

# Arab Women Cyberfeminism

■ Rita Stephan

Doctoral Candidate, the Department of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin

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In 1999, members of the San Francisco chapter of the Arab Women Solidarity Association (AWSA-United) launched a website and an email listserv to connect Arab women internationally. The aim of this listserv was to provide a space for Arab women and their allies to share information and discuss issues relevant to Arab women's lives and experiences. It also serves as a springboard for activism related to Arab women's issues in the modern world (AWSA website). Through conducting an online survey, I use the case study of AWSA-United to understand how Arab women use cyberspace to construct their identity in terms of their ethnicities as Arabs or hyphenated-Arabs, their religions as Muslims, Christians or others, and their activism as feminists or activists.

## **Arab-American Activism and Cyberfeminism**

Arab women living in the Western Hemisphere have had a long history of struggling to gain status and recognition for their roles and activism within the American feminist movement. In an article geared toward leaders of American feminism, Arab-American feminist Al-Hibri claims: "Some of us were right here, in the forefront of the U.S. women's movement in the 1960s! Oh yes; you may not have noticed, but many of us are U.S. feminists. We are part of you. We live among you, and we have invisibly

struggled by your side for decades." Yet, American feminists were only interested in addressing "the veil and female genital mutilation as they speak of Arab women's oppression" (Al-Hibri, 1994, p. 161). Saliba (1999) traces the history of modern Arab-American feminism to 1981 "when women of color challenged white feminists at the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) conference and emerged in a coalition of 'U.S. Third World Feminists'" (p. 313). Their experiences at the NWSA conferences motivated Arab-American women to take a more active role in expressing their voices in local, national, and international politics (Kadi, 1994).

Arab American feminism emerged as "a complex interaction between 'first' and 'third' world feminisms, situated within a highly politicized context" (Saliba, 1999, p. 313-314). They participated in establishing "U.S. Third World feminism", during the eighties and later transforming it into "transnational feminism" in the nineties. This transformation allowed Arab-American women to claim their presence in this form of feminism as they "often negotiate identities across two continents and national identities" (Saliba 1999, p. 316). Transnational feminist theory appealed to them because it emphasizes the global interconnectedness among thoughts of feminists and the inter-

ests of women (Mohanty, 2004; Naples & Desai, 2002; Kaplan, Alarcón, & Moallem, 2000; Shohat, 1999). This global interconnectedness also extends to ethnic minorities who do not necessarily feel a sense of belonging to one community. They, as Grewal and Kaplan (1994) explain, occupy "contradictory positions that allow some of us to live in the 'West' without being 'Western'" and to avoid "the postmodern celebration of hybridity [that] often retains the us and them paradigm that stems from modernist modes of description and representation" (p. 7).

Yet, the hybridity of postmodernism has made women's activism in cyberspace plausible. Cyberfeminism has become a suitable means for women to create social and political networks and associations. Plant (1996) argues that the Internet has opened the way for a new format of feminism-cyberfeminism, which is a tool to escape the patriarchal control of centralized organizations and a place where postmodern fragmented subjectivities can exist. Indeed, Vogt and Chen (2001) agree that the "lack of institutional and cultural norms [in cyberspace] is similar to the nontraditional spaces that the women's movement has created since its beginning" (p. 371).

Arab feminists have taken their activism to the safety of the Internet in order to be safeguarded from unfavorable governmental restrictions, oppressive patriarchal systems, and rigid religious practices in the Arab world. In the same vein, they have sought the Internet as a refuge from the cultural apathy and ideological irrelevancy they face in the West. By doing so, they have given AWSA-United the continuation, not only allowing it to exist when other chapters folded, but also enabling a cadre of highly educated and motivated women to come together as: "an online group of transnationally based Arab women, mostly living in the West and united by the struggle for women's rights in the Arab world, for Arab rights in the West, and for freedom and democracy in the Arab regions" (see survey below). Chatterjee (2002) asserts that cyberspace "has been understood as a novel social and cultural phenomenon that could have radical implications for contemporary constructions and understandings of embodiment, identities, sexualities, and subjectivities, and that such understandings require a political grounding, which cyberfeminism tries to provide" (p. 198). These theoretical and sociological perspectives have encouraged this investigation into how AWSA members view their feminism and identity in the light of their membership in this cyber community.

### Historical Background

The Arab Women's Solidarity Association International was founded in Egypt in 1982 by 120 women under the leadership of Dr. Nawal Al-Saadawi. "Its aims were to link the struggle of Arabs for liberation and freedom from economic, cultural and media domination to the liberation of

Arab women" (Stephan, 2004, p. 268). AWSA was the first pan-Arab women's organization accorded international status at the United Nations, and to have representation of both sexes. By 1985, AWSA International had 3,000 members worldwide, and was granted consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. AWSA International stood against the Gulf War in 1991 and demanded that the UN take a firm position against the war. This action provoked the Egyptian government to close down the association and reappropriate its funds to an Islamic women's organization. AWSA International's headquarter shifted to Algeria and then back to Cairo in 1996 (Stephan, 2004, p. 268).

Arab feminists in the United States were motivated to initiate their own organizations and establish an AWSA chapter in Seattle, Washington in 1994. This chapter remained active until 1996. In 1995, a second chapter was founded in San Francisco, California and was active under the name of AWSA-North America as a non-profit, non-sectarian organization 501(c)(3) (<http://www.aff.org/archive/1997/awsa/awsa.html>). However, the chapter was eventually dissolved. Its last activities were recorded in June 2002. In 1997, AWSA-SF cosponsored an annual, ongoing Arab film festival and published a paper entitled, "The Forgotten 'Is'm: An Arab American Women's Perspective on Zionism, Racism, and Sexism" that serves as a training guide for activists. In 1999, Cyber-AWSA was created with a mandate making it institutionally and logistically distinct from other AWSA chapters. Although most of the founding members have left the group after an irreconcilable conflict, AWSA continues to exist and attract new members internationally. Its members voted in March 2005 to change Cyber-AWSA's name to AWSA-United to reflect their inclusive and concrete presence. Today AWSA-United consists of about 181 members (155 at the time of the survey), many of whom use the listserv as an informational medium without actively participating in posting messages or engaging in dialogues. Although participation in the listserv is free, requests for membership require the approval of the steering committee.

### Methodology

This author's interest in AWSA-United stems from being a member since September 2003, and serving on its steering committee since April 2004. This personal involvement in the organization is mentioned because, being acutely aware of such a close affiliation and the group's environment throughout the study, it was essential to refrain from using any reference to contents of email messages received from the listserv in order to protect confidentiality and to adhere to membership protocols. An online survey of AWSA-United members was conducted in the fall of 2004 asking them ten questions: five touching upon AWSA's organizational profile and the other five addressing the demographic makeup of

its membership. Applying convenience and random sampling methods, the outcome of the participation in the survey was determined by the willingness of AWSA members to answer the survey questions. During a period of two weeks, 34 members responded to the survey, which constituted 47 percent of all active members.

### Identity and Activism

Pierre Bourdieu emphasizes the importance of conveying data as stated by respondents: "A social reality, whether an agent or an institution, presents itself all the more easily, provides all the more readily what are called 'data' the more completely we agree to take it as it presents itself" (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 776). Following Bourdieu's approach in analyzing data, this study refrained from imposing conventional or personal definitions on respondents' reference to activism or feminism. Whenever a respondent identified herself as an Arab, a feminist, or an activist, a cross reference analysis of these terms was not made.

How members view the intersection of their membership in AWSA-United and their identification of themselves as feminists is worthy of examination. Mansbridge (1995) suggests that feminist identities are usually achieved through powerful personal transformative experiences and learning about other feminists. Since AWSA is closely connected with Dr. Nawal Al-Saadawi, did her character in any way influence AWSA-United members? The development of this question was guided by a survey conducted in Palestine by Amal Amireh in 2000 who asked 147 students about their most read author. While respondents gave only 6.7 percent to Nawal Al-Saadawi, most of them identified her as a Feminist (93.9%) — rather than a literary writer (1.1%) — (Amireh, 2000). These two perspectives led to two assumptions about the makeup of the specific feminism of AWSA members: First, those AWSA-United members who identified themselves as feminists might have been influenced by the feminism of Al-Saadawi; and second, those who read Al-Saadawi's writings are more likely to identify themselves as feminists.

The survey findings showed that the first assumption could not be supported. It was discovered that individuals who joined AWSA-United were not motivated by the charisma of Al-Saadawi. Inquiring about the factors that motivated members to join AWSA-United reveals that being influenced or interested in AWSA International's charismatic founder Nawal Al-Saadawi was not a motivating factor. However, the most significant factor in motivating membership in AWSA-United was individuals' interest in activism with and on behalf of Arab women (68.7%). Other factors included knowing other members (15.6%) and searching the Web (12.5%). Not to underestimate the impact that Al-Saadawi has had on AWSA and Arab feminism, an implication can be made that these feminists are breaking away

from the central charismatic leader syndrome from which some Middle Eastern nongovernmental organizations suffer. Joseph (1997) posits that the successes and failures of Arab women's organizations are directly linked to the abilities and character of their founding leader.

The second assumption proved to be more complex because no direct relation can be detected between the readership of feminist literature and the motivation to join activist organizations. Furthermore, the literature on Middle Eastern gender studies suggests that Arab women are less likely to identify themselves as feminists than are their Western counterparts. Sabbagh writes: "Western feminism, of course, is grounded in Western thought, ideology, and values. Arab women's struggle is equally grounded in the religious, cultural, and political norms of the Arab world" (1996, p. xxiv-xxv). Note that Sabbagh does not refer to Arab women's struggle as feminism but rather she specifically distinguishes them from Western feminists. These findings suggest that Sabbagh's claim is relatively applicable to Arab women: They are not like Western feminists. Nonetheless, they are their own type of "feminists" because they also were comfortable with their ethnic and religious identities as Arabs or hyphenated-Arabs, Muslims, and Christians. From the survey conducted, 78.8 percent of respondents identified themselves as feminists. The feminism of Arab women in the diaspora differs from Western feminism because, regardless of their religious affiliation and ethnic identification, members of AWSA-United did not express a conflict between their feminism and their religious and ethnic heritage.

Moreover, their feminism also differs from the activism of Arab women in the homeland. Respondents who lived outside the Arab world were more likely to embrace a feminist identity than those living in Arab countries. Additionally, many of them did not speak Arabic or had not read Al-Saadawi's books. However, most respondents claimed to be Arabs or hyphenated-Arabs (64.7 percent), and 70.5 percent of the respondents indicated that the United States was their place of residency or their hyphenated identity (Arab-Americans). According to Mahmood (2001), this is not surprising, because social conditions and environments determine personal and collective narratives of liberty (p. 208). In her ethnographic study of the women's movement in Egypt, Al-Ali (1997) posits, "Feminists have been increasingly accused of collaborating with Western imperialism by importing alien ideas and practices and circulating them throughout society. In the light of these very intimidating charges, it is not surprising that many women activists have internalized these accusations, and themselves equate *nas-sawiyaa* (feminism) with a Western concept, alien and alienating to their social, cultural and political context" (p. 182). A respondent described AWSA-United as a forum that encompasses Arab women activism internationally: "Cyber

AWSA is much more an Arab American listserv than an Arab one, so because I live in the Arab world it was mostly helpful in terms of information provided about the organizations and activities of Arab American feminists. [It] provided a productive framework through which to see my own local activism as part of a more international struggle." It seems that cyberspace allowed AWSA-United members to escape adverse environments and create a community in which they are safe and free to claim other controversial identities such as being "queers", "liberal", and "pacifist".

### Conclusion

How can individuals from the Philippines, Germany, and Yemen join in a dialogue over Arab women's rights? Technology and the Internet have rendered traditional national boundaries insignificant. The Internet has made it possible for AWSA-United members in the West to survive, especially after September 11, 2001, as their mere Arab identity was seen as constituting a national threat. Similarly, the Internet has made it possible for Arab women

to escape patriarchal control over their activist discourse and identities. This study found that AWSA-United has been successful in strengthening members' sense of identity by encompassing their differences, which include nationality, religious affiliation, and sexuality. AWSA and AWSA-United have opened a gate to Arab women in the diaspora to express solidarity and support with other Arab women in the homeland.

AWSA-United members are engaged in a process of dissidence through their membership and activism. They maintain their membership in cyberspace because it is a place where they are free to be women, Arabs, intellectuals, queers, feminists, Americans, Pro-Palestine, Anti-Palestine, Pro-Bush, Anti-government, and everything else. Members feel empowered and connected with one another regardless of political, national, sexual, and religious differences. AWSA-United connects members from a wide variety of backgrounds around the world. It brings them together in a forum to discuss issues relevant to their lives without the censure of any authority.

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