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Women's rights, gender and ICTs

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Whose internet is it anyway?
Shaping the internet – women's voices in governance decision making in the Middle East and North Africa

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It has always been a challenge to explain what I do for a living to my family and friends, but everyone agrees I have an interesting career path; they just don't understand what it means exactly, to be managing an internet governance programme. The credit for my current involvement in internet policy and governance goes to my curiosity; I started using the internet around the mid-1990s and it took me a few years to start asking questions like: "Who manages the internet?" When I carried out my Master's thesis research on "freedom of expression on the internet" ten years ago, I hardly found any references on the subject apart from Lessig's *Code* (first edition, 1999), even though it was not directly related to the theme of my research.

Explaining what internet governance and policy means in simple terms can be challenging – and being a woman working in this field and focusing on the Arab region is complicated – but not impossible. One would expect that, generally, women are not fairly represented within the policy decision making process in the Arab region due to deeply rooted perceptions both in the society and the workplace. It is not a question of how many women are leading policy battles in the Arab region; it is a matter of there being a will to give women an opportunity to prove they can be effective in decision making. When female representation in the technology sector is added to the discussion, another layer of complication is inevitably added to the question of gender imbalance, which does not apply only to the Arab world but other regions as well.

Challenges facing Arab women in information and communications technology (ICT) policy

There is a considerable digital gender gap in the Arab region. Using ICTs to improve the social standing of Arab women seems to be feasible due to the unlimited opportunities new technologies can offer.[1] Yet, without having a clear vision of how to overcome the challenges hindering Arab women from integrating into the field of technology, it will be impossible to address this issue.

Arab women struggle to overcome various obstacles related to the culture and traditions of the region. The perception of women's role in society still revolves around the family unit, even if they have a successful career. They are not empowered to be an equal contributor and are restricted from being a driving force to accelerate the social and economic development of the Arab region.

It is safe to state that Arab women are not yet able to make it into the boardrooms of tech companies or government entities where high-level decisions are made, for the very same reasons. The structure of the society dictates that women should be followers but not leaders. This results in low self-esteem and obligates them to abide by the rules of a society which tends to give more leverage to men.

Influential Arab women's voices in ICT policy

Internet governance and policy as a field of expertise is fairly new. A limited number of women at the global level have stood out and managed to secure influential positions, mainly in the business sector or civil society organisations. In the Arab region, the public sector seems to be the main host of influential Arab women when it comes to local internet governance and policy mechanisms. However, only one woman has managed to reach the top of the decision-making pyramid: Dr. Hassa Al Jaber, the head of the national telecom regulator ICT Qatar, and one of the most powerful women in the Arab region. Al Jaber has been instrumental in the liberalisation of Qatar's telecommunication market and has helped spearhead the modernisation of Qatar's government through information technology.[2]

1　www.diplointernetgovernance.org/profiles/blogs/the-role-of-information-and-communication-technologies-in

2　www.arabianbusiness.com/100-most-powerful-arab-women-2012-448295.html?view=profile&itemid=448218#.UiIO7-dkTRd

Impact of internet governance arrangements on Arab women

It is difficult at this point in time to assess the impact of internet governance and policies adopted in the Arab region on the situation of women. There are pressing priorities which need addressing first, such as bridging the gender digital gap in Arab countries. Little attention is allocated to the role of the internet, for example, in sustainable development and how it can effectively change the perception of women and their capabilities. Moreover, it is quite a challenge for Arab countries to devise a clear vision on how to integrate an effective ICT strategy for the benefit of women.[3]

Nevertheless, the internet and the widespread use of social media specifically have helped computer-literate Arab women to advance causes that are hard to advocate for offline. Cyber feminism is a significant outcome of Arab women using the internet, which has allowed them to escape the patriarchal control of centralised organisations by providing them with a space where their fragmented subjectivities can exist;[4] whether any future internet governance arrangements will positively affect women in the Arab region entirely depends on whether the decision-making circles are aware of the existing struggle against social and political restraints.

Conclusion

Internet governance and policy is meant to shape the future of the internet by involving various stakeholders using a bottom-up approach. Encouraging women to integrate themselves in the discussion and to influence the decision-making process will help them in proposing better policies to address the issues at stake and the challenges they are facing. The hope for women in the Arab region is to be in a better position to drive the change, and design a better future for them through the internet. Therefore, efforts should be made by decision makers in the Arab region to be more inclusive and aware of the prominent role women can play in internet policy making by establishing a special task force with the objective of considering the impact of new technologies in general on Arab women's empowerment. Such an initiative can facilitate women's integration in the policy-making scene organically, since it will make them active stakeholders that can advocate for their own cause. At the same time they will share their own perspective on internet governance and policy issues, which in essence is meant to be multi-stakeholder. ∎

3   www.diplointernetgovernance.org/profiles/blogs/the-role-of-information-and-communication-technologies-in

4   www.e-ir.info/2013/08/28/cyberfeminism-and-its-political-implications-for-women-in-the-arab-world/