

The Role of Social Media in the Fight for Women's Rights

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The use of social media has become the main scenario of contemporary online communication and, therefore, it plays a key role in the process of creating a global identity. Thus far, it has been the place where new names, icons, slogans or mottos have been shared, and where the revolutionary narrative has shaped and created the basis for the emerging activism trends and collective actors that played a crucial role during certain social movements (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015).

Digital activism or cyberactivism represents a new paradigm used to build up an online community, connect with other users and spread a message within and beyond country borders. Although, there is still a huge part of society that has no access to the online sphere, digital activism may provide a space and a platform to empower marginalized voices, giving them the chance for cross-boundary dialogue.

These platforms are the starting point for different types of social movements, for instance, the “Fridays for Future” (2018) campaign that the young activist Greta Thunberg started; or #Stayhome (2020), a campaign to create awareness about a global situation during the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, social media can also serve as a platform to mobilize people to seek justice for any human rights violations such as “HollaBack” (2005), “SlutWalk” (2011), “Bring Back our Girls” (2014), “Me Too” (2017) or “Black Lives Matter” (2020). It's through social media campaigns, online petitions, blogs, crowdfunding platforms etc., where people seek justice and solidarity. Therefore, these move-

ments grow, become viral and stronger. Nonetheless, it is clear that before these hashtags become viral, there's a reason behind them that goes beyond the action. For example, #BringBackOurGirls was not only a hashtag that sought justice for the 200 schoolgirls that were abducted by Boko Haram in Nigeria, but also served as a ground-breaking movement to advocate for social changes in the socio-cultural, political and economic fields in the country (Akpojivi, 2019); or #BlackLivesMatter, a social movement that started with George Zimmerman's acquittal regarding Trayvon Martin's death, back in 2013, which represented the cherry on the cake regarding the situation black people have to face in the US on a daily basis. These huge campaigns have reached millions of people and gathered other voices on the ground that have joined the movements.

For its part, feminist activism has jumped into the online landscape, aiming to achieve gender-based dialogue as well as expand its message and reach people beyond borders. In this regard, these spaces created by women activists are the starting point to building up identity discussions and online dialogue with a gender perspective. However, there is an existing gap, especially in the MENA region, where only women in the academy or in privileged situations are allowed to have a presence in the online world (Newsom & Lengel, 2021).

Women's Rights in the Digital Sphere

The #MeToo campaign can be understood as the zenith of the previous social media campaigns to denounce sexual harassment and gender violence, worldwide. Sexual violence has several stages, such as sexual harassment, gender violence, sexual assault, rape, incest, sexual abuse, etc. So, social me-

dia campaigns have been targeting these different scenarios by using different types of messages. For instance, several anti-street harassment campaigns have been launched online such as HarassMap in Egypt, Harasstracker in Lebanon, Tell Your Story in Turkey or Dear Catcallers in the Netherlands.

The #MeToo campaign, which took the world by storm in 2017, gathered female voices around the globe. Although this was a worldwide feminist movement, it especially empowered women in the MENA region (Basch-Harod, 2019). By 2021, with an estimated population of 440 million in the Arab states, only around 66% of people in MENA had access to the Internet,¹ a percentage that has been progressively increasing over the years. Even though it is a clearly increasing trend, there is still a huge existing gap between men and women, since women still have less access to the Internet (56%) than men (68%). Nonetheless, although the gap is still big, it has not prevented women's activism, which has increased.

Digital activism has become a mechanism within society to create awareness on both individual and collective levels

"You will never walk alone" or "I believe you" are some of the messages that this hashtag conveys, creating a community of solidarity and understanding. This campaign has become an intersectional feminist online movement that calls women to join, not only to support and to create community but also to share their testimonies of harassment and sexual assault, to draw a bigger picture of this never-ending situation. #MeToo is built on the many actions that feminist activism has previously undertaken, particularly in relation to the "naming and contestation of previously hidden forms of sexual violence (Loney-Howes et al., 2021)." Since the early 2000s, digital activism has been creating its own space through the different existing platforms such as Blogger (2003), Wordpress (2004),

Facebook (2004), Twitter (2006), Sina Weibo (2009) or WeChat (2011). These platforms were – and still are – the key tool for communicating news, information and for mobilizing activism both online and offline for several women's rights movements. Digital activism has become a mechanism within society to create awareness on both individual and collective levels, always using that space for sharing and to show to other people around the world that they are not alone.

Women are challenging the regional and the national sphere by speaking out. According to some scholars, by bringing social issues into public contestation, the issues become "political" (Sreberny, 2015). A clear example is the online response after the attack a woman suffered in Egypt in a demonstration in Cairo's Tahrir square, back in 2015. The beating of the so-called Blue Bra Girl, who was a protester beaten up by the Egyptian military, was all over the Internet thanks to the many women and protesters that captured the moment and shared it on YouTube and Facebook. The protester became an icon of the fight against violence, and the hashtag #BlueBra was used to gather women to take to the streets. This happened to be one of the biggest demonstrations by Egyptian women. This is only one of the many more examples that have dyed the social media activism landscape during the first two decades of this century. In 2019, the Facebook page "My Stealthy Freedom" reached over one million followers. This campaign started in 2014, when an Iranian journalist posted a picture on Facebook of herself without a hijab. This led to a massive response of Iranian women doing the same, posting pictures of themselves without the chador, creating a huge community of women that spoke out against the obligation to wear this Iranian garment. In Morocco, back in 2013, #RIPAmna was a campaign against the Penal Code's Article 475, that allowed a rapist to avoid prosecution and jail if he married the victim. Thanks to mobilization and public pressure, this article was repealed in 2014.² Or when, in 2017, Lebanese women created the hashtag #Abolish522 or #Undress522, to protest against the decision of the Parliament to abolish the marriage loophole. Women activists filled social media with videos and photos sharing the same message: "A white dress

¹ ITU, www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx

² BBC News. "Morocco amends controversial rape marriage law." 2014: www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-25855025

doesn't cover the rape."³ In August 2021, the Taliban took power in Afghanistan, and an even worse humanitarian crisis began. Women's rights disappeared. The initial reaction on social media was strong, condemning the action, condemning the violence and showing support to the people. However, the multiple tweets by institutions, governments and high-level politicians led to nothing but actions in accordance with the rules on diplomatic behaviour. Many people in Afghanistan, especially women, had to close their social media accounts for their own safety. By the end of the year, the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan vanished from the majority of the world's agenda, but in the social media sphere it lived on. On 23 March, the Taliban banned girls from returning to school indefinitely and on 7 May, it banned Afghani women from showing their faces in public. #LetAfghanGirlsLearn and #FreeHerFace are some of the main hashtags that have become trending topics all over the Internet, and not thanks to government institutions, but rather because of the people and journalists. These trends have become viral, looking to seek justice for women in Afghanistan. Even though this may not have a short-term political impact, it is a constant reminder that girls and women in Afghanistan have no rights. And it has not been limited to the online sphere, but also went to the streets. Women, especially young women, in the country are facing the Taliban by taking to the streets to protest against the prohibition and to go to school, knowing what their fate may be. Furthermore, #FreeHerFace mobilized not only women but also a few men, something that has never been seen before in the country. Some men on Afghan television channels, such as Tolo News, joined the #FreeHerFace movement, and started to wear masks in solidarity with their female coworkers and to protest against the Taliban's decision (Joya, 2022).

Reporting gender violence on social media follows a similar pattern. Most of the time, as mentioned before, a hashtag linked to some specific case is supported by a vast social movement. One individual case is transformed into a broader problem within society. In other words, it questions and confronts the government's actions and its judicial system, e.g. the case of #Iamanada in Spain, where five men raped an 18-year-old woman in Pamplona, in 2016. When the

case was reported it grew stronger and a huge community was generated seeking justice for the victim and protesting against the system. Social media platforms also serve to shed light on investigations, which are not always transparent. Users use social media as a space to add extra non-official information, confronting governments or national authorities. #FindHinyUmoren was a campaign created by activists in Nigeria in 2020, due to the disappearance of a young woman on her way to work. This campaign sets the perfect example of the evolution of the changing narrative during the different processes in the investigation of a case involving gender-based violence. We can divide this campaign into three different stages. The movement started with the aim of finding her by sharing pictures of her using the hashtag. When she was found dead, the hashtag twisted and was used to find and add more information about the murderer. And in the last stage, the hashtag was also used as a space to grieve as well as to seek justice for her. These campaigns are in constant evolution, although their ultimate goals remain unchanged.

Digital Activism in the New Era

The old concept of activism has changed, along with the way younger generations in the region express and tell their stories. Older generations never had this chance. Social media and digital platforms have now become a useful tool within the feminist activism framework, not only for individuals but also for a large number of women's rights organizations. Many of these organizations in the Middle East and North Africa use these platforms to approach people, engage with them in conversations about women's rights and share reflections on current events, challenges and feminist issues. It has been proved that these online spaces are already quite accessible and cost-effective for feminist and women's rights organizations working towards social change and gender equality. It has clearly made their work more visible and facilitated the connection between communities as well as reaching their audiences. Online feminism has crossed borders, reached people, disseminated important information among women and has respond-

³ BBC News. "Lebanon rape law: Parliament abolishes marriage loophole." 16 August 2017. www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40947448

ed to the continuous needs of women around the world (Qazzaz, 2021). In recent years, therefore, online feminist activism, especially in the region, has provided the possibility of engaging and creating a network of feminists from all over the globe, who can mobilize and practise solidarity (Qazzaz, 2021).

On another level, social media, especially Twitter, have been used not only to denounce gender violence but also as an information weapon. Activists act as barrier breakers bringing new information to specific cases, most of the time, non-official information, which is complementary to what can be found in the media. In some cases, this new information refutes fake news and disinformation. Ultimately, the role of activists is to shed light on the attempts at justifying gender violence, while creating awareness and social responsibility (UOC, 2021).

Online activism faces trolling and cyberbullying on a daily basis, and the fight for women's rights has been continually challenged with threats, harassment or discrimination. Digital campaigns and movements have brought the division of society into the online landscape. On the one hand, it has had a positive effect, gathering many women around the world and creating a massive community of feminism. But, on the other hand, it has been an open space for anti-feminist hate speech and perpetual intimidation. Despite all the hatred and disinformation, digital activism has served as the tool to not only spread a message, anger and discomfort, but also to empower and gather a powerful revolutionary movement, leading many women in the MENA region to take to the streets and stand up against violence, harassment and rape and fight for their rights.

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