontaneous about it," *Sojourners* 40, no.5 (2011): 22, http://sojo.net/magazine/2011/05/nothing-spontaneous-about-it.

[4]   Melody Ng, "Contemporary Female Activism: Female Activists and Social Movements in the Cyber-Era," (Master's Thesis, Univesity of California, Berkeley 2012), 41.

Scholars (Egyptians and others) of varying disciplines have written about the misogynist Egyptian society. Public spaces are fraught with dangers for women who walk the streets unaccompanied by male guardians, as they are harassed or sexually assaulted. It is reported that there are numerous (large-scale) daily occurrences of sexual assaults – physically and verbally – of women, and these incidents have increased over the past decade. In an interview, Mona Eltahawy claims that the Egyptian state relies on "three pillars of misogyny: the state itself, the street and the home."[5] El-Ibiary affirms that

> violence against women in Egypt is a socio-cultural political phenomenon, due to a male-dominated culture and a patriarchal authority, as well as deteriorating economic conditions and a widening gap between social classes and categories. It is integral to the wider context of political violence, the struggle over power, as well as the societal acceptance of violence against women.[6]

Moreover, a man's honour, and by extension the family honour, is paramount in the Egyptian society – melded from culture, religion, and state policy. This honour rests on the good conduct of the women in the family household. Thus, if the women venture out alone and are victims of sexual assault, they utimately become the antagonists rather than the victims and bring dishonour to the family. This also bears witness to the public/private dichotomy where the predominant ideological assumption is that a woman's role is within the home, whereas men function in the public sphere. Yet, during those 18 days of protest, it has been stated that women – old, young, mothers, daughters, and grandmothers – were out on the steets with or without male family members, and not a single sexual harassment case was filed. However, these claims have been disputed as it was reported that on the last day of the 18-day protest a case of sexual assault was filed. Some women also indicated that during the protests, women were assaulted and raped by groups of men.[7] Mona

---

[5]   Segolene Allemandou, "Female Emancipation in Egypt 'Can Only Come From Egyptian women'," *France24*, 18 December 2017, https://www.france24.com/en/20171218-women-rights-egypt-emancipation-egyptian-feminists-sisi.

[6]   Rasha El-Ibiary, "Media Portrayal of Street Violence Against Egyptian Women: Women, Socio-Political Violence, Ineffective Laws and Limited Role of NGOs," *IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication & Film* 4, no.1 (2017): 50, http://iafor.org/archives/journals/iafor-journal-of-media-communication-and-film/10.22492.ijmcf.4.1.04.pdf.

[7]   Mariz Tadros, "Reclaiming the Streets for Women's Dignity: Effective Initiatives in the Struggle against Gender-Based Violence in between Egypt's Two Revolutions," *Evidence Report* no.48, Institute of Development Studies (2014), 11.

Eltahawy – an activist, journalist, and writer – also reported that she, amongst other women, was sexually assaulted during the protests, which left her with two broken arms. This begs the question then, as to whether women were as safe or gender neutral as is stated by some protestors. Some reports documented that there were indeed many men who, day and night, assisted, facilitated, and protected the presence of women on the Square, thus indicating that a public space had become relatively "safe" for women. Added to that, women shouldered the attacks by the police force, the military, and the state vigilantes together with men. This in itself was marked as an historic shift in the gendered transformations of public space.

Just a month after Mubarak was ousted and to celebrate International Women's Day on 8 March 2011, women planned a gathering in Tahrir Square. This was to celebrate the recent political victory, but also to remind government of women's rights for equality and participation in the constitutional discussions for a new political dispensation. Activists have hoped for large numbers of women to heed the call, yet a mere 300 showed up and they faced a severe backlash from men who were angered by their actions. The women were verbally abused and sexually attacked with interjections like "Go back home and to the kitchen;" "Your demands are unjustified, unnecessary, a threat to the gains of the revolution, out of time, out of place and the product of a 'foreign agenda'." A "sheikh" holding a Qur'an was carried on the shoulders of the protesting men. His performance was to emphasise the idea of the doctrinal authority of the Qur'an in opposition to the actions of the women. That night, women and men who camped out in the Square were arrested, subjected to torture, and beaten. Women who were expected to still be virgins were subjected to virginity tests, as a general of the military authorities said, "They are not like my daughters or yours…they slept alongside men in tents…they had to be given virginity tests."[8] The ideology and practice of the unsafe public space for women was once again at play.

The events of this demonstration did not deter the women and they continued to attend a number of protests over the next few months in 2011. Many citizens were killed and/or injured (mainly men), and in one incident which became a precursor for a following 10,000-strong protest,

---

[8]   Taher, "We are not Women," 371; BBC News, "Egypt 'Virginity Tests' Decried," *BBC News*, 1 June 2001, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13620712.

a young woman who was beaten by police, stood up and stripped to her waist revealing her blue bra.[9] The general public opinion that played out in the media was that she as a women should not have been in that space in the first place and girls do not belong at protests, and if they insist on attending, they should be prevented from doing so by force of their male guardians. Her behaviour was questioned, but not that of the police. Patriarchy and honour had returned to the public space. These two protests suggested that women no longer had the capacity or the right to be present in such public offline spaces, as their earlier roles in the mass protest of January 2011 as Egyptians had reverted to their former roles of being women in private spaces – as deemed by men.

However, when the abovementioned 10,000-strong march of women occurred in response to the "blue bra" incident, the women used emotive and qualifying language referring to themselves as mothers and daughters of Egypt: "Daughters of Egypt do not get stripped," they chanted. With this particular protest, the women were treated with re-spect, did not need protection, and received an apology for the attack on the woman with the blue bra – who incidentally became a graffiti symbol of a "Wonder Woman"[10] wearing a blue bra! They demanded the dignity and the rights of the "daughters of Egypt."

From these examples the fluctuating dynamics of the public spaces and the safety of women within those spaces are apparent. In reference to Deniz Kandiyoti's[11] theory of patriarchal bargaining**,** Taher suggests that women are strategising within a given structure of patriarchal constraints specific to their context, to maximise on options that best facilitate an active or passive resistance to their oppression. Furthermore she main-tains that the bargains are not timeless or irreversible but are "sus-

---

[9]   It should be noted that the identity of this woman was never revealed, yet she became a symbol of agency for the struggle of women in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

[10] On 21 October 2016 the United Nations named "Wonder Woman" as the honorary ambassador for the empowerment of women and girls. "Wonder Woman" would be the front for the campaign for women's rights and gender equality with the slogan, "think of all the wonders we can do" (Will Worley, "Wonder Woman Named UN Gender Equality Ambassador, Sparking Backlash," *Independent*, 21 October 2016, http://www.indepen-dent.co.uk/news/world/americas/wonder-woman-un-honorary-ambassador-empower-ment-women-girls-gender-equality-petition-a7374856.html.

[11] Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender and Society* 2, no.3 (1988): 274-90.

ceptible to historical transformations that open up new areas of struggle and renegotiation of the relations between genders."[12]

Sherine Hafez argues that patriarchal power[13] was seriously challenged both at the private and public levels by the Egyptian Revolution through the presence of a people consciousness where men and women acted together.[14] I take this further by suggesting that, in order for Egyptian women to be part of the "people consciousness," in order to be Egyptians, they renounced being women. They bargained with their womenhood to be accepted within the political climate, as citizens of their country. They raised the collective identity of being Egyptian, or even being called a "man," above that of being women, so that they could enter spaces considered to be unsafe for them. Tahrir Square was a relatively safe public space for the women as revolutionaries and as Egyptian citizens within a specific time frame and for a united reason, but not for women as women, as was demonstrated by the protests and marches which followed after the 18-day protest – and for some women even during the 18-day protest.

Only the "Blue Bra" protest, where the slogan and chants of "Egypt's daughters will not be stripped," had similar success. Women negotiated the patriarchal structure of the Egyptian society by subverting the male conscience to protect the women and female children of Egypt by using a notion of activist mothering.[15] This is a powerful form of activism that is negotiated from the mothering identity, which has put men in a position where their honour was being negotiated within the realms of the Egyptian normative society.

Once Mubarak had been deposed, the "power" of the women was marginalised; they even struggled to find voice and representation in the

---

[12]   Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," 275.
[13]   Sherine Hafez, in her article "No Longer a Bargain: Women, Masculinity, and the Egyptian Uprising" (*American Ethnologist* 39, no.1 [2012]: 37-42), extends the concept of patriarchal bargaining from Kandiyoti's frame of gendered bargaining to include the patriarchal power of Egypt's state leader Mubarak over the Egyptian masses, where he retained a fatherlike position of power over the population.
[14]   Hafez, "No longer a bargain," 38.
[15]   Nancy A. Naples, "Activist Mothering: Cross-Generational Continuity in the Community Work of Women from Low-Income Urban Neighbourhoods," *Gender and Society* 6, no.3 (1992): 441-63, https://www.jstor.org/stable/189996.

incoming leadership when they were excluded from the committee on constitutional reform. Kandiyoti states:

> Wherever women continue to serve as boundary markers between different national, ethnic, and religious collectivities, their emer-gence as full-fledged citizens will be jeopardised, and whatever rights they may have achieved during one stage of nation-building may be sacrificed on the altar of identity politics during another.[16]

The bargained women's voice and presence that may have been evoked as Egyptian, was eroded and maligned once the objectives of the collective have been realised. Once again, women have lost a footing in the participatory power base of the state. This is well highlighted in the last couple of weeks of October 2015 when elections were reaching their peak in Egypt: during that time the state issued a statement claiming that women who wore revealing or immodest clothing would not be eligible to vote and women who wore the *niqab* (face veil) would need to remove it for identification.[17] This, according to state spokespersons, was neces-sary in terms of respecting traditions. This emphasises the societal pres-sures of the honour of women and their negotiated presence in public spaces as determined by a patriarchal structure.

Cyberactivism, Cyberfeminism, and Social Movements
It was in the 1990s when the EZLN Zapatista movement in Mexico[18] employed the Internet in their social movement against the Zedillo

---

[16] Deniz Kandiyoti, "Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation," *WLUML Dossier* 26 (2004): 45-58.

[17] Ashraf Abdelhameed, "Egyptian Women in 'Revealing Attire to be Banned' from Voting," *Al Arabiya News*, 14 October 2015, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/variety/2015/10/14/Egyptian-women-in-revealing-attire-to-be-banned-from-voting.html.

[18] The EZLN Zapatista movement: Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (The Zapatista Army of National Liberation) initiated a protest on 1 January 1994, the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect. In San Cristóbal, an indigenous representative of the EZLN read from the opening of "The First Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle" to a gathered crowd. The document was in essence a declaration of war against the government of Ernesto Zedillo, and "referred to Article 39 of the Mexican Constitution to justify the people's...inalienable right to alter or modify their form of government." Most importantly, the declaration outlined the 11 demands of Zapatista: jobs, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice and peace (Sheryl Shirley, "Zapatista Organising in Cyber-space: Winning Hearts and Minds?" *Conference of the Latin American Studies* 2001; Adrienne Russell, "Myth and the Zapatista Movement: Exploring a Network Identity," *New Media & Society* 7, no.4 (2005): 559-77, http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.955.8978&rep=rep1&type=pdf.

government, that the use of the Internet for activism for political and social movements started the increasing popularity and effectiveness of such methods where the Internet is harnessed in various emancipatory ways to inform self and others, and to construct new socio-political relations. Kahn and Kellner[19] assert that "the global internet, then, is creating the base and the basis for an unparalleled worldwide anti-war/ pro-peace and social justice movement during a time of terrorism, war, and intense political struggle." Many protests and revolutions since then were successfully executed on the Internet. Leaders of many of these worldwide protests have had training by CANVAS as a result of their success in Serbia.[20]

Cyberfeminism is still considered as a predominantly North or First World development of technological advancement. Gajjala[21] argues that cyber-feminisms have opened up spaces for possibilities and disussions in the Third World using Western technologies, yet the idea of the users in the Third World as the "other" is still implicit in these discussions. She questions whether Internet use will equalise the power structures between North and South, or guarantee the reduction of social, political, or economic injustices faced by those who are "de-empowered"[22] in the world's hierarchical structure. She states that

> [c]yberspace is increasingly marketed as a wonderland where gender, race, and all such markers of otherness will be erased and melted down as we transform ourselves into texts and images online. This view, like the melting pot ideology, fails to point out that it is the "Others" who will be the ones who will need to trans-form themselves into an Anglo-American

---

19 Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner, "New Media and Internet Activism: From the 'Battle of Seattle' to Blogging," *New Media & Society* 6, no.1 (2004): 87-95, http://nms.sage-pub.com.

20 Ramadaan, *The Arab Awakening,* 6.

21 Radhika Gajjala, "'Third World' Perspectives on Cyberfeminism," *Development in Practice* 9, no.5 (1999): 616-9; Radhika Gajjala, "Internet Constructs of Identity and Ignorance: 'Third-World' Contexts and Cyberfeminism," *Works and Days* 33/34, 35/36, 17 and 18 (1999-2000); Radhika Gajjala, "Woman and Other Women: Implicit Binaries in Cyberfeminisms," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 11, no.3 (2014); Radhika Gajjala and Annapurna Mamidipudi, "Cyberfeminism, Technology, and Inter-national 'Development'," in *Cyber Selves: Feminist Ethnographies of South Asian Women*, ed. Radhika Gajjala (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004), 81-94.

22 Gajjala uses the term "de-empowered" to highlight the stripping away of the identity and indigenous modes of knowledge of the people of the South as backward and traditional in comparison to the ideology of Western expertise and enlightenment (cf. Gajjala, "'Third World' perspectives on cyberfeminism," 1999).

dominated information structure which is dictated by programming languages and nettiquettes laid out from a Eurocentric social, cultural, and political perspective.[23]

Nonetheless, she argues that the idea of cyberfeminism is "to use Internet technologies and to create spaces online that are empowering to women." This occurs at the "intersection of computer technology with subversive feminist counterculture"[24] where possibilities of activism, education, support, and research occur. Surfing the Internet provides an array of vlogs, blogs, YouTube videos, and discussion groups which attest that many women – for the purpose of this discussion, women who identify as Muslim – are appropriating their skills with technology for enabling and empowering women in environments that are politically and religiously restrictive. For women activists, Skalli[25] presents three areas in which the technology is useful: first, it allows a knowledge building capacity outside the restrictions of censorship in a fast and fluid manner; second, it provides a wider range of voices and initiatives locally, natio-nally, and globally without having to rely on analogue media which are often state controlled, and third, it encourages women to establish far reaching relationships and alliances which can create allies and greater interventions.

For the past decade in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), women have been using the Internet to build support for their work and to disseminate images and information through citizen journalism around social and political issues. This has created a connectivity for women's rights activists where they are able to create alternative ideas around identity politics, citizenship, and political participation in mediated discur-sive spaces. As a result, women are able to "redefine patriarchal gender roles while questioning the sociocultural, economical, political and legal institutions constraining them."[26]

---

[23] Gajjala*, Internet Constructs of Identity*, 119.

[24] Kira Hall, "Cyberfeminism," in *Computer-Mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives*," ed. Susan Herring (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing), 147-72.

[25] Loubna H. Skalli, "Communicating Gender in the Public Sphere: Women and Information Technologies in the MENA Region," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2, no.2 (2006): 35-59.

[26] Elham Gheytanchi and Valentine N. Moghadam, "Women, Social Protests, and the New Media Activism in the Middle East and North Africa," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 40, no.1 (2014): 1-26.

Words of a Woman: Subversive Piety in Asmaa Mahfouz's Viral Vlog

I propose that the offline occupation of Tahrir Square was a patriarchal and negotiated bargain as compared to Asmaa Mahfouz's subversive "give and take" negotiations in her online vlog. Mahfouz is a techno-millennial, business graduate, and activist who lives within the misogynist restrictions of her society. Using her private space, the Internet, and her rage, Mahfouz's vlog was a call for collective action for all Egyptians to descend on Tahrir Square to oppose the Mubarak regime. It was this vlog that went viral on YouTube after she initially uploaded it onto her Facebook page and has been given the credit for sparking the revolution.[27]

Applying Saba Mahmood's concept of subversive piety, Mahfouz masterfully subverts the Egyptian social structures in her vlog. Extolling the pointlessness of the four Egyptians who set themselves alight in a copycat act of Mohammed Bouazzizi of Tunisia, Mahfouz calls for all Egyptians to participate in a protest against the regime. Dressed modestly, wearing her *hijab*, and filming from her private space which is considered appropriate for Egyptian women, Mahfouz not only fulfils the Egyptian societal requirements of honour and modesty but presents a strong, bold, and authoritative persona through her presence, voice, and body language on the vlog. Showing her face and providing her contact details in a country where the media is controlled by the state, was a high-risk action that, until then, no other blogger or vlogger had attempted within that political climate. Manuel Castells[28] argues that risk taking behaviour becomes part of the counterpower process when anger against the ruling power supersedes the fear that previously prevented action. Speaking in colloquial Arabic (*ammiya*) to address a wider civilian audience and as an affront to governmental apparatus, she challenges the patriarchal structure throughout her vlog:

> I posted that *I, a girl*, am going *down to Tahrir Square* and *I will stand alone* and I will hold up a banner, *perhaps people will show some honour…If you think yourself a man*, come with me on January 25th.

---

27 Melissa Wall and Sahar el Zahed, "'I'll be Waiting for You Guys:' A YouTube Call to Action in the Egyptian Revolution," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1334.

28 Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge, UK.: Polity, 2012), 3, 14.

> *Whoever says women shouldn't go to protest because they will get beaten, let him have some honour and manhood* and come with me on January 25th. Whoever says it's not worth it because there will only be a handful of people, I want to tell him you are the reason behind this. And you are a traitor, just like the president or any security cop who beats us in the street…*If you have honour and dignity as a man, come, come and protect me, and other girls in the protest. If you stay at home*, then you deserve all that's being done to you. And *you will be guilty*, before your nation and your people and *you'll be responsible for what happens to us on the street while you sit at home* (emphasis added to indicate the subversive usage of language).[29]

Mahfouz deftly uses the patriarchal context of the Egyptian society to her advantage. She subverts her position in society as a woman to demand the attention of Egyptians, especially men. By addressing men directly, she affirmed that she is just "a girl" and presented them with the opportunity to show "manhood and honour" and dignity by protecting her and any other women who may be on the street protesting. She went even further indicating that if they do not protect them, they will be guilty before the nation and the people. This was a powerful mode of subvertsive incitement within the cultural/religious structure. Moreover, by employing the use of cyberspace she could speak and be heard. She was able to disrupt the normative male discourses by interpreting her reality in a way which strategised within her constraints. This is a growing strategy where women in the MENA region are occupying the public online space to gain agency and to present positions of counterpower in relatively safe spaces, referred to by Castells as "networks of outrage."[30] Activist Noha Atef states: "[T]o have a space, an online space, to write and talk to people, to give them messages which will increase their anger, this is my favourite way of online activism."[31]

Gheytanchi and Moghadam found that in Iran, online activists had very similar experiences as they felt that cyberspace presented them with "a safe environment to explore new venues and express their feelings of frustration with the status quo."[32]

---

[29] Wall and el Zahed, "I'll be Waiting for You," 1338-9.
[30] Castells, *Networks of Outrage*, 15.
[31] Miryam Aouragh and Anne Alexander, "The Egyptian Experience: Sense and Nonsense of the Internet Revolution," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1348.
[32] Gheytanchi and Moghadam, "Women, Social Protests, and the New Media Activism," 9.

Cyberspace certainly provides a space of immediacy that facilitates the voices of the marginalised, and it enables agency and counterpower particularly for women, without the daily perils of physical societal public space. However, Mahfouz was arrested for her vlog and was to be sentenced to a year in prison. Civil protests averted her imprisonment, but a travel ban was placed upon her. Many online activists, both women and men, faced similar challenges and threats. This has also occurred in other countries such as Iran, Libya, and Tunisia. This suggests that cyberspace as part of the Internet is an empowering tool for cyberactivism and cyberfeminism, but that it carries its own set of challenges.

Egypt's Post-Revolutionary Cyberspace: Where do We Go from Here?

The al-Sisi government has approved and implemented laws such as the Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes Law in August 2018 and the Media Regulation Law in July 2018. These laws give the government broad ranging power to regulate and restrict freedom of expression on the Internet and to jail online activists whom the government deems to be threats to the state. In addition, counterterrorism and state of emergency laws enable the court to prosecute bloggers and online activists for peaceful criticism.[33] These regulations provide the Supreme Council for Media Regulations the power to put citizens with more than 5,000 followers on social media, with personal blogs, or websites under state supervision. This power also extends to blocking or suspending any personal accounts which the state considers to be fake news or criticism. Rights activists argue that this is a method of crushing dissent by bloggers and online activists.[34] In 2013, Alaa Abdel Fattah, an online activist and blogger who was also part of the 2011 Egyptian uprising, was arrested and jailed by the al-Sisi state. He was just one of apparently thousands who have been arrested and imprisoned, although al-Sisi has denied such activities. Another activist who was detained was Amal Fathi in May 2018, after she posted a video (taken on her smartphone) on Facebook, criticizing sexual harassment in Egypt. Her

---

[33] Khaled Desouki, "Egypt: Events of 2018," *Human Rights Watch*, 2019, https://www. hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/egypt.

[34] NewsWires, "Egypt's Sisi Ratifies Law to Clamp Down on Social Media," 2 September 2018, *France24*, https://www.france24.com/en/20180902-egypt-sisi-ratifies-law-clamp-down-social-media-internet.

crime was said to be "spreading false news" and "inciting regime change."[35]

An Egyptian online activist, Omayma, who is presently exiled in the Netherlands, says that "the new generation of feminists is smarter than the government thinks. This generation grew up with technology, they are used to it. We all have smartphones and can record videos. That is threatening to the government."[36] She suggests that it is dangerous in Egypt even in the online space; yet she, as others, are constantly trying to achieve change because "not only the government likes to keep women small, it is also ingrained in society." Some Egyptian journalists have been sentenced to years in jail, whilst others like Fattah, Wael Ghonim, and Asraa Abdel Rattah – also known as the "Facebook Girl"[37] – have been released, albeit under restrictive conditions. Online activists continue to push the boundaries and find alternatives in this circum-venting censorship, both on the Internet and on other mediated spaces in the more recent Egyptian political and social milieu, even though the Egyptian cyberspace does not guarantee any sense of safety for the users, neither female nor male. Nonetheless, as Omayma states, for her, the Arab Spring was a moment of clarity, and since then "I have the feeling that my life can change every moment and that I can also change the lives of others." On the other hand, Asmaa Mahfouz argues that the Egypt under al-Sisi is undergoing a counter-revolution and that it is far more dangerous to be engaged in activism – both online and offline – under the present leadership than it was under Mubarak.[38]

---

[35] AFP, "Egypt Activist Urges Sisi to Pardon Detained Wife,*" News24*, 3 January 2019, https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/egypt-activist-urges-sisi-to-pardon-detained-wife-20190103-2.

[36] Noemi Prent, "Meet Omayma, Women's Rights Activist in Turbulent Egypt," *ATRIA, Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History*, 9 October 2018, https://institute-genderequality.org/news-publications/feminism/feminism-21st-century/meet-omayma-womens-rights-activist-in-turbulent-egypt/.

[37] The "Facebook Girl" is Asraa Abdel Rattah who used social media to organise and support public protests in Egypt, including the textile workers strike in 2008 for which she was detained. She also facilitated the 2011 Arab Spring protests (cf. MLDI, "Case of Fearless Egyptian Internet Activist Esraa Abdel Fattah [Aka 'Facebook Girl'] Taken up by International Legal Team," *MLDI*, https://www.mediadefence.org/news/case-fearless-egyptian-internet-activist-esraa-abdel-fattah-aka-%E2%80%9Cfacebook-girl%E2%80%9D-taken).

[38] Orla Guerin, "Revolution a Distant Memory as Egypt Escalates Repression," *BBC News*, 9 December 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-30381292.

Conclusion

Although Mahfouz's actions were exceedingly dangerous in respect of governmental retaliation, her presence in the public online space was relatively safe as compared to the presence of women in an offline public space within Egypt. Mahfouz did not bargain her womanhood within cyberspace in order to assert her Egyptian nationality or Muslim identity. In the online space pre-protest, during the protest and post-protest, she was not confronted with the normative patriarchal responses that develop in offline public spaces. However, given that she was arrested, attests that complete safety in cyberspace is not guaranteed. Even though "flaming" can occur, ethics can be flouted, censorship is a real threat, and imprisonment is possible in some countries, cyberspace is a possible alternative to enable agency and power/counterpower for women. It has enabled women activists to facilitate a network through offline and online debates which has contributed to what Moghadam and Sidiqi refer to as the "feminization of the public sphere."[39] Egypt's first female judge and the vice president of the Supreme Constitutional Court, Ehany el Gibaly avers: "Women should not wait to be invited. It is time for them to perform their rights."[40]

I therefore conclude that cyberspace can be an alternative safe, public space of recognition, participation, counterpower and safety within negotiated feminisms and possibly beyond patriarchal limitations, not only for revolutionary women, but for women *per se,* and that with more nationwide access to cyberspace and with more time, such power and reimaginings can be retained in post-revolutionary contexts. However, this can only be possible where state laws are not implemented to censor the Internet and the media.

References

Abdelhameed, Ashraf. "Egyptian Women in 'Revealing Attire to be Banned' from Voting." *Al Arabiya News.* 14 October 2015. http://english.alarabiya.net/en/variety/2015/10/14/Egyptian-women-in-revealing-attire-to-be-banned-from-voting.html (Accessed 27 October 2015).

---

[39] Valentine M. Moghadam and Fatima Sadiqi, "Women and the Public Sphere in the Middle East and North Africa," *Special Issue of Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2*,* no.2 (2006): 1-7, https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/13236.

[40] Hafez, "No Longer a Bargain," 41.

AFP. "Egypt Activist Urges Sisi to Pardon Detained Wife." *News24*, 3 January 2019. https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/egypt-activist-urges-sisi-to-pardon-detained-wife-20190103-2 (Accessed 15 September 2019).

Allemandou, Segolene. "Female Emancipation in Egypt 'Can Only Come From Egyptian Women'." France24, 18 December 2017. https://www.france24.com/en/20171218-women-rights-egypt-emancipation-egyptian-feminists-sisi (Accessed 15 September 2019).

Aouragh, Miryam and Anne Alexander. "The Egyptian Experience: Sense and Nonsense of the Internet Revolution." *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1344-58.

BBC News. "Egypt 'Virginity Tests' Decried." *BBC News*. 1 June 2011. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13620712 (Accessed 15 July 2017).

Berger, Rose Marie. "Nothing Spontaneous about It." *Sojourners* 40 no.5 (2011): 22. http://sojo.net/magazine/2011/05/nothing-spontaneous-about-it (Accessed 18 August 2015).

Castells, Manuel. *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age.* Cambridge, UK.: Polity, 2012.

Desouki, Khaled. "Egypt: Events of 2018." *Human Rights Watch*, 2019. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/egypt (Accessed 15 September 2019).

El-Ibiary, Rasha. "Media Portayal of Street Violence Against Egyptian Women: Women, Socio-Political Violence, Ineffective Laws and Limited Role of NGOs." *IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication & Film* 4, no.1 (2017): 49-64. http://iafor.org/archives/journals/iafor-journal-of-media-communication-and-film/10.22492.ijmcf.4.1.04.pdf.

Gajjala, Radhika. "'Third World' Perspectives on Cyberfeminism." *Development in Practice* 9, no.5 (1999): 616-9.

Gajjala, Radhika. "Internet Constructs of Identity and Ignorance: 'Third-World' Contexts and Cyberfeminism." *Works and Days* 33/34,35/36 17 and 18 (1999-2000): 117-37.

Gajjala, Radhika. "Woman and Other Women: Implicit Binaries in Cyberfeminisms." *Communicaton and Critical/Cultural Studies* 11, no.3 (2014): 288-92.

Gajjala, Radhika and Annapurna Mamidipudi. "Cyberfeminism, Technology, and International 'Development'." In *Cyber Selves: Feminist Ethnograhies of South Asian Women* edited by Radhika Gajjala, 81-94. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004.

Gheytanchi, Elham and Valentine N. Moghadam. "Women, Social Protests, and the New Media Activism in the Middle East and North Africa." *International Review of Modern Sociology* 40, no.1 (2014): 1-26.

Guerin, Orla. "Revolution a Distant Memory as Egypt Escalates Repression." *BBC News*, 9 December 2014. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-30381292 (Accessed 15 September 2019).

Hafez, Sherine. "No Longer a Bargain: Women, Masculinity, and the Egyptian Uprising." *American Ethnologist* 39, no.1 (2012): 37-42.

Hall, Kira. "Cyberfeminism." In *Computer-Mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Susan Herring, 147-72. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1996.

Kahn, Richard and Douglas Kellner. "New Media and Internet Activism: From the 'Battle of Seattle' to Blogging." *New Media & Society* 6, no.1 (2004): 87-95. http://nms.sagepub.com.

Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender and Society* 2, no.3 (1988): 274-90.

Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation." *WLUML Dossier* 26 (2004): 45-58.

MLDI, "Case of Fearless Egyptian Internet Activist Esraa Abdel Fattah [Aka 'Facebook Girl'] Taken up by International Legal Team," *MLDI*, https://www.mediadefence.org/news/case-fearless-egyptian-internet-activist-esraa-abdel-fattah-aka-%E2%80%9Cfacebook-girl%E2%80%9D-taken (Accessed 15 September 2019).

Moghadam, Valentine M. and Fatima Sadiqi. "Women and the Public Sphere in the Middle East and North Africa." *Special Issue of Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2, no.2 (2006): 1-7.

Naples, Nancy A. "Activist Mothering: Cross-Generational Continuity in the Community Work of Women from Low-Income Urban Neighbourhoods." *Gender and Society* 6, no.3 (1992): 441-63. https://www.jstor.org/stable/189996.

NewsWires. "Egypt's Sisi Ratifies Law to Clamp Down on Social Media." 2 September 2018. https://www.france24.com/en/20180902-egypt-sisi-ratifies-law-clamp-down-social-media-internet (Accessed 15 September 2019).

Ng, Melody. "Contemporary Female Activism: Female Activists and Social Movements in the Cyber-Era." Master's Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2012.

Prent, Noemi. "Meet Omayma, Women's Rights Activist in Turbulent Egypt." *ATRIA, Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History*, 9 October 2018. https://institute-genderequality.org/news-publications/feminism/feminism-21st-century/meet-omayma-womens-rights-activist-in-turbulent-egypt/ (Accessed 15 September 2019).

Ramadaan, Tariq. *The Arab Awakening.* London: Penguin Books, 2012.

Russell, Adrienne. "Myth and the Zapatista Movement: Exploring a Network Identity." *New Media & Society* 7, no.4 (2005): 559-77.

http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.955.897
8&rep=rep1&type=pdf.

Shirley, Sheryl. "Zapatista Organinising in Cyberspace: Winning Hearts
and Minds?" *Conference of the Latin American Studies.*
Washington D.C., September 2001.

Skalli, Loubna H. "Communicating Gender in the Public Sphere: Women
and Information Technologies in the MENA Region." *Journal of
Middle East Women's Studies* 2, no.2 (2006): 35-59.

Tadros, Mariz. "Reclaiming the Streets for Women's Dignity: Effective
Initiatives in the Struggle against Gender-Based Violence in
between Egypt's Two Revolutions." *Evidence Report* no.48,
Institute of Development Studies, 2014.

Taher, Nadia. "We are not Women, We are Egyptians." *City: Analysis of
Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* 16, no.3 (2012):
369-76.

Wall, Melissa and Sahar el Zahed. "'I'll be Waiting for You Guys:' A
YouTube Call to Action in the Egyptian Revolution." *International
Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1333-43.

Worley, Will. "Wonder Woman Named UN Gender Equality Ambassador,
Sparking Backlash." *Independent.* Online newspaper. 21 October
2016. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/wonder-
woman-un-honorary-ambassador-empowerment-women-girls-
gender-equality-petition-a7374856.html (Accessed 15 September
2019).