GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH **2013**

Women's rights, gender and ICTs

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SYRIA

Women's rights, gender and ICTs in Syria
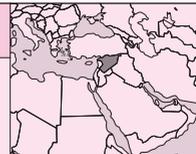
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Introduction

Syria has witnessed fast-paced developments that have affected the different political, economic, social and cultural aspects of the country. These developments led in some cases to the advancement of women's rights and offered women new opportunities in becoming increasingly active in their society. Yet it is still obvious that Syrian society is a masculine society, where women continue struggling to earn their full and equal rights.

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) have offered Syrian women many powerful tools to organise, mobilise and fight for their rights and equality. Many initiatives have leveraged the increasingly ubiquitous access to the internet in the country to advocate their causes of gender equality and participation. A prominent example is Musawa[1] (Equality), an independent civil society organisation founded in 2009 by a group of Syrian women that aims to support women's achievement of full equality in Syrian society.

Policy and political background

The Syrian constitution provides clear protection of many women's rights, articulated specifically in Article 23, which states: "The state shall provide women with all opportunities enabling them to effectively and fully contribute to the political, economic, social and cultural life, and the state shall work on removing the restrictions that prevent their development and participation in building society."[2] The constitution also contains other provisions that relate to women's and children's rights, such as Article 33 (equality in rights and duties without discrimination) and Article 20 (protection of maternity and childhood).

However, several studies have suggested that Syrian women still suffer from inequality in participating in the political, economic and decision-making spheres.[3] These studies cite laws that discriminate against women in family affairs, such as children's custody and citizenship, and freedom of movement and domicile.

Despite Syria's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on 28 March 2003, the country registered reservations on Articles 2, 9, 15, 16 and 29.[4]

In light of these challenges, Musawa, among other feminist groups, was established to further the cause of gender equality and the elimination of discrimination against women.

The story of Musawa

In its mission statement, Musawa states that its aim is to "support women's struggle to obtain their full rights, remove all kinds of gender-based discrimination, fight violence against women, and establish the necessary conditions to enable their effective participation in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres."[5] The organisation was founded by a group of Syrian women, or women residing in Syria, in response to what they considered as increased marginalisation of women, deprivation of economic opportunities, and denial of many human rights. The founding members set out to achieve ambitious goals, including:

- Ensuring sufficient and effective participation of women's organisations in any commission or committee tasked with establishing the country's reformed constitution or new legislation.

- Establishing an intellectual framework defining the future of women in Syria.

- Participating in local and regional efforts to remove reservations registered on CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and to ratify the optional protocol of CEDAW.[6]

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1 www.musawasy.org

2 www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?docid=5100f02a2

3 www.mokarabat.com/rep.nesasy.htm (in Arabic)

4 treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-8&chapter=4&lang=en#EndDec

5 www.facebook.com/MsawatEquality/info

6 The optional protocol to CEDAW (OP-CEDAW) establishes complaint and inquiry mechanisms for the convention, allowing individuals in ratifying countries to register complaints or inquiries into "grave or systematic violations" of CEDAW. While Syria is a signatory of CEDAW, the country has not yet ratified the optional protocol.

- Conducting social campaigns and activities using all available media outlets to raise awareness of women's rights and contributing to changing the discriminating culture of the society.

- Documenting violations and incidents of violence against women and supporting female victims who suffer emotional and physical harm.

Musawa is not the only organisation fighting for gender equality in Syria. There are several other prominent organisations that include the General Union of Syrian Women[7] (which represents Syria in the relevant UN programmes and agencies), the Syrian Women's League,[8] and the Association for Women's Role Development (AWRD). However, what distinguishes Musawa is its very heavy reliance on the internet and the social web to support and advance its causes. Musawa has an active website, launched in 2009, that serves as the primary communication outlet for the organisation. The website is rich in content and frequently updated. This is in stark contrast to the other organisations that either have non-functioning websites, or have a rather basic web presence.

Musawa's extensive website content includes local, regional and international news, reports, studies, a document archive, information on prominent female figures and culture, and details of publications. Some of the topics covered by the organisation's activities include CEDAW, human trafficking, sexual harassment, gender equality, early marriage, violence against women, polygamy and women's empowerment. This makes the website one of the most comprehensive resources on the subject not only in Syria, but in the whole Arab region.

The gender section of the website includes over 65 articles and studies that discuss the topic, including information on gender-responsive budgets, gender and human rights, an introduction to gender evaluation, and an observatory for violations of gender equality in Syria (such as a story about the Central Bank of Syria advertising to recruit male employees only in early 2011). Interestingly, Musawa's website presents information from a wide spectrum of perspectives, making it one of the few online forums in the Arab region that expand participation and encourage diversity and difference in opinion.

While the Musawa website serves as the primary resource for gender-related information, reports and news stories, the organisation seems to have adopted other ICT and social web tools as its main

participatory platform. This multi-platform approach is an interesting idea that few organisations in the country have successfully embraced. Musawa's website links to its page on Facebook[9] and Twitter stream.[10] Advocacy and influencing policy are two key activities for the organisation, and they require the widest possible level of participation and engagement from the primary target audience (Syrian women) and the public at large.

Musawa's Facebook page had around 1,500 likes as of 15 April 2013. Activity on the page shows several posts per day, an indication of an active and participatory community. Many posts attract interaction from the community in the form of likes, shares or comments. The page also promotes Musawa's activities in the real world, including workshops, events, lectures and festivals. The organisation's account on Twitter, on the other hand, has a rather modest following, with only 155 tweets posted as of 15 April 2013. This could be the result of the much lower popularity of Twitter in the Arab region in general, and in Syria in particular, compared to Facebook.[11]

Interestingly, Musawa seems to have a second, member-only group on Facebook that focuses mostly on events and dialogue. The group had 156 members as of 15 April 2013, and it is not clear why the decision was made not to make it public.

As can be seen from the discussion of Musawa's presence on the web and social networks, the organisation seems to have actively pursued leveraging these vehicles to further its causes and foster a participatory and inclusive community. This is actually an appropriate strategy for an organisation that strives to achieve gender equality and promote women's participation. While most other women's organisations in the country conduct their activities entirely offline, and make little if any use of ICTs, Musawa seems to have struck the right balance between on-the-ground grassroots activism and online dialogue and advocacy.

This strategy has several advantages for Musawa, its membership and their cause. Firstly, it can increase its reach into communities and amongst individuals in ways that would not be otherwise possible. This can expand the organisation's audience and strengthen the movement it is trying to mobilise. Secondly, online communication can facilitate participation and discussion, leading to richer deliberations around the areas of relevance

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7   www.wdp-sy.net

8   www.syriancp.org/ar/womensomite/sbindex.htm

9   www.facebook.com/MsawatEquality

10 twitter.com/musawasy1

11 The Arab Social Media Report states a total of 3,766,000 users of Twitter in the Arab region (as of March 2013), compared to almost 54,553,000 users of Facebook (www.arabsocialmediareport.com).

to the organisation. For example, Musawa used its presence on social networks to organise dialogue events around key events, such as discussing women's rights in the new constitution. In such events, members send offline questions to be answered by a panel of experts, and a live session is held to enable online discussions. At the same time, Musawa transfers its reach in the cyber world to its events in the real world by announcing events it is organising, and inviting visitors or members to attend these events.

Having a well-organised and frequently updated presence in cyberspace preserves the valuable content produced through the organisation's activities, such as documented incidents, studies, reports and discussions, and makes it available and accessible to a wide audience over time. This can significantly increase the organisation's visibility both locally and at the international level, which may lead to opportunities for partnerships with similar organisations or attract contributions and support from prominent figures in the field.

An argument could be made that the use of social networks in general, and Facebook in particular, can in itself be a barrier for free participation. This argument is based on the premise that the use of such technologies usually requires users to reveal their actual identity, which might be problematic in situations where sensitive subjects and issues are being discussed. Many victims of domestic violence or sexual assault may need support from a community that understands their pains, and may also want to talk about their experiences and seek advice from others. However, the dilemma here is that if the only channel for communication requires these victims to reveal their true identity, they will most likely surrender in fear. Even topics as simple as women's right to grant citizenship to their children could be perceived as being culturally sensitive, and are an arena for the brave and fearless only. This phenomenon can be mitigated to a certain degree by using pseudonyms when participating (despite the fact that this violates Facebook's terms and conditions).

Conclusions

The story of Musawa can be reflected upon through the lens of the Association for Progressive Communications' (APC) Gender Evaluation Methodology (GEM)[12] from two perspectives. Firstly, the initiative itself can be studied to evaluate the extent to which it has succeeded in achieving its objectives, and incorporate learning from this evaluation into the initiative. Secondly, the different platforms and activities of the initiative (including its website, presence on social networks, and face-to-face events and activities) can be leveraged as effective and useful methods to develop better understanding of gender-related issues in Syria, formulate questions to evaluate changes (either positive or negative) relating to these issues, and collect data to inform gender-evaluation indicators.

Musawa can greatly benefit from a structured and systematic evaluation approach based on GEM to assess its progress towards achieving its goals and objectives. The organisation's main objectives can be summarised as raising awareness about women's issues in Syria, mobilising change, and influencing policies. The content published on Musawa's online outlets, and the interactions generated around this content, clearly indicate a positive impact on awareness raising and network building. The organisation seems to have also achieved significant network building and collaboration with other women's organisations and entities that share similar visions. This is evident in the joint activities publicised by Musawa that it organises with other partners. Such a collaborative and cooperative approach would certainly lead to wider reach and stronger networks that Musawa can mobilise to effect change and improve gender equality.

The issue of access is a very important question that needs to be addressed. Many civil society organisations that restrict their activities to cyberspace risk leaving behind an important portion of their target audience. Not all women have access to the technology required to use the internet, or possess the skills necessary to use these technologies effectively. This may well be the most vulnerable target audience, and the one that needs the greatest attention. Musawa addresses this matter by adopting a hybrid online/offline approach to its activities and engagement. By doing so, Musawa is expanding its network even further, addressing the issues of access and connectivity, and widening the spectrum of its discourse and dialogue. Moreover, the organisation is bridging the offline and online worlds by documenting and archiving the proceedings of events and activities for future reference.

From another perspective, Musawa's online platforms can be leveraged as effective and useful methods to gauge emerging gender-related issues in Syria, and to facilitate the collection of data for the development of meaningful gender indicators. While not strictly structured, Musawa conducted several polls and open consultations around important challenges facing women in Syria, including

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12 www.apcwomen.org/gem

gender equality in the new constitution and the elimination of the country's reservations on CEDAW. Undoubtedly, the value of these resources and platforms in identifying changes in gender-related issues and collecting data and contributions to evaluate change in this domain can be greatly enhanced if Musawa adopts a structured methodology for gender evaluation such as GEM.

Action steps

- Gender activists in general, and Musawa's community in particular, should consider developing the insights they acquire through their online and offline activities into policy briefs that can be used to influence decision makers and policy formulation processes. This is probably the least developed area in the organisation's repertoire.

- Musawa's activities can be greatly enhanced by adopting GEM as a guiding framework and methodology for evaluating the status of gender equality in Syria. By joining the GEM community of practice, Musawa can also learn from other women's organisations all over the world and share best practices.

- In line with Musawa's goals in conducting social campaigns and activities using all available media outlets to raise awareness of women's rights, the organisation should strengthen its reach into the mass media (including radio and TV), and also explore using rich digital media (such as video and podcasts) to increase the impact of its communications. ▪