

Women, Arab Spring and Social Media: Effects of Social Media on Egyptian Women's Participation in the Revolution

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 15 April 2019

Keywords

Arab Spring, social media, women's political participation, civic engagement, online/offline activism, social network, empowerment, democracy..

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ABSTRACT

This research article discusses the role played by social media among Egyptian women during Arab uprising that occurred in the year 2011. During the rebellion in Tahrir Square, Cairo, women ferociously protested against their concerns. The research article evaluates the participation of women in the rebellion in their own viewpoint, pursues explanation for the use of social media by women and their opinions on whether it made women participate in those revolts. The research concluded that an excellent work was done by the social media during the Arab uprising which empowered the women activists at personal level and it boosted the women in terms of politics. Social media offered the right space for women who were enthusiastic to participate in the uprising and in the politics of their country. Through social media, freedom of expression, increased awareness and encouragement among women were achieved.

1. Introduction

The primary motivation behind this research article is the interest towards Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Since the daily life of women in these regions is different from Scandinavia, the research article is intended to cover this topic. The role played by women in the Arab Spring is the primary focus on this paper. The news media chronicles are the main reason behind investigating the role played by social media in revolution. The question raises here about the impact of social media in the event of Arab uprisings. The civil unrest occurred in Egypt primarily due to poverty, nationwide unemployment among the young citizens and corruption.

A total of 18 days of protests led to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak who held the power along with army for the past 30 years. The primary aim of this research article is to evaluate the participation of Egyptian women in politics during the Arab uprising via social media. This paper pursues a connection between the involvement of women in social networks and in political and social changes (BBC 2013).

Egyptian women: movements and political participation

For a long known time (Al-Ali, 2000; Baron, 2005; Hafez, 2003), Egyptian women have actively participated in movements of both secular and religious types. The current research denotes movement as both secular and religious as well as political and non-political movements. According to the author, movement can be any form of social participation. Critiques concerned the state of feminist movements and its particulars in Egypt. But the current study focus may not be in this regard. An overview of the evolution of Egyptian feminism and women's movement understanding the diversity of both definitions is present in this article.

The year 1923 saw the development of first women organization i.e., Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) under the leadership of Huda Sha'arawi, the pioneer in feminist movements (Cairo Papers 2009, Vol. 29, 117-118). The purpose of this union was to increase the awareness among

women with regards to political and social equality alike men. Egyptian Feminist Party was established in the year 1942 followed by the establishment of Bint al-Nil organization. However, a number of debates occurred concerning the induction of women movement in Egypt (Sika & Khodary 2012, 92). These debates mostly focused on the persons who initiated such movements and origin of feminism in Egypt (Al-Ali 2000, 57-58)

The feminist movement progressed during Nasser regime. In the history of Egypt, women were allowed to vote for the first time in 1956. Political and economic rights were offered to women who then gained limited rights of equality to public life. Though there were some good progress, the discrimination of women through family laws remained unchanged (Sika & Khodary 2012, 92.). The state hegemony extended to civil society actors in the year 1964. As per the law 32/1964, the state is given freedom to strictly regulate the civil society actors or actions (Ibid. 93.) This made quite a positive progress for the women's organizations in the authoritarian state in terms of their rights being considered simultaneously. Post-death of Nasser, the Sadat regime began with the emergence of presidential office power. Though, during Sadat's regime, initiatives were taken for promoting the rights of women in terms of equal education, employment and political participation, all the initiatives were confined with authoritarianism only. Women's personal status such as right to divorce were considered during this regime (Ibid. 93.)

At the time of Economic growth in Egypt i.e., during 1990s the non-governmental organizations were shaped by Mubarak's regime. Those NGOs were harnessed for the development of state through multiple ways. In the subsequent decades, a number of civil society organizations, women's organizations emerged in a tremendous manner. There was frequent intervention by the state officials in the affairs of such organizations, especially women's organizations. Mubarak regime established the National council for women in the year 2000. This council entered into collaboration with various

women's organizations that strengthened the regime's support towards the development of Egyptian woman in the public sphere (Sika & Khodary 2012, 94.) In 2010, women entered the parliament through quota system though it was soon abolished with uprising that occurred on January 25th (Ibid. 95).

Though education is offered to women, Egyptian women still remain unemployed when compared to men due to the workplace discrimination both in public and private spheres. This is because of the regime's practices i.e., exclusion of citizens from various spheres is the awkward logic followed by authoritarian state. Such issues discussed above led to the uprising of women protests started in 2000. The Kifaya militants started protesting against the President Hosni Mubarak who intended to seek a fifth term in office Sika & Khodary 2012, 96)

Followed by other groups of Egyptians whom include workers, students, university professors and journalists, the Kifaya led the protests for change. All the protestors declared their willingness to bring change in Egypt as Kifaya did under the movement named 'Egyptian Movement for Change' Moghadam 2013, 403).

Kifaya movement protests that occurred in the year 2004 showed an immediate impact upon the women activists who then interacted with the political protests. By May 2005, Kifaya movement was supported by women activists too through a small demonstration at downtown, Cairo. In this demonstration, women participants were deliberately harassed by thugs and the adherents of former NDP (National Democratic Party). Since there was no intervention from the officials, women activists reacted strongly and mobilized 500 women demanding the resignation of internal affairs minister Habib al-Adly.

Women looked upon the social networking sites, though they were not politically or socially active earlier, along with the women who were involved in the development of feminist movements. The regime started taking actions against the women who protested against them, "women activists were able to generate consensus by combining different socio-political forces together, like Islamists, leftists, feminists, and liberals to contest the power and brutality of the Mubarak regime" Cairo Papers, 2009, 45.) Though short-lived, the women for democracy movement was an important movement since it brought out the women's rights issues to the broad daylight with feminist activism being the forefront of public debate within the structure of anti-authoritarianism. In association with existing movements, women activists and new feminists movements started blooming which expressed their rage publicly against the then regime (Mark Granovetter (2003, 109).

New Woman Organization and other such older groups associated with various activists looking for an alternative to authoritarianism and patriarchy. They parted away from the women's rights movements that existed and worked from Nasser era. The novel women movements adapted new techniques to question the then situations. Most new female activists participated in the feminist's movements for the first

time due to which "they learned from the emerging protests to criticize and contest authoritarian power structures at work in the political sphere". During the uprising, both active and inactive Egyptian women came to the streets demanding their rights. Their protests primary focused on eradicating the authoritarianism and providing better life for themselves and the society rather than the women's emancipation or equality (David Krackhardt (2003, 84).

Social Media

Christian Fuchs mentioned that a critical understanding of social media means effective engagement of different sociality forms in the internet in the context of society since the term itself is exhaustively complex with multi-layered meanings. In 2006, van Dijk (2006, 15) divided the media into two such as old (face-to-face, print, broadcasting, telephone) and new (computer networks, multimedia). In Egyptian uprisings, both old as well as new media were utilized since the very basic nature of these media is purely social. Further, it is a general notion to describe social media through the identification of specific applications such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube. But social media is generally "beyond a particular proprietary tool, there is very social content". They (Fuchs, Boersma, Albrechtshund, Sandoval, 2011, 3) further opined that the very basic function of internet shifted from information provision to communication and community building. Van Dijk (2012, 183) mentioned that internet has returned to its roots i.e., being a network of exchange and cooperation rather than a source for consumption and information retrieval.

In three parts, social media can be defined such as First, "the information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content"; second, "the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, ideas, and cultural products"; and finally "the people, organizations, and industries that produce and consume digital content". (Howard & Parks 2012, 362.) van Dijk (2012, 180) defined social media in a straightforward way i.e., "Internet applications that enable the sharing of things" (van Dijk 2012, 180). The current study uses this definition wherever social media is cited.

Social Movements and Civic Engagement

Social movements occur due to the bursting needs of the society looking for change. The term 'social movement' has a number of key elements added to it in a precise form. One of the key elements in social movement is the right of ordinary people to hold power and limit the actions of rules. Every citizen in the society is eager to express their freedom of choice and decision" (Tilly 2010, 182). The regime can control the social movements and has the power to make sure there are no such uprisings altogether. In western countries, social movements combine three claims such as 1) identity claims of the claimants who form a unified force to be reckoned with under a common name 2) Standing claims assert ties and similarities with other political actors whom include loyal supporters of the regime, properly constituted citizen groups, established trades, excluded minorities etc., 3) Program claims which either support or oppose the actual or proposed actions by the objects of movement claims (Tilly 2010, 182-184.).

Nowadays, mass media make the performance of social movements visible to the entire globe through their

demonstrations through which dissidents in nondemocratic regimes often end up in emulating their forms. In the current study, the civic engagement “refers to the process through which civil society is invited to participate in on going political, economic and social efforts that are meant to bring about change” Khamis & Vaughn 2011, 5).

Feminism, Gender-equality and Women’s movement

It is important to introduce the term feminism since the current research article discusses about the women in middle of Arab Spring in Egypt. This research paper explores the women and their exclusive rights in the estranged societal behaviour due to their gender (Al-Ali 2000, 209). Feminism, according to the current study, denotes the exploration of women’s rights. In Egypt, activists themselves do not agree on how to define the women’s rights. So, in such scenario, the current study could not accomplish the in-depth exploration of feminism in the given context, rather than which it can discuss the presence of such entity. Further, being a young western women researcher, the author of the current study could not fully grasp the upbringings of Egyptian women whom belong to various religions and their day-to-day challenges due to the deep-rooted gender-based societal discrimination (Bowden & Mummery 2009). With the concepts of women’s movement, gender-equality and feminism, the women’s movement in their very plain signification hopefully avoids misconceptions.

One can very well understand the reality of gender equality in North Africa compared to western societies. Women face a lot of challenges in the patriarchal society and associated factors either secular or religious (Islam). Various criticisms are kept upon the western values, its impact on human rights and universalization in Egypt. It is a general discussion that Egyptians should accomplish the development level on their own terms. Since the views and observations with regards to feminism and gender equality could not be collected directly from the participants, the current research article utilizes gender equality at universal level i.e. women are entitled to enjoy the same rights and opportunities alike men from their birth. The issues predominantly focused during the women’s movements in Egypt are completely different from the movements taken forward by such western counterparts. Within the society itself, there have been variations in terms of structures and details in these movements. Women’s movement is a term utilized in a very solute way for describing organizations that work for women’s rights.

Women, Social Media and the Uprising

Due to the low penetration of internet in Middle East and North Africa, the protests consisted of population who mostly belong to well-educated class and other privileged classes. (Newsom & Lengel 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). ICT statistics 2013 mentioned that 43% of the Egyptian people are equipped with a personal computer at home whereas 34% of Egyptian people are connected to internet and 49% of individuals use internet (ITU 2013.). There are gender stereotypes and discrimination in using the computer still exist according to the statistics. According to Newsom and Lengel, online activism empower the marginalized voices and provide them the much-needed opportunity for cross-boundary dialogue thus helping the society in bringing the change.

However, it is still debated that whether these new forms of media can empower such non-democratic societies or allow them to adopt new strategies. On the contrary, it is argued that these online tools make people participate in the activities falsely instead they prevent them from physical protests (Cooper 2006).

Though the gender issues were predominantly focused during Egyptian uprisings, a number of Arab women could not actively participate since they were still dependent on the society or family (Newsom & Lengel 2012, 33). Women who joined in the protests actively raised concerns in terms of democracy, free and fair elections and attacked the long-held dictatorships. Instead of gender rights, the protests was main focused on other issues. Cairo’s Tahrir square saw only the street-level protests during the Arab spring for gender equality issues (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013, 117.)

Mostly male protesters (75.4%), and female protesters in fair amount (24.6%), participated in the political protests that occurred in Tahrir square during the Arab uprisings. In terms of age, the female protesters were young than their male counterparts. Female protesters were better educated with access to internet via phone and home connection (Tufekci & Wilson 2012). Facebook and twitter were the factors that differentiated the male and female protesters in terms of communication which was statistically significant too. Facebook was predominantly used by women (60% vs 48%), when compared to males, in communicating the information regarding protests. Further, the women also used twitter to communicate with each other about the protests than men (Tufekci & Wilson 2012). An impressive 25% of the sample contained women participants inferring their participation in the political process which was highly noticed by a number of protest observers. An analysis inferred that the women participants seemed to be educated and possessed more economic resources than their counterparts in Tahrir Square protests. Further, social media was preferred mostly by the women than men. Men took part in the first day of protest i.e., 25th January which made the women to make use of alternative tools.

The interviews by the Cairo women protesters inferred that Facebook was the basic and strong media platform through which they expressed their opinions and it enabled them to participate in political activity at the time when women were prevented from attending meetings or participating/speaking as in the uprisings. In a number of cases, Arab women were loaded with challenges from their traditional roles and invisibility due to the public spheres in their culture (Newsom & Lengel 2012, 35). The results added that the influence of social media led to their empowerment in Arab world. The awareness among women about sexual harassment got increased after the Egyptian women started using social media which also led to the parliamentary action to define and criminalize sexual harassment Tufekci & Wilson 2012, 375).

With the Arab uprisings, the women in MENA region got a new image across the globe. It is an established fact that the women in western countries are brave, independent and technologically intelligent too (Eltantawy 2013,765.). On the

other hand, it is critical to note the problematic description of western media about the female protesters of MENA region. They often projected that the women in MENA region are completely prohibited from political sphere and they voiced for their political freedom. The media mislead the global nations about the female politicians of the MENA regions as either non-existent or one-of-its kind. This is completely untrue since the Egyptian society had and still has a number of women's rights movements working towards the upliftment of women in the region. (Ibroscheva 2013, 871.)

Discussion and Conclusion

This study was developed on the basis of role played by social media in Arab spring. A number of previous studies helped in the development of the paper, especially Jan van Dijk's (2012). This study focused on the networks of the society and how the study findings could be compared with his thought process i.e., internet as a tool for democracy. He opined that the social media is the most appropriate illustration of networking in the society that inspired the study on Arab spring protests.

At first, people who lives in the MENA region found it odd to use social media for the purpose of communication and mobilization to participate in the Arab spring. This is attributed to the assumption that the MENA society already got a tight

community network and there was no need of a new networking tool. As predicted, this assumption was proved wrong and misleading. These existing networks in the societies contributed both positively as well as negatively. After Arab spring, many years have passed and no significant results were achieved in the region. On the contrary, Syrians are struggling with civil war and disorder continues in Tunisia as in Egypt too.

Egyptian women have been always excluded from the societal activities and politics which led to such protests in the past. Women are discriminated by the government and societies in general. Being a diversified country, Egypt has different lifestyle conditions for women in different regions. Though the regime of Mohammed Mursi ended, the people of Egypt still feel the presence of army that stayed relatively stable. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, ex-military leader, gained power through another presidential election though boycotted by many. The nation is monitored now and then strongly and women are no exception in this regard. In Arab spring, social media played a large role yet many could not access it. But a number of demonstrators who belong to the middle class utilized social media for communication about the protests. Since the people efficiently utilized the social media for political participation, mobilizing and raising awareness, it is important to include social networks in an examination of related issues.

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