The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship
معهد الأصفري للمجتمع المدني والمواطنة
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Digital Activism and the Feminist Movement

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ABAAD Founder & Director

2

ABOUT THE ASFARI INSTITUTE AT AUB

The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship is a regional hub of a dynamic community of academics, practitioners, policymakers, activists, and members of the general public interested in exploring traditional and innovative forms of collective actions, locally-grounded policy debates and in advancing realistic solutions to the obstacles to effective civil society and citizenship in the Arab world.

In doing so, the Institute provides training workshops and programs beside regular teaching at AUB, encourages and provides evidence-based research in areas related to political participation, accountability and good governance, produces policy/ practice recommendations to improve citizens' engagement and civil society roles in mediation, deliberation and self-organization.

It also promotes public awareness of civil society and civic engagement best practices in the region through its monthly meetings and seminars and stimulates fruitful dialogue among the region's varied publics through its programmatic activities of workshops, conferences, blog and publications.

The Asfari Institute is a research center based at AUB since 2012 and is a solid partner in consolidating AUB commitment to serve, educate and engage the Lebanese society. The Institute is mobilized to develop a new minor program on civil society and collective action with relevant AUB faculties. Among its new activities is the consolidation of three new lines of work: Civil Society Law and Governance, Culture as Resistance, and Civil Society in Conflict and Post Conflict Setting.

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Bridging Academia and Activism

CONTENTS

13 **Recommendations**

14 **Bibliography**

Project Details

Project

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Digital Activism and the Feminist Movement

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In recent years, digital platforms have become a major tool for activists in the Middle East and a powerful way to express dissent, to disrupt and to organize. This relatively new form of activism, also known as digital activism, has proven to be effective in mobilizing a public opinion that is supportive to the goals and objectives of different campaigns. The act of using digital technologies such as phones or other internet-enabled devices "in campaigns for social and political change", has been increasingly used by citizens across the world in recent years (Joyce 2010, vii). In his article, "Small Change", author and theorist Malcolm Gladwell encourages us to "exploit the power of…distant connections [the connections made through social media] with marvelous efficiency" (Gladwell 2010). Combined with other digital platforms, these networks span the globe and bridge gaps like never before.

Why Use the Term "Digital Activism"?

In her book "Digital Activism Decoded" Joyce explains that this term refers to the set of digitally networked campaigning activities or practices that is both exhaustive and exclusive. "Exhaustive in that it encompasses all social and political campaigning activities or practices that use digital network infrastructure; exclusive in that it excludes practices that are not examples of this type of practice" (Joyce 2010). For example, the term "cyber-activism" and "online activism" are not exhaustive as they exclude the use of mobile phones and other offline digital devices.

This recent strategy has not only given activists new tools for reaching wider audiences, but allowed them to communicate and interact with each other and with their target audience(s). The immediacy of the internet paves the way of reaching the general public and even decision-makers almost instantaneously; and with a powerful message and the right approach, there is a good chance that the potential for change can be achieved. This is why, in the rise of new media, strategies for designing and implementing campaigns have been evolving. Digital technologies are being used in innovative ways to devise creative campaigns, connect like-minded people from around the world, mobilize the masses, influence public opinion and eventually push for social change.

In 2017, the #MeToo movement, which began as a hashtag on social media, widely spread around the globe demonstrating the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment, especially in the workplace. What began as a community effort to build a support system for young black and brown survivors of sexual assault spread across the world to create a network of solidarity. The network encouraged survivors of sexual harassment to come forward with their stories from all around the world, challenging patriarchal norms and victim-blaming attitudes about sexual assault. In the book "Digital Feminist Activism", authors explore how digital tools are being used to challenge rape culture and also map the experiences of those involved. They argue that engaging with feminism via digital technologies transform the participants' lives, confirming that digital platforms give people an opportunity to "voice previously hidden experiences of sexual violence, making sure they are seen, heard, and validated" (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019).

"This hashtag [#MeToo], like many others before it (#YesAllWomen, #NotOk), provided women with an opportunity to share personal experiences of sexual assault and abuse, and in doing so, to showcase the pervasiveness of such practices, while sparking dialogue and debates about how to challenge them" (Ibid.)

It goes without saying that digital platforms serve as important tools for feminist movements. Building on the momentum of the global #MeToo movement, ABAAD – Resource Center for Gender Equality launched the #ShameonWho nation-wide campaign in Lebanon in 2018, calling for the prosecution of all rapists and promoting a public opinion that supports the survivor instead of judging her. The launch of the campaign included a video of a social experiment that was conducted in more than one area in Lebanon, to showcase the negative perception and attitudes of the society towards rape victims. The campaign had a broad reach, spanning across media with 3.7 billion impressions. Since the launch of the campaign on November 6 and until the end of December 2018, 205 women and girls came forward with their stories, calling ABAAD helplines to seek support after having reported sexual assault cases. The #ShameOnWho campaign received national and international exposure and media coverage. It is noteworthy to mention that intersectionality is mainstreamed across all ABAAD's programming and campaigning. As a mobilization tool for social movements, it was also applied in the #ShameonWho campaign to dissect, identify and address the different ways in which forms of social discrimination overlap with gender and take such relationships into account when working on gender equality advocacy campaigns in Lebanon.

Additionally, although digital communication channels, including social media, help campaigns go viral by

increasing the number of people involved, it is also important to also mobilize influential institutions and entities through offline collaboration platforms, such as lobbying visits and community-led initiatives, especially if the objective is to reach the decision-makers and to advocate for law reform. "If the objective is change in government or government policy, civil society groups have demonstrated success with just modest street protests and a few digital tools" (Edwards, Howard and Joyce 2013). This argument has proven to be consistent with ABAAD's #Undress_522 campaign which aimed to abolish Article 522 of the Lebanese Penal code. The latter allowed men, who had been convicted of committed sexual assault, abduction, or statutory rape against a woman, to avoid penalty of no less than five years of hard labor if a valid contract of marriage could be provided.

What contributed to the success of the campaign was the unique strategy which combined advocacy, lobbying of stakeholders and sensitization of public opinion on the existing legal framework (see figure 1). A wide range of stakeholders were involved, including some religious institutions in Lebanon, who expressed support for the cause. The visual aspects of the campaign played a crucial role in addressing the problem, as a series of "shock" actions were organized to convey, in creative ways, the idea that forcing a woman or girl to marry her rapist meant sentencing her to lifelong rape. At the same time, ABAAD also launched the online #Undress522 petition, organized two flash mobs; one during the parliamentary meeting of the committee for administration and justice and another one at Beirut International Marathon. Several billboards of "A White Dress Doesn't Cover the Rape" were posted throughout Lebanon. Public service announcement aired on local and regional TV channels. Solidarity videos and actions by public figures were shared on social media.

Integrated approaches to affect change via Digital Activism

Inform, educate, mobilize

- Open debates, and show the power of numbers and facts
- Do this on several ecological models (i.e. micro-level (individual), meso-level (communities), exo-level (mass media, policies, governmental institutions), and macro-level (ideologies and cultural dogmas)) (Henderson & Baffour 2015)

Shock to mobilize

Mobilize through tapping on emotions

- Use personal cases, empathy
- Use lay language to communicate with larger audiences and be more accessible with your information and activist strategy

Figure 1: Integrated approach to affecting change via DA

12

The campaign resulted in a historical vote of the Lebanese parliament repealing article 522 on Thursday June 16, 2017.

#Undress_522 Campaign in Numbers

- 15 community actions were conducted in 5 regions, targeting 2021 women and men who were engaged and sensitized on article 522
- 7 NGOs actively engaged in the coalition
- 1020 individuals took part in the opinion poll based on a representative sample (gender, age, geographical coverage)
- 9.1 million reach on ABAAD's Facebook Page
- 18,400 view on Instagram
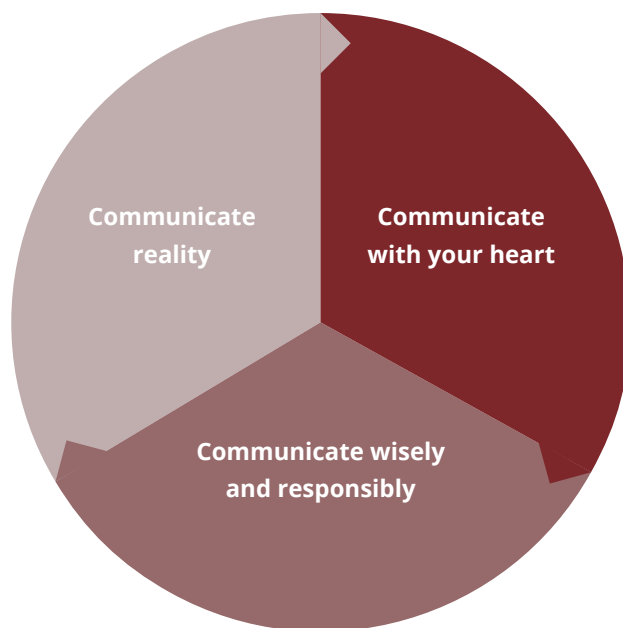- 101,400 views on YouTube
- 56,500 impressions on Twitter

Figure 2: *Rule of 3 C's*

In order to reach the highest number of people in the most effective manner, ABAAD employed the 3 C's rule: communicate reality, communicate with your heart, and communicate responsibly and wisely. It is believed within ABAAD that these three C's, combined, are the most effective in affecting change and minimizing risk or harm. It is imperative that this internal approach be used alongside a dissemination and mitigation plan. If advocacy, especially digital advocacy and activism, are not used ethically and responsibly, they may cause unintended harm.

This approach, and digital activism more broadly, are linked to digital strategy for change. One way to understand this is to see digital activism in the context of "tactical innovation, [which] is situated within a broader strategic framework in which actors create a compelling vision of the future to guide action and establish broad coalitions to reach those ends" (Squire & Gaydos 2013, 5). An example of this is a group of students using SMS and social media to reach a university's student body to improve university infrastructure accessibility for people with disabilities. In this case, the actors are the students, the vision is wider accessibility, the broader coalition is the student body (and eventually university administrative bodies), and the method is digital tools. In the case of the #522 campaign, the actors are civil society, the vision is the repeal of a discriminatory and harmful law (Law 522), and the broader coalition is the Lebanese legislators.

Keeping the above in mind, despite the success of the #522 campaign, not all digital activism or advocacy methods are successful. In Lebanon, on issues of gender-based violence (GBV) such as personal status laws and ending violence against women, though digital activism was somewhat effective, it was less effective in issues of women's political participation. In this case, it was used against candidates and other online parties involved in the digital movement. This brings us to the potential risks of digital advocacy.

As Joyce explains in Digital Activism Decoded (2010), digital activism can be used, in contrast to affecting positive change, "malicious and sometimes illegal behavior" such as "new forms of harassment and obstruction," as well as exploitation. The anonymity and easy use of digital platforms, as well as the potential lack of accountability, open users up to potential vulnerabilities.

Figure 3: *Risks of Digital Activism*

Can cause harm	• Psychological damage • Triggers (e.g. graphic videos may be triggering for survivors of sexual assault)
Peer pressure and identification	• Backlash, unexpected reactions • "We2fet 3laye" example in Lebanon, where people began to use the phrase in an unintended way
It can reinforce incorrect behavior if not complemented with field advocacy	• Digital activism is not academic, there are no citations, and people rarely check the source of information on digital platforms
It can distort facts if not done thoroughly	• The lack of citations on digital platforms cause the spread of false information, which can be detrimental to digital activism efforts
Can be used to cause harm to competitors	• Spread of false or malicious information via digital platforms
It can reinforce incorrect behavior if not complemented with field advocacy	

If not planned and implemented correctly, digital advocacy efforts can backfire. Above are some potential repercussions, including backlash, triggering content, and spread of false or malicious information to harm constituents. The above consequences cannot be fully prevented, as the nature of digital advocacy allows for free interactions on the platform, regardless of their intentions. Some regulations have been put in place, but they are not always sufficient.

Overall, there have been countless debates over the efficiency of data activism, in the sphere of feminism as well as for leftist activism more broadly. While some argue that digital activism can be effective in bridging global communities and raising awareness, Malcolm Gladwell argues that "'the revolution will not

be tweeted'" (Cummins, 2010). And while Sarah Ditum claims that "social media gives a lot more people the opportunity to be telescopic philanthropists" and that digital movements show and "encourage a movement of attitudes leading to long-term change", Lina Srivastava argues that it is the methodology of the campaign, and not the medium. The above does not suggest that these methods will be effective across the board or in any context, but that they have worked for some women's rights campaigns and have been used and tweaked over the years by experts working in the field. What comes next, with the advancement of technology and populations' growing concerns with the ongoings of media platforms and digital content (social media and other), has yet to be learned and written about.

Recommendations

1. Promote further understanding of behavioral change and information and communications technology (Lots of information shared during the process of digital advocacy; analyze information and human behavior, and be mindful of your audience)
2. Regulations need to be put in place by social media corporations and other media regulation bodies to protect minors and vulnerable populations (in a contextualized manner)
3. Create guidelines or manual for ethical digital activism
4. Educate women & girls on digital security

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