

## Cyber infidelity in Egypt's virtual world

Twenty-three-year-old Waleed uses the Internet to catch up on the news, check the latest football scores and also meet women. His justification is simple. "It is difficult in my town to meet a girl. Assiut is very conservative," said the single Egyptian male, who is studying medicine at the faculty in his hometown south of the capital. He asked that his last name be withheld. "There you can only say good morning to a girl in the street."

The World Wide Web has indeed opened doors for the doctor-to-be, providing him with the opportunity to chat with single women online. Three such cyber exchanges in fact led to face-to-face meetings. Waleed still goes online regularly in the hope that one day he will eventually meet his future wife.

The popularity of the Internet and other digital technologies is on the rise in Egypt, causing some critics to question whether the digital revolution will lead to a sexual revolution in the traditionally conservative Egyptian society.

Ghada Lotfi, a training consultant at [The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights](#), is convinced that there is indeed a connection between the use of cyber technology, infidelity and the rate of divorce in Egypt. "Of course, of course, they are all related," said Lotfi, pointing out though that there are still no official statistics to support this correlation. "We receive many complaints from women who want a divorce because their husbands are meeting other women in chat rooms and cheating on their wives."

According to the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, in 2007 an Egyptian couple files for divorce every six minutes, with a third of marriages in Egypt breaking up in the first year.

"Most of the time my clients are facing marital problems, and they come to me when they are on the brink of divorce," said Abier Barbari, an Egyptian psychologist who has been practicing as a private counselor in Cairo since 2001. Her patients vary in age between their mid twenties and fifties and range from the average to the very affluent, influential, and Westernized Egyptian. "It is definitely a common complaint that the husband is getting his sexual satisfaction through the Internet, from chatting or from porno sites," said Barbari, adding that this trend plays a factor in the breakup of relationships. "Women have been living with this and now are talking about it," she

added. "It is becoming more and more prominent that the man uses the Internet to satisfy his sexual desires."

In a conformist society like Egypt, opposite sexes generally interact and mingle only within the limited confines of socially acceptable norms. However with the growing use of cell phone messaging, as well as the attraction of anonymous Web chat rooms and electronic social networking websites like Facebook, the once customary barriers dividing men and women are eroding.

Mary Habib, a communications student at the American University in Cairo (AUC) in her junior year, spends a daily average of five hours online, sending e-mails, updating her two blogs and her Facebook account, as well as chatting in virtual rooms. She has already received a number of propositions from men she did not know but refused to act on any of them. "I never trust these men because you don't know who you are talking to," said Habib.

According to a recent study conducted by the Egyptian Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center, about 40 percent of the country's internet users admit to having at least one "deceitful" cyber relationship.

Today even cyber sex is not uncommon. Through the Internet, with just a few keyboard clicks, men and women can connect easily, quickly, and anonymously. "In any chatting room on Yahoo in Arabic, you will find men and women discussing sex openly," said Maha Fayed, a mass communications student at AUC. "The man looks for a woman for one night," said Fayed, adding that even prices are settled online. The array of cyber rooms that welcome new members "interested in meeting new people for online chat" is a clear indicator of the growing demand for online love. A basic search for "free Egypt chat sites" brings up over 5,000,000 results.

Twenty-two-year-old Mostafa, a single pharmacy student from Assiut said the sole purpose of his chatting online is that a virtual relationship can lead to a real date. "There is a strategy for each woman, there are fixed steps," he said, wishing to withhold his family name. If the woman online agrees to see him, Mostafa never refuses even though he admits regarding such "easy" women with disrespect. Yet he likes to brag to his friends about the possible outcome.

Some critics blame the new media as one of the causes for the alarming increase in sexual harassment in Egypt. In 2008, the ECWR found in the first exhaustive study ever to be conducted on sexual harassment in Egypt, that more than 60 percent of the

Egyptian women and nearly 100 percent of foreign women who took part in the study, claimed to have experienced some form of sexual harassment in Egypt.

[Egyptian sexologist Dr. Heba Qotb](#) works as a marriage counselor and sex therapist in her downtown clinic. While she encourages young married couples to be more sexually active, she also warns them about promiscuity. “You have nowhere else to get your sexuality but from your spouse,” said Qotb in a past interview on CNN.

With Internet World Stats showing Egypt’s internet users jumping from 450,000 in 2000 to more than 12,000,000 last year and the growing number of Egyptians adopting mobile telephones and subscribing to satellite television, sexual promiscuity is even reaching the most remote and more conservative rural areas.

Khaled is a Cairene who owns a farm and agricultural land in the Delta. He says many of the men living in the village have pornographic channels installed on their television receiver. “They are very sexually frustrated which is why they watch these movies. Everything here is forbidden, *haram*, *haram*,” said Khaled, who wished to remain partially anonymous.

After viewing the salacious images, some men says Khaled then go home and attempt to reenact what they have just seen, with their wives – something that is not often well received. “These movies are so provocative and these people are so ignorant that of course it has a great deal of effect on them,” Khaled said.