Role of Social Media in the Empowerment of Arab Women

by

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Abstract

In the Middle East, the lack of press freedom means people are unable to receive information, let alone analytic and interpretative functionalism of mass media. If Arab Spring is any lesson, the right to information is vital for political participation and socio-economic development. The path traveled by nationalists and activists in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, plus movements in Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, and conservative Saudi Arabia, indicates that women have awaken to exploiting unconventional media to combat discrimination and inequality imbedded in their societies. Women are aware of the tight control on information by government-owned press that has routinely ignored promoting women's issues, including education and positions of authority. Women have, heretofore, lacked a voice to articulate their plight until they discovered virtual media. They use Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to transmit messages to empower women. As a result, Arab women have marginalized inequality in society, education, and professional opportunities.

Key Words

Press freedom, agenda setting, participation, equality, public agenda, technology

Introduction

It is pointless arguing that women do not have comparable skills when it comes to national development. That women must be empowered in order to be productive in their own land cannot be discredited either. The fact of the matter, however, is that women in the Arab World are largely excluded from full participation in national development. They hold fewer positions than men in the higher echelons of government, politics, and private sector. This condition deprives them of access to decision-making on issues that concern them.

BBC (2005) reports the number of women members of parliament (MPs) in the Arab World doubled in 2005. But the International Parliamentary Union (IPU) says only 6.5 percent of the region's MPs were women, although representation inched upward from 3.5 percent in 2000. Jordan, Tunisia, and Morocco contributed the most. An IPU survey showed that the proportion of women MPs throughout the world had risen from 13.4 percent to 15.7 percent. In 2005, women in Arab parliaments were represented as follows: Tunisia - 43 out of 189; Morocco - 38 out of 595; Egypt - 31 out of 718; Syria - 30 out of 250; Algeria - 28 out of 533; Jordan - 13 out of 165; Oman - 11 out of 138; Bahrain - 6 out of 80; Lebanon - 3 out of 128; Yemen - 1 out of 301; Kuwait - 4 of 56; Saudi Arabia - 0 representation; United Arab Emirates - 0 representation; Libya, Qatar, Palestinian territories - No figures available.

Bird (2005) takes a particular interest in writing about culture, with special emphasis on gender issues. Bird says discussions on issues facing women in the Arab World tend to be monochromatic, often completely overlooking the diversity in the lifestyles and conditions of women. The media, the author regrets, have bought into stereotypical depictions of the Arab women. As a consequence, women are

portrayed as weak, passive, and always veiled. Furthermore, stereotypes are presented to fit all Arab nations, a notion that is far from the truth. In Tunisia, for example, wearing a veil is forbidden. However, women are yet to achieve any kind of equity in the political or professional spheres. Bird (2005) holds the view that, the condition of Arab women is inextricably linked with the United States (US) policies in the region, as well as economic exploitation and sanctions.

There are Arab women in Israel who do not fare any better, despite the fact that Israel is considered, by the West, as the most democratic country in the Middle East. BBC (2009) mentions the Association for Civil Rights, which states that contrary to existing law, women there are routinely victims of discrimination. A study conducted by the association shows that Arab Israelis, compared with Jews, hold disproportionately few government jobs, receive inferior education, and are more harshly treated by the criminal justice system.

Although many governments in the Middle East require that all children receive, at least, five years of education and provide free education through high school, the rapid growth of school-age populations in the region is posing a challenge for many governments. Between 1986 and 1996, the number of Iranians between ages 5 and 19 grew by 20 percent, straining the capacity of the country's schools. In Egypt, the government has succeeded in curtailing the adult literacy rate from 60 percent in 1980 to 50 percent in 1990. Other Middle East countries have witnessed the same trend. Countries with gains in reducing illiteracy, such as Jordan and Tunisia, have seen success in their efforts to provide skill development and career opportunities for women.

Methodology

The purpose of the present research was to examine developments in the Arab media from the epoch of government control to the new era of virtual access and practice. Of interest was to ascertain the various ways that social media have served, and will continue to address, women's rights issues.

Secondary sources included books in library holdings, online materials, newspapers, and magazine articles. Secondary sources proved helpful in directing and analyzing relevant literature on the subject under investigation. The author's work and living experience in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), plus travels to Oman, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, provided experiential learning and direct contact with primary sources.

The present research attempted to address five topics. The first topic looked at women representation in parliaments of select Middle East countries. The second topic dealt with the external pressure placed on Middle East countries to adopt policies that provide equal opportunities for their citizens. The third topic looked at activities in advocating women's rights in light of new media technologies. The fourth topic examined the progress made in the empowerment of women through social media. The fifth topic explored the importance of continued exploitation of social media within the context of media convergence.

A theoretical communication framework was taken into account. The hypodermic needle, very much alive prior to the advent of social media, formed a part of literature analysis and interpretation. The two-step flow received similar treatment. Agenda setting was considered, too, in view of the women's efforts to articulate their causes to the wider public. Uses and gratifications theory was also at play to narrow the gender gap in the male-dominated world of opportunities.

Pressure for Reform

In 2003 president George W. Bush announced a Middle East trade plan that included the empowerment of women as part of US free-trade area leading to 2013. The plan was inclusive of a drive for peace in the region. BBC (2003) reports that the president intended to bring the Middle East into "an expanding circle of opportunity" and to reward nations that pursued broad political and economic reforms. In a major speech at the University of South Carolina (US), Bush expressed his desire to see nations benefit from economic prosperity that is prevalent in many other parts of the world. "The combined GDP of all Arab countries is smaller than that of Spain," he said.

The 2004 Alexandria (Egypt) statement has become a pivotal counterpoint for the empowerment of women. Entitled, "Arab Reform Issues: Vision and Implementation," it was formulated at the conclusion of the conference on Issues of Reform in the Arab World, and in collaboration with the Arab Academy for science and Technology, Arab Business Council, and Arab Women's Organization for Human Rights. Participants called for a free press, audio-visual, and electronic media.

In the final analysis, the partnership between media as change agents on the one hand, and national institutes on the other, was recognized as pivotal in bringing about transparency in public life, stamp out corruption, establish good governance, and guarantee women's rights. Lang (2010) remembers the words of Diala Al-Haij Aref, Syrian minister of social affairs and labor, who said, "Political empowerment of women in the Arab world sets new signs, and women will make the most powerful change to the economic crises."

Conference chair and president of Arab International Women's Forum (AIWF), Haifa Fahoum Al-Kaylani, said the organization aims at achieving progress and to

advance gender equilibrium in order to foster opportunities for women as basic human rights. Al-Kaylani admitted that the question was not whether women are more efficient than men. Rather, it is to acknowledge that 52 percent of the world's humans are women. Emma Bonio, Italy's former senate vice president, deplored the lack of empowerment for women. Bonio urged women to recognize the strength of empowerment and to be perpetually ambitious.

In 2002, Beirut (Lebanon) hosted an expert group meeting on "participation and access to the media and the impact of media use for the advancement and empowerment of women." Referring to the meeting, Obeidat (2002) favors in increase in access to power and decision- making within media organizations where women's influence is hardly existent. Obeidat is quick to accept the reality that women face obstacles in exploiting the advantages presented by information technology.

Nonetheless, she summons women to be unrelenting in engaging social media to pursue empowerment so as to form links and to network with each other more effectively. Obeidat is pleased to note that the region's movement has seen an increase in the use of social media to put forward women's advocacy strategy. The Beirut conference concluded with a number of recommendations. They are:

- To launch an Internet-based information service featuring information and communication on women's issues across the Arab World,

- To develop cooperative approaches and partnerships exploring applications of the new information and communication technology for social and economic empowerment of women,

- To organize regional and international conferences, workshops, forums, and other events to address issues pertaining to women and media,

- To provide training for women on database and resource management, and

- To disseminate information to women across the world through the Website and electronic mailing lists.

Another conference was held in Alexandria (Egypt) in November 2010, to explore practical approaches to the use of social media in empowering women's entrepreneurship as part of Youth Leader's Visitors Program (YLVP). The program is a module that concentrates on sharing, networking, and social media training for young women opinion leaders in the Middle East and North Africa. Javerira Rizvi Kabani, program manager at the Swedish Institute, describes the conference as a forum to give young women a chance to lay the foundation for meaningful employment. Participants also discussed ways to support Internet bloggers focusing on social media to bring about positive change

Nasr (2009) does not shy away from a region she calls home. She is quick to comment that the Middle East teaches minorities some tough lessons and shapes them in ways that might surprise one. Admitting that conservative patriarchal society is expected to keep people under the thumb of tradition, culture, tribal, and religious beliefs, she argues that too much control of a people can be counterproductive.

Nasr has learned that a woman only lives as someone's daughter, sister, wife, or mother. Her opinion does not matter; it is not required. Her emotions do not count; she has no rights, except those granted to her by a male. Indeed, there is a popular Arabic saying: "A good woman has a mouth that eats, but not one that speaks."

Nasr's female members were quite active in issues pertaining to women's rights in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. But even then, women's rights were always controlled by men's approval.

Access to Virtual Media

Women, too, want to be citizens. They want access to information. They want to be social media managers. Actually, they want to be in the business of message development and dissemination. Cable Network News (CNN) has chronicled examples of Middle East women taking steps in connecting with the world using the Internet.

In Saudi Arabia, Hana Hajjar draws pictures depicting how a woman feels when her husband takes a second, or even third wife. She draws how the man's action rips apart the woman's heart. Islam accepts polygamy. But there is a phrase that men conveniently ignore: "You can take multiple wives; but if you want to be fair, marry one," says the holy Muslim book. While not many in Saudi Arabia might care about how Hajjar feels, the world outside the Kingdom is paying attention and expressing empathy.

The online traffic witnessed in the aftermath of Iran's 2009 elections saw an outpour of support for Iranian reformists through social media. In this case, social media energized activists and helped spread the message to the far-reaching corners of the world. Other stories that have captured the world's attention are bloggers jailed in Egypt and Saudi Arabia for speaking up against the status quo in their countries, and daring to demand social justice and political reform. It also shows how the world is being educated on what is going on inside the most conservative and police-controlled countries in the region through bloggers who refuse to be intimidated or silenced. Nor are they deterred by the possibility of jail or harassment.

The Lebanese Association of Women Researchers (Bahithat) organized a conference at the American University of Beirut in 2010, under the theme, "A Cornerstone of Arab Feminism." The conference drew participants from the entire region, including Iran and Iraq. The conference was to promote online media activities by feminists, including Twitter and Facebook. Women were urged to use social media to speak out, instead of waiting for government officials to grant permission.

Even Jordan's Queen Rania has recognized the impact of social media. In 2008, as she sat behind her enormous office desk, three cameras kept rolling during the recording of a regularly transmitted YouTube appearance. As Jones (2008) recollects, Rania had posted seven video segments on the international virtual medium by March 2008. Rania encouraged interaction with viewers, asking them to forward stereotypes about Arab women, promising to set the record straight.

Keeping Tab on Success

Hilleary (2010) provides an array of positions and opinions, drawing chiefly from an interview she conducted with Mona Eltahawy, Egyptian-born columnist who writes about Middle Eastern political affairs for international newspapers. Hilleary conveys that social media are among the tools that ring optimism for the region, emphasizing that social media have given voice to the most marginalized groups, notably women. The game changer is social media, which have been instrumental in forcing women's issues to the public agenda. Through her writings, Mona Eltahawy has enabled authorities to try and convict police officers for such crimes as torture and wrongful conduct.

Social media were forefront in disseminating information about a hunger strike in Saudi Arabia. In Egypt, social media raised awareness about sexual harassment

against Egyptian women in public, leading to parliamentary action to define and criminalize sexual harassment. Social media were also responsible for exposing police corruption in Morocco. Emphasizing the impact of social media in the empowerment of women, Eltahawy believes that social media are more than just stress relief and venting.

Saudi laws and regulations are not easy on Internet use. Among categories banned are anything contravening a fundamental principle or legislation; infringing the sanctity of Islam and Sharia; breaching public decency; anything contrary to the state or its system; reports or news damaging to the Saudi Arabian armed forces done without approval of competent authorities; publication of official state laws, agreements or statements, before they are officially made public; anything which is damaging to the dignity of heads of state or heads of accredited diplomatic missions in the kingdom, or harms relations with those countries; any false information ascribed to state officials or those private/public domestic institutions and bodies, liable to cause them or their offices harm or damage their integrity; the propagation of subversive ideas or disruption of public order or disputes among citizens; anything liable to promote or incite crime, or advocate, violence against others in anyway; and any slanderous or libelous material against individuals.

But by the end of 2005, blogging was banned due to pressure on the government from religious authorities. To their credit, bloggers have adopted migrating tactics to avoid filtering or harassment by religious police. Women bloggers have links to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, making access and information sharing easy.

Women have gained political power, too. Benazir Bhutto was elected prime minister of Pakistan, 1988-1990, and 1993-1996. Although she faced politically

motivated corruption charges, she had broken the grid to male dominance of a top position in the country. The prime minister consequently went on self-imposed exile to London. The most remarkable aspect, from the point of view of women's empowerment, is that she wore a hijab. Taylor (1994) says women who wear a hijab want to make an identity of their own, and to retain what they consider to be their tradition.

In Saudi Arabia, Princess Lolwah Al-Faisal is standing up for women's rights. An advocate of women's rights, she is head of a prominent women's college in the Kingdom. Among the causes she champions are the right for women to drive, the right to education, and the right to decide whether or not to wear a veil. Buzbee (2007) confirms that Al-Faisal sees the veil as a way to enable women, who are suppressed in their country, to see the power in the veil, and to understand it is not a means of oppression. Thus, the princess stands behind her veil, along with the empowerment beneath it and authority bestowed upon her.

Iranian Zahra Rahnavard made political waves when, as spouse of the 2009 presidential candidate, Mir Hossein Rahnavard, she found herself engrossed in the campaign. Her open appearances and public statements were an entirely new undertaking. Freeman (2009) recounts that she brought the "Zahra factor" into the campaign. Although she had not previously run for office, Zahra quickly learned the ropes of political astuteness. Today, she is in favor of women becoming politically active. Zahra continues to urge women to become involved and to advocate for repeal or changes in law that impede the empowerment of women. The changes that Zahra has articulated have had an influence in other parts of the Middle East.

In 2003, the hopes and expectations of Iraqi women were high because women had become quite active. With political freedom came the freedom to organize,

become activists, and learn how to take advantage of social media. Literally, in every city, one would easily find groups of 20, 30, 40 or more women's groups that have realized that they are a part of the movement for democratic change. These women's groups have learned about the importance of organization and coordination. They have harnessed social media to reach their ends, making it possible to campaign for the women's 40 percent quota representation in the new government. They also plus participated in drafting the new constitution. Consequently, 25 percent of seats in parliament are reserved for women. By 2003, at least two women judges served on the Appeals Court of the Islamic Republic.

During the May 10, 2012, Algerian legislative election, women won almost 33 percent of the seats, making the national assembly the most gender-balanced in the region. Women hold about 145 of the new national assembly's 462 seats. Before the election, women made up only seven percent of the legislative body. US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, hailed the high number of women elected, while UN Secretary-General, Ba Ki-moon, welcomed the increased representation of women in the new parliament. Feminists now look forward to the hard work that lies ahead of the women. The lawmakers are expected to address two issues close to women's hearts: a law to grant equality to women and a bill to criminalize domestic violence.

Creativity in the use of social media has crept into the arena of empowerment. In Saudi Arabia, it is an all-female rock band. Who would believe that a rock band would play in conservative Saudi Arabia? Well, such is the case. The women in the band wear the "abaya," (top to bottom) as tradition mandates. In effect, the band women cannot be arrested because they cannot be recognized! They are, indeed, saved by the veiled abaya. McEvers (2008) acknowledges that playing by the rules allows the women to enjoy a certain freedom in Saudi Arabia. It helps them avoid

unwanted attention. In the past, rock bands have been arrested during performances and persecuted. McElroy (2005) agrees that the group has an influence on Saudi culture by showing there is nothing wrong with expressing oneself without taking off the covering.

Kuwaiti women have made gargantuan gains. In April 2012, a court annulled a government order barring women from entry-level positions at the Ministry of Justice. Human Rights Watch had filed the complaint on behalf of six women on grounds of discrimination. The ministry had, in July 2011, advertised in the local media that it was accepting applications for entry-level legal researchers, a first-step to become a prosecutor. In particular, the advertisement stated that only male applications would be considered.

In its ruling, the court said the ministry had violated the Kuwaiti constitution and international treaties ratified by Kuwait. The ruling is consistent with Article 29 of Kuwait constitution, which states: "All people are equal in human dignity and in public rights and duties before the law, without distinction to race, origin, language, or religion."

The ruling in favor of women's rights contradicts a similar case in April 2010, in which an administrative court had ruled that, Kuwait's constitution (which cites Islam as the state religion and Sharia as main source of legislation) prevented women from holding prosecutorial positions. The 2012 court decision aligns with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Kuwait ratified in 1994, and which calls for measures to eliminate discrimination against women.

Meanwhile, women's rights took another leap forward in 2005, when Kuwaiti women won the right to vote and to run for public office. Consequently, four women

were elected to parliament in 2009. CEDAW has not relented. In its 2011 committee meeting, the organization called on Arab governments to systematically review the provisions in laws and regulations and to repeal or amend sex-gender-based discriminatory provisions.

Beyond the cube (2012) portrays Morocco where there is a heavy reliance on social media to communicate and interact with the female population. In fact, over 30 million of the people (half population) are Internet users, with women making up 33.5 percent of all users. In recent years, measures have been taken to improve the status of women, including laws to reduce gender inequality. In 1995, a revision to Morocco's commercial code provided women opportunities to start a business or enter into contractual employment without the husband's authorization. Furthermore, current legislation permits women to have control over their property and money.

Some of the greatest gains fall in the area of education. In 2002-2003, 50 percent of students admitted to universities in Iran were women, while two-thirds of those admitted to universities in Kuwait were women. A 2002 Zogby International survey conducted in seven Arab countries found that half of respondents considered the empowerment of women's rights to be a high priority. Significantly, the strongest support for change came from Saudi Arabia, a country where women need it the most.

Clarion Call

There is no denying that social media have influenced the empowerment of women in the Arab World. What is equally important is to ensure that the gains made are not only maintained, but also propelled through continuously utilizing social media. This is a clarion call to activists and women's rights advocates interconnected by cyberspace technology.

Ayish (2011) recounts many debates about negative representations of women in the public sphere during the past four decades, which had consistently dehumanized and commercialized women in conventional print and electronic media. To fight these representations, women and support groups have repeatedly appealed to media executives and journalists to demonstrate more responsibility when dealing with women's issues. But these appeals have had little success. To take matters into their hands, women have concluded that they must be active, not passive.

In this vein, writes Ayish, the 2000 millennium ushered in new media technologies with numerous information and communication capabilities. In 2008, the Arab Women Media Strategy was launched in Dubai under the patronage of Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak, chair of UAE General Women's Union. The Arab women's strategy includes media projects, training, production support, and advice on social media message conceptualization and dissemination. One aim of the media strategy is to reverse negative cultural attitudes and skewed media practices that have stifled women's access to education and career opportunities.

A conference on Arab Women working in the media was held in Amman, Jordan, from October 5-8, 2010. Participants noted, with regret, that Arab women who held positions of authority in the television industry stood at three. In Palestine, 43 percent of the graduates from media colleges are women. However, men working in the media sector make up 80 percent of the workforce. In Saudi Arabia, women constitute a meager eight percent of the media workforce.

Naomi (2002) laments the status quo and looks forward to a bright future with a glow of equal opportunity. Cognizant of the importance of equal access to media, she calls for women's empowerment by making use of social media and cyberface to

connect dispersed communities. Gittler (1999) concurs when he says the Internet has the capacity "by perpetuating the inequality squelching diversity or fostering exclusivity."

There is a consensus to maintain and solidify access and use of social media as tools for women's empowerment. Although the approach may differ among media strategists, media practitioners, and packaging of information, the rallying point is constant: To dismantle cultural inequality and to pave the way for justice and fair consideration/representation in business ventures or opportunities.

Beyond the Cube (2011) has come up with an approach that focuses on the present and can be implemented within women's groups. The cube makes the following getting-back-to-basics notations concerning social media and entrepreneurship:

- Face reality that e-mail is not going away; it has 100 percent employee collaboration and communication. The ability to post social content, receive notification, receive activity digests, must be associated with e-mail and short message system (SMS) and, where feasible, Outlook,

- Recognize that collaboration extends beyond the four walls of the organization because we use multiple tools and multiple networks,

- Collaboration is uncertain. Therefore, content and collaboration need to flow across mobile, tablet, desktop, and laptop associated with one's use,

- Ubiquitous collaboration needs equal opportunity. For example, one using multiple tools, and multiple networks, can add one more tool to the "mix" to make life easier,

- Intranet should be associated with the social platform. If a certain Website is the place to get news, the social platform should seamlessly be an integral part of the experience, and

- Focus on providing a "natural" collaborative experience; do not create numerous social tools. Rather, focus on the basics so they can be mastered. If the trend is accurate, users will move rapidly from online, and interact more pervasively using social media.

A future with a tone on the empowerment of women is incomplete without advancement in education. It is said that education is to the soul what marble is to the sculptor. Various global trends pose special changes to women who are illiterate or have limited education. While the small and medium-size enterprises create opportunities, women need requisite education and training to take full advantage of the business and/or career opportunities.

Roudi-Fahimi and Moghadam (2003) laydown the following reasoning for education in women's empowerment and gender equality: (a) As female education rises, fertility, population growth, and infant and child mortality fall, while family health improves, (b) Increases in girls secondary school enrollment are associated with increases in women's participation in the labor force and their contribution to household and national income, (c) Women's increased earning capacity has a positive effect on child nutrition, (d) Daughters of educated mothers are more likely to be enrolled in school and to have higher levels of education attainment, and (e) Educated women are more politically active and better informed about their legal rights and how to exercise them.

Furthermore, education is mutually inclusive with women's reproductive choices and empowerment. Educated women generally want smaller families and make

better use of reproductive health and family planning information services in achieving desired family size. For instance, in 1995, Moroccan Women, with at least secondary education, had half as many children as women with no education. In Egypt, children born to mothers in the same year, and with no formal education, were more than twice as likely to die, compared with those born to mothers who had completed secondary school. According to the 2000 child mortality report by the Egyptian Department of Health services, Egyptian women with less education were less likely to receive antenatal care; only 30 percent of the mothers with no education received antenatal care, compared with 75 percent of those with a high school or college education.

Most women in the region know about modern contraception. However, more educated women tend to know more about a wider range of available methods and where to get them. In Egypt, 69 percent of married women between the age of 15 to 49, and who had completed secondary school, reported accessing family planning messages in newspapers and magazines, compared with 32 percent of those who had completed only primary school. Women with more education are also likely to discuss family planning issues with their husbands. An argument can be made that, women's ability to choose the timing of their births is key to the empowerment of women as individuals, mothers, and citizens.

The region has formed the New Arab Women Forum (NAWF) with scheduled conventions each year. Each year's participants are drawn from the private and public sectors, men who are supportive of women's rights, international organizations, and foundations supporting women's causes. In 2012, the fifth NAWF's convention was held in Beirut, Lebanon, under the theme, "Women and the

Arab Spring," with 500 participants from 22 Arab countries. Convention proceedings are placed on social media and interactive capabilities.

An eye on social media, NAWF has launched a new Website (www.nawforum.com). Visitors are able to provide feedback, interact with one another, and participate in discussions on social, economic, political, and cultural issues that pertain to women. One feature of the Website is the "Woman of the Week," designed to celebrate women's achievements by recognizing one success story within seven days. Selected female figures must have dedicated their lives to a cause in order to bring about positive change in their societies. Individuals are welcome to nominate one or more Arab females of any profession or age. Besides providing network capabilities, "Woman of the Week" culminates in the section of "Woman of the Year," to be honored during the following year's NAWF convention.

In the spirit of media convergence, the *Arab Woman & Business* (AWB), with offices in Lebanon, Dubai, and France, has taken on publishing news, analysis, commentaries, and features of women's empowerment. AWB aims at highlighting that, (a) There is no economic, social or political development in any society without a woman, (b) Most Arab countries have at least one female government minister and are today's chief executive officers (CEOs), professors, engineers, economists, marketers, pharmacists, doctors and successful entrepreneurs, (c) AWB magazine focuses on women's achievements in the Arab world and is managed by professional journalists and economists, (d) AWB magazine gives the world a wider perspective on business women in the Arab world, (e) AWB provides its readers with unique and professional content as well as opinion and editorials that focus on Arab women's achievements in the business sectors, (f) Every month AWB interviews prominent female leaders in the business community and reports on happenings and

events suitable for a business woman's agenda, and (g) AWB publishes newsworthy reports, business news and analysis of financial highlights, current affairs, and technology.

AWB currently has readership in seven Arab countries. These are Saudi Arabia: 12,000; UAE: 8,000; Qatar: 5,000; Jordan: 4,000; Bahrain: 4,000; Lebanon: 6,000; Kuwait: 3,500. Subscribers receive 7,500 copies; hotels 2,000; airlines 1,500; newsstands 21,000; events 4,000; and agencies/clients 6,000. In terms of gender, female readership accounts for 80 percent of the entire readership, while 20 percent of the readership is female. The age distribution for AWB's readership is as follows: 25-34 years: 28 percent; 35-49 years: 30 percent; 50-54 years: 24 percent; 50+ years: 15 percent. AWB is also published online with links to social media.

The first Miss Arab World pageant on November 11, 2009, in exotic Sharm El Sheikh (Egypt), and modeled after the Miss Universe Pageant, makes a statement that Arab women are beautiful and are not entirely suppressed. The pageant is more inclusive, allowing veiled and non-veiled women to compete alongside without having to compromise their values for events like swimwear competition. Instead, the contestants do the catwalk in their national costumes. Sixteen young women (18-24 years) from all over Arab countries competed for the title. They were judged on the basis of their looks, knowledge, and education. Mawadda Nour from Saudi Arabia won the title; Jessy Zaher from Lebanon was first runner up. As to why Mawadda Nour won, Hanan Nasr, pageant official, explained that, "Mawadda Nour exemplified a modest and beautiful young Arab female intellectual who is loved by all."

Hashim (2009) affirms that a beauty pageant is all about looks, adding that beauty is the result of works by beauticians and fashion experts. Thus, these touch-ups are applied to every beauty pageant, including the 2009 Miss Arab World

pageant, as part of a woman's empowerment. Contestants represent their countries as individuals and as women who love their culture. During the pageant, several dress styles were displayed, punctuated by willingness to expose more skin, as did Miss Lebanon and Miss Syria.

Results

Pageants do, however, fall short in cataloguing the progress made by Arab women in their march toward empowerment. Cann (2012) reports that 60 percent of the global economic gender gap has been closed in four areas: access to healthcare, access to education, political participation, and economic equality. A 2012 Global Gender Gap Study by the World Economic Forum reports progress made in education and the economy.

Of the 132 countries surveyed, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), at 107, continues to hold the top spot in the Arab world. UAE commands a higher than average parity on education, including a reverse gender gap on tertiary education where almost three times as many women are enrolled as men. Davies (2012) concurs that, in nearly two-thirds of Arab countries, there are more women than men attending university. "This a giant step," she states, "because it achieves of one of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals to eliminate gender disparity in all levels of education by 2015."

In contrast, Syria, on which data was collected before the outbreak of the current civil war, fell three places to 132. Saudi Arabia came below at 131, representing an improvement by ten percent from her score in 2006. Yemen stood at 135, earning the lowest ranking Arab country, and dropping from recorded progress since 2006. But in Lebanon, women make up 54 percent of university students, but only 26

percent of the labor force and eight percent legislators. Qatar has the second women enrollment in higher education at 63 percent, with a 93 percent literacy rate among women. On the other hand, women make up a meager 12 percent of the labor force, and seven percent legislators.

The low numbers in participatory governance show that the work in empowering women has to tread more milestones. Radsch (2012) remarks that, "The power of women is in their stories. They are not stories, they are real lives that, thanks to social media, we are able to share knowledge." Radsch reflects on the advent of social media as a blessing which, amidst cultural and historical impediments, brought to the world stage the plight of Saudi women who yearn to drive, but are not allowed.

Although not every woman can drive to the store to buy food or related items, it is not uncommon to find women who find it important to cook for self or family. Women have found social media to be instrumental in forming cook communities using social media. Aharoni (2013) writes that Arab women have discovered Facebook and learned that food is the subject that brings people together. "Through food, they talk to one another, express themselves and their creativity, which until now had only been seen in their private space," says Aharoni. In furtherance of the Arab culture, women use Facebook whereby, say, a picture of a table laden with pastries relates to the story of a family celebration. Likewise, a picture of a heart-shaped cake tells a love story without words. These food communities empower women to discover their common interests and to bond in other areas.

Khélifa (2012) notes the effect of social media on women's rights in the Arab world, emphasizing it forces all parties concerned to take a stance on issues important to women. Khélifa contends that social media bring about debate designed

to advance women's rights. "The goal now is a shift from 'state feminism to political feminism,'" she concludes.

Alwis (2012) proudly refers to Rwanda as an Arab country that has taken significant strides toward empowering women. Besides taking control of civil society (after the genocide) and governing institutions, women now constitute 50 percent of Rwanda's parliament. In Jordan, Al-Adwan (2012) has analyzed the influence of social media in advancing women's causes. Thus, the country has passed, modified, or adopted legislation to foster the rights of women, and has abolished discrimination against women. Politically, women currently make up ten percent of legislators in the Jordanian lower house, and eleven percent in the senate. Furthermore, women constitute 49 percent of public sector labor force.

Notwithstanding the gains made by women, Pomed Wire (2012) recalls a statement by US Secretary Hillary Clinton, in which she bemoaned the systematic degradation and dishonor of Egyptian women. Speaking about the Middle East, Clinton said "women were harassed, arrested, tortured, or otherwise ill-treated in gender-specific ways because they took part in pro-democracy demonstrations." In Bahrain, women have ben arrested and tortured, and in Yemen, authorities summoned male relatives to control their female family members.

Conclusion

Despite evident and catalogued cases of degradation, sanctioned ill-treatment and discrimination, women's empowerment has seen remarkable gains thanks to social media. In fact, women's empowerment has even attracted global recognition. According to Pomed Wire, US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and First Lady, Michelle Obama, in 2012, hosted the International Women of Courage Awards in Washington, DC. The event was to recognize and honor women who have played a

role in empowering women. Among award recipients were Samar Badawi, the first Saudi Arabian woman to sue the Saudi government for the right to choose her own husband.

And in 2011, the Nobel Peace Prize Committee decided to reward three women for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women, and for women's rights to full participation and peace-building work. Among the laureates was Tawakkoi Karman, a Yemeni activist. In her acceptance lecture, Karman affirmed that, "the solution to women's issues can only be achieved in a free democratic society in which human energy is liberated, the energy of both women and men."

In particular, the number of Arab women using social media rose sharply by November 2011. Tomlin (2012) is quick to assert that 36 million users were associated with Facebook and Twitter during this period. Tomlin indicates there is a strong belief, among women in the region, that social media play a significant role in enhancing their participation in economic, social, and political life. This, Tomlin believes, permits women to acquire self-expression as a means to promote social change. "Women are so embedded in social media in their lives that they use it seamlessly in their campaigns," says Tomlin.

Despite these gains, history attests that Arab women have undergone nearly insurmountable obstacles in their quest for participation in the development of their countries. There are those women who do not have the nerve to seek change for fear of retribution. Other women have voiced opinions within friends and family circles. There are women who want to do something about it. The latter have concluded that change cannot be doled out. It must be demanded. They have become women's rights advocates or torchbearers, forming fearless groups and

taking pride in the risk involved to right the wrongs of the past embedded in culture and tradition.

Haidar (2012) enthusiastically champions women's empowerment, purposefully and meticulously drawing a page from the spirits exemplified in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain. Haidar wants to keep in check the progress made so there is no reincarnation of the status quo. Using social media under the slogan, "Together for free, independent and fearless women in the Arab world," Haidar advocates equality for women via-à-vis male counterparts. In Haidar's opinion, laws that dehumanize women and discriminate against them should be abolished without further delay. The activist, and others in a similar vein, will find naturally and geographically akin allies.

In the women's favor is the common culture that binds the Arad world. It is fortuitous to develop a strategy in, say, the UAE, and replicate it in Kuwait without the arduous task of making substantive changes. This prevalence also enhances the design and dissemination of messages tailored toward the empowerment of women. Moreover, the audiences share similar values and characteristics, as evidenced by the tone of deliberations at women's conferences held within and without the region. Women have recognized the imperative to harness social media their empowerment.

To sustain gains made, and to assure future gains, women's rights groups and advocates must encourage their ranks to acquire education and necessary training to produce qualitative social media content to articulate their causes. While education is the backbone of women's empowerment, the quality of education is equally important. In addressing gender education, educational systems should be sensitive to the specific needs of girls and women. A recurring drawback is fact that curricula and teaching materials reinforce traditional roles that deny women

opportunities for full and equal participation in society. Since media work in the context of convergence, and provide capabilities for multi-device utilization, social media and the Internet can be customized to maximize females' educational experiences.

There is no denying that Arab countries are undergoing changes that would benefit all of their citizens. The time for turning a blind eye to the inequalities in the region is over. It has been replaced by overt recognition that women, who have endured discrimination and literally barred from acquiring education and access to competitive careers are, indeed, citizens of the soil. The pursuit of national development is not a selective process, but one that is all-inclusive, and in which all citizens are given equal opportunity. It is only when women no longer feel discriminated against will they seek education, aspire to positions of responsibility, and perform maximally because their empowerment will lead to productive contribution to socio-economic, cultural, and political development.

Above all, women must be actively engaged in acquiring technological skills to take advantage of social media, integrating the likes of Facebook, Twitter, and almighty Internet with devices such as smartphones, iPads, laptop and desktop computers. The impetus for the empowerment of women could not have come at a more opportune period in history. Social media have been born when governments, despite their desire, are totally disempowered to totally control or regulate social media. Women's rights groups and advocates would only have themselves to blame if information tailored to concerned causes is not professionally conceptualized, packaged, and disseminated. Information will also enlighten those who are dogmatic to the status quo, eradicate ignorance and stereotypes, and present new challenges for governments and their leaders to accord women their rightful place is society.

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