

Publicizing the Private: Egyptian Women Bloggers

Speak Out

As word of a wave of sexual harassment attacks in downtown Cairo spread through the Egyptian blogosphere October 25, 2006, Nermeen Edris, who blogs under the name Nermeena, began thinking about how to respond. She called for suggestions on her website, and after a few days, settled on an idea: a silent protest of women wearing black, each holding a sign calling for an end to the sexual harassment on Cairo's streets.

Nermeena, 28, is one of the longest-active female bloggers in Cairo. She's had her blog, <http://nerro.wordpress.com/>, since February 2004; a veritable eon in Egyptian Internet-time. Since she started writing, the number of Egyptian blogs has mushroomed from less than 100 to somewhere around 3,000 (like many statistics on the Egyptian Internet, exact figures are not known). Not only are women involved in the blogging explosion—they appear to be more active bloggers than men, says Alaa Seif Al Islam, a well-known Egyptian blogger who collects statistics on the blogosphere through his website and blog aggregator, www.manalaa.net. “At the start, some 70 percent of bloggers were women. Now, they are probably just over 50 percent. The men are catching up,” he said.

There are many reasons why Egyptian women have embraced blogging, but primary among them, say female bloggers here, is that blogs offer a place to express themselves, often anonymously, in a way that would not be possible in other public forums. Most women on the Egyptian blogosphere try to create sites that reflect their personalities; they tell personal stories, share political and cultural views, post favorite pictures, and talk about their daily frustrations. “My blog is a way to remind myself that I am not alone, and also it’s a way to vent. Even if no one read it, I would still keep writing,” said Isis, an anonymous 22-year-old blogger who writes about her past as a drug addict and has criticized in a post what she calls Arab society’s “continuing obsession with female virginity.”

Egyptian women make up 30 percent of all Internet users in Egypt, a statistic that generally exceeds their presence in the formal work force (24 percent of the workforce is female, according to 2005 United Nations statistics). Fewer women than men in Egypt are literate—just 44 percent of women can read, compared to 67 percent of men. But the middle and upper class segment of Egyptian society that is turning to the Internet as an alternative site for discussion and information has large numbers of educated women. Since 1999, for example, a majority of university graduates from the faculties of Arts and Social Sciences have been female, according to Egypt’s National Council of Women. And with the average marriage age in Egypt now at 24—and unemployment among women more than double than that among men—young women may have more time on their hands to write.

Whatever the reason, the blogosphere has become one of the few public spaces in Egypt where men and women are represented more-or-less equally, and this helps make possible some discussions that are uncommon off-line. Strangers from across the ideological spectrum are participating in discussions of arranged marriage, homosexuality, and the necessity of veiling for Muslim women on the comment section of female blogs. And activism fueled by the Internet is also making possible male-female collaboration on social issues—such as sexual harassment—often thought of in Egypt as “women’s problems.”

“There’s equality between men and women on the Internet. If your blog is good, we read it. If it’s not, we don’t,” says male blogger Wael Abbas, whose pro-reform political blog, Al Wai Al Masri (The Egyptian Conscience), at www.misrdigital.com, is perhaps the most popular blog in the country. “Men find women’s blogs very interesting, probably as a clue to what is going on in our minds,” says Nora Younis, a female political activist who posts news of anti-Hosni Mubarak protests and other opposition events on her site, www.norayounis.com. “There are usually as many men commenting on women’s blogs as women,” she said.

When women talk about deeply personal issues online, the responses they receive range from intensely supportive to deeply critical—and in some cases are offensive. This is especially true with female writers who try to break social taboos, such as the two or three sites run by lesbian or bisexual women.

“You are just trying to make excuses. If you want to be a homo, just be a homo. Don’t try to bring religion into it,” wrote one angry male reader in Arabic about a post on a blog called Gay Woman, emraamethlya.blogspot.com. The blogger, who is Muslim and writes in Arabic, had argued that while lesbianism may be a sin in Islam, it’s not as bad as male-male sex or adultery.

Vicious comments from male readers actually inspired a group of 200 women bloggers this year to carry out a solidarity campaign online. Called We are All Leila, (*Kolona Leila*) <http://laila-eg.blogspot.com/>, the group took its name from a classic female character in Egyptian literature who has come to represent the struggles of all women. For one day, September 9, 2006, each blogger shared her thoughts on feminism and femininity in Egypt. The sites were linked together through the We are All Leila homepage.

In her contribution to the We are All Leila effort, for example, Ain Shems Univeristy student Walaa Emam responded to the perception of some men that all feminists support abortion, man-hating, and lesbian relationships. In fact, she wrote on her blog Sheer Mental Garbage (<http://sheermentalgarbage.blogspot.com/>), feminism is a positive force which can strengthen male-female relationships in society.

“Feminism fights for you too,” she wrote, addressing her male readers. “Even if you can’t believe this, then think of feminism as fighting for your daughter, your mother, you sister, your wife. *When the women you love are safe and happy, aren't you much*

safer and happier too? We are not enemies. We count you as some of our strongest supporters.”

While Kolana Leila has yet to coalesce into an ongoing project, bloggers argue that even individual efforts of female self-expression on the Egyptian blogosphere have helped raise awareness of the difficulties Egyptian women face. They set the stage, for example, for a strong Internet response to the wave of sexual attacks that took place in October, during the Eid holiday that followed Ramadan.

In the weeks and months before the attacks October 24 and 25, a number of female bloggers were writing about sexual harassment. On her blog, forsoothsayer.blogspot.com, Sherine Zaki, 23, was complaining about the daily verbal harassment she was facing as an unveiled Christian woman during Ramadan. Manal Hassan, a female blogger who runs www.manalaa.net with her husband, Alaa Seif Al Islam, created a stir earlier this year by revealing that a man had masturbated in front of her on an airplane. Some of her online readers blamed the incident on what she was wearing.

“I already knew that sexual harassment was a problem, but when we first heard about the attacks, we thought someone must be exaggerating,” said blogger Wael Abbas, who was sitting at a café October 24 when someone told him there were crowds of men running after women downtown and grabbing them.

But it was no exaggeration, he said afterwards. Leaving his table with four other bloggers, he went into the streets, where he saw large groups of young men chasing after women, surrounding them, and ripping their clothes. The targeted women, who were both veiled and unveiled, were attempting to escape into taxis, restaurants—anywhere they could find refuge.

Abbas and two other bloggers quickly posted pictures and accounts of what they had seen. From there, an independent Egyptian television station picked up the story. After a week, the state-media finally mentioned the event, accompanied by official government denials that anything had happened. Meanwhile, the blogosphere response continued. A video was posted on YouTube, a free video-file sharing site, which alleged to show a similar gang harassment attack by men last January. One victim of the attacks even started her own blog, <http://woundedgirlfromcairo.blogspot.com/> with pictures of an injury she sustained escaping into a taxi.

“We felt like we were in a war—I had emptied my self defense spray on the endless number of guys who surrounded us and yet it still wasn't enough. We, girls, had our butts, breasts, and every inch of our bodies grabbed,” she wrote.

An informal coalition has since formed to bring more attention to the long-concealed problem of sexual harassment in Egypt. It includes men and women bloggers, as well as traditional women's NGOs, like the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights,

which has collected hundreds of testimonies of women who have been victims of sexual harassment through a campaign that began last year.

“What gave the issue traction after the Eid attacks is that it became a male-female issue, not just a female issue, in a society that often excuses male behavior as a result of their nature and their frustration with life, and relies on women to control and restrain society,” said 25-year-old Sandmonkey, (www.sandmonkey.net), who anonymously runs a snarky, right-wing political blog which gets some 10,000 international and Egyptian visitors per day—among the highest of any Egyptian blogger.

The response to the attacks showcased the Egyptian blogosphere’s small but developing role as a societal watchdog and instigator of social and political activism. In early November, the demonstration Nermeena called for took place outside of Cairo’s journalist syndicate. It attracted some 200 people—a good number by recent Cairo protest standards. But the event—which was ringed by hundreds of black-clad police officers—also highlighted the internal tensions within Cairo’s small activist community. Because a wide variety of activists had heard about the protest on the Internet, shortly after the stand began, it was no longer a silent, all-women’s event. Two men from the opposition movement Kifaya—a Muslim Brotherhood leader and the head of the leftist Revolutionary Socialist movement—pulled out a bullhorn and began calling for the end of President Mubarak’s regime, and a moment of silence for a female Palestinian suicide bomber. “I left after a while,” Nermeena said. “I thought, if we are not making ourselves clear, then why are we doing this?”

What They Write

Blogs written by women in Egypt range from the intensely personal to the predominately political. Like male Egyptian bloggers, most female bloggers tend to be middle-class, upper-middle class, or wealthy, and the vast majority are under 30 years of age. They write in both Arabic and English, both anonymously and under their own names

Female bloggers write about arranged marriage proposals they accept or reject; demonstrations they attend or shun; their trials at work; Muslim-Christian tensions; their opinions of movies and concerts; discussions with friends and boyfriends. In short, they write about what's on their minds. The following are short sketches of four Egyptian female bloggers:

Nora Younis runs what many believe to be the most popular of Egyptian women's blogs, though she does not keep track of how many visitors she receives. Active in the Kifaya protest movement, the 29-year-old posts information about past demonstrations and upcoming opposition events. She also posts eyewitness accounts and photographs of things the state-run media does not cover. In December 2005, for example, she documented in detail how the Egyptian police broke up a 3-month sit-in by Sudanese refugees, an action which killed some 20 refugees. Her posts, which are in Arabic—though some are translated into English—often convey a sense of frustration

that by forgetting some core human values, Egyptians are betraying themselves and each other.

“I try to keep it uniquely my blog, reflecting my colors and my life. It never crossed my mind to be anonymous,” said Younis over a recent coffee in Cairo. Younis’s activism stems from her experience working with an NGO that gives small business loans to poor families. “I realized the impact I was having was very limited, she said. “I wanted to be a part of something bigger, and it was the right time.”

Isis, a senior at the American University in Cairo, tries to maintain complete anonymity on her blog, Egypt: The Reality, <http://www.egyptreality.blogspot.com/>. The reason is clear: she writes vividly in English about her past as a heroin addict—“drugs are everywhere in Egypt,” she says—and the open-air drug markets in the Sinai where she and her friends used to go to score. Isis quit drugs in rehab nearly two years ago and said she considers her blog part of her ongoing therapy. She does not pull punches in her discussion of the drug trade:

“I saw first hand how the government handles the drug market,” she wrote. “The police supervise drug selling and buying. Most of the friends I had in the police force were either drug users or addicts themselves. I saw how the police used to protect heroin dealers and get kickbacks. I saw how heroin was smuggled across the Sinai border into Egypt from Israel, while weapons were smuggled into Israel from Egypt and vice

versa.... I saw how thousands and thousands of ecstasy pills and kilogram upon kilogram of cocaine were smuggled through the airport.”

Isis also writes about the controversial subject of hymen-replacement surgery, an increasingly popular operation among Egyptian middle and upper class women because society still expects women to be virgins at marriage. Upper-class herself and “very spoiled” by her parents, she wants to bring some hidden Egyptian social realities into the public eye. “Women have a lot more freedom to say what they want on the Internet without being scared of being judged,” Isis said in an interview. In oversized sunglasses, unveiled, and in form-fitting black clothes, she looked much like most of the trendy young women who fill the American University campus.

Wahda Tania, a 31-year-old bisexual woman, talks about her personal experiences and emotions on Other Things, <http://otherthings.manalaa.net/>. She does not reveal her identity on her site but friends and other bloggers know who she is. She has shocked some readers with her willingness to describe sexual experiences with women in Arabic that borders on the erotic.

In one recent post called “An Open Experience,” she wrote about a friend who had attempted suicide after her marriage to a man she did not love fell apart. The two women took a weekend in Alexandria together. Alone in their hotel room, they shared a bottle of vodka and shared stories of their pasts. At the end of the night, her friend joined

her in her bed. Wahda recounts how she was joyous, but confused, because her feelings were deep.

“Before, I was looking at my relationships with women as kind of an experiment, or a mirror, through which I wondered about myself,” she wrote. “Does what pleases me please them as well? How do I look when I am having an orgasm? I spent so much effort to look outside of the box, but was never brave enough to escape from the box itself.”

One of Wahda’s devoted readers is Raouf Mos’ad, an erotic writer in Arabic who lives in the Netherlands. “The good thing about this blog is that it opens the door to everyone,” he commented on the site. “Accordingly each one finds himself completely comfortable here.”

Sherine Zaki, a young corporate lawyer, writes in English on Forsoothsayer, <http://forsoothsayer.blogspot.com/> about her daily life and thoughts in a funny, tongue-in-cheek way: she counts American humorists Erma Bombeck and David Sedaris among her inspirations. Educated at an American school in Kuwait, and a graduate of law school in Canada, she started her blog in February 2005. “Don’t expect me to be polite. This is my refuge from the social demands of the outside world,” she warns on her site.

Sherine, who describes herself as a “liberal, Westernized person” writes in a lite, Bridget-Jones diary style, referring to her boyfriend as M. and her workplace a Large Corporate Law Firm. “I effing hate my job. I have absolutely no reason to do so, but I

still do,” she wrote in a recent post. “The bathrooms here are really nice and I have my own phone and office supplies...But NO INTERNET. This galls me to the bone.”

Sherine can also get serious. For example, she recently complained that social pressure on women to veil to protect themselves against street harassment does not take into account the fact that some 10 percent of Egyptians—including her—are Christians. “I’ve always liked the fact that even though I’m a minority in my country, I’m not a visible one. That, alas, is fast ceasing to be the case—in a country where difference is never tolerated.”

A Limit To Expression

Though they agree that the Internet has given them unparalleled freedom to express themselves, female bloggers in Egypt know there may be consequences for what they write. Their fear is sometimes social; non-anonymous bloggers like Nermeena say they have to watch what they write now because they know their friends are reading. But there can also be criminal penalties for writing openly in Egypt, even in informal publications like personal websites.

Woman blogger Asmaa Ali, whose political blog is called Details, (tafseel.blogspot.com) was arrested last May 7. Her crime was protesting the detention of campaigners who took part in a sit-in supporting greater independence for Egypt’s

judiciary. She was kept in prison for just under a month. Four male bloggers were also arrested and held for a month to six weeks.

Asmaa and the other bloggers were arguably jailed not for their blogs, but for their off-line, real-world political activities. But some witnesses to their arrests claim that security forces specifically targeted the bloggers, while letting other protestors go, said Elijah Zarwan, the Cairo-based researcher for Human Rights Watch. And one blogger currently in detention, 22-year-old Abdulkarim Nabeel Sulaiman from Alexandria, appears to have been arrested purely for what he wrote on his blog.

Kareem, as he is known, was a law student until 2005 at Al Azhar, Egypt's highest institute of Sunni Muslim learning. The administration expelled him after he criticized his teachers and said the Egyptian government would finish "in the dustbin of history." Administrators then alerted state security to his blog, which contained articles they claimed "throw suspicion at Islam and criticize some of its symbols," according to a website, <http://freekareem.org/>, calling for Kareem's release.

Kareem has been charged with defaming the president, incitement to hate Islam and "highlighting inappropriate aspects that harm the reputation of Egypt and spreading them to the public," according to his supporters. As of this writing, he was being held for 30 days pending further investigation. The government has not commented publicly on the matter.

“I actually think it’s the bloggers who write about religion and sexuality—culturally sensitive issues that could upset Al Azhar and other conservative institutions—that are more at risk than people who write about politics,” says Al Islam, who was arrested along with Asmaa Ali last May and spent 45 days in prison. He figures that the Egyptian government has gotten used to political criticism through Egyptian opposition newspapers such as *Al Masry Al Youm* and *Al Dustour* —which print anti-regime articles daily and are only occasionally penalized.

“The main no-go area for bloggers is anything that can be seen as inflaming Christian-Muslim tensions, whether by criticizing Christianity or Islam. All the recent cases of arrests of Egyptians for online activities had to do with this subject,” Zarwan said.

Egypt ranks a low 133 out of 168 countries in a 2006 global press freedom index compiled by Reporters Without Borders. The organization also recently labeled Egypt an “enemy of the Internet” due to its recent arrests of pro-democracy bloggers.

“Until we have legislation that truly allows us freedom of thought and speech, our personal safety is going to continue to be at risk,” said blogger Nora Younis. But, she added, “I still think more Internet activism is the next stage for the Egyptian opposition. The streets are becoming more and more dangerous, and the Internet is still safer.”

Shining Light on the Private

By any measure, the Egyptian blogosphere remains tiny. Egypt has nearly 79 million people, and just .003% of them blog. Regular readership is also modest; Al Islam says about 45,000 readers visit his blog aggregator daily and link through it to Egyptian blogs—he estimates a total regular blog leadership of some 100,000. Nermeena has had a total of 50,000 visits to her blog in its history; Isis records just 2,000.

But the number of blogs is growing exponentially, doubling every six months, according to statistics kept by Al Islam and other bloggers. And blogging has become a focus of research and scholarly observation because it remains one of the most open arenas of expression in Egyptian public life. Anyone with basic computer knowledge and access to an Internet connection can start a blog, regardless of political opinions, gender, and age. As a result, the blogosphere is remarkably diverse; there are Islamists and homosexuals, liberals and Arab nationalists. And the high rate of female participation shows that Egyptian women have much to say that the male-dominated, state-managed mainstream media sector is missing.

Egyptian women bloggers are breaking new ground, often by challenging cultural assumptions in Egypt that anything that goes against traditional social mores should be kept private. By making their personal thoughts public, they are adding complexity to the concept of femininity in Egypt. Their musings are read by men and women, who then

engage in dialogues online of a sort generally possible only among the most intimate of friends. As a semi-public, semi-public medium, blogging seems uniquely suited to breach the public-private divide in Egyptian society. “People do things in Egypt but they never tell—even to themselves! I believe that we need to break all these taboos. To speak freely and openly is the only way to change reality. So I started with myself,” wrote bisexual blogger Wahda Tania in an email interview.

Egyptian bloggers are well-organized, and many meet off-line as well, forming friendships and networks that go beyond the virtual. This contributes to the construction of activist networks which challenge traditional conceptions that some issues should be the realm of women’s activism, other of men’s. “Women are going more often to political protests, and we are going to the sexual harassment protests. So we are helping each other,” blogger Sandmonkey said.

Isis is motivated by a kind of utopian hope: she said she is optimistic that once private and shameful subjects—like drug use among young women—are exposed to the light of the public sphere, they can no longer be denied, and therefore must be dealt with. Whether blogs can have that kind of real-world impact remains to be seen. But Isis and other bloggers also stressed that there is a sense of agency and empowerment in just being able to write, even if nobody very important reads it. The process of writing, after all, helps to hone and pinpoint thoughts, which in turn creates better thinkers. And this, some bloggers say, strengthens the likelihood of eventual social and political change.

“It’s easy to speak about issues, but hard to write them down. When you try to write, it makes you think through the issue better,” said 25-year-old Mozn Hassan, who co-authors an Arabic blog (www.tabooahat.blogspot.com) with another woman and two men. Wahda Tania agreed. “The Internet is a great tool to teach people how to express themselves and how to fight for their ideas,” she wrote.

Sharon Otterman has spent the last year and a half researching and writing articles about women and political reform in Cairo. Her articles have been published by the San Francisco Chronicle, The Christian Science Monitor, The Washington Times, and United Press International. A Fulbright scholarship winner, she holds a Masters in International Affairs from Columbia University .