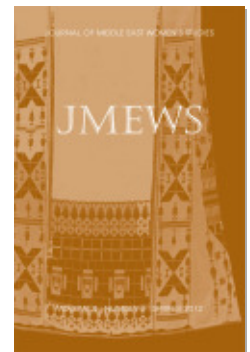# Communicating Gender in the Public Sphere: Women and Information Technologies in the MENA Region

Skalli, Loubna H., 1962-

COMMUNICATING GENDER IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: WOMEN AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES IN THE MENA

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the public sphere in the Middle East and North Africa from the perspective of women's uses of information and communication technologies. I argue that the sociopolitical transformations unfolding in many countries in the Middle East and North Africa are not taking place in the absence of women's contribution and participation. Drawing on examples from different countries, I demonstrate how women are shaping, impacting, and redefining the public sphere by producing alternative discourses and images about womanhood, citizenship, and political participation in their societies. Crusading female journalists, feminist film producers/directors, publishers, and feminist cyber "bloggers" are strategically using old and new media to participate in the production and dissemination of alternative knowledge and the creation of transgressive spaces.

The impact of new media on the public sphere in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has generated interesting reflections over the last decades. The rise of modern media is seen as playing a significant role in the emergence of ideas, identities, and discourses that "are fragment-

ing and contesting" the hegemony of authoritarian political and/or religious centers (Eickelman and Anderson 1999:1). New communications technologies, including fax, telephone and the Internet, are creating a new sense of accountability toward a public that is increasingly challenging in its demands for greater transparency in state decisions and policies. Technologies are also increasing the scope, intensity, and forms of citizens' involvement in "a multiplicity of over-lapping public spheres" (Eickelman and Salvatore 2002). The changing audio-visual landscape of the region, the rise of satellite television, and the role of Al-Jazeera in particular are seen as being among the important forces behind "the structural transformation of the Arab public sphere" (Lynch 2005).

However, whether we talk about the emergence or the transformation of the Arab public sphere, the gender dimension of this sphere usually is given only a passing recognition. The aim of this paper is to provide precisely such a gendered perspective. Discussing the public sphere remains incomplete if we do not investigate the different roles women and media play within the region. As Annabelle Sreberny rightly states, women and the media are "increasingly taken as a key index of the democratization and development of a society" (2002:271).

I argue here that women have been involved in shaping, impacting, and redefining the public sphere despite the often-institutionalized norms of exclusion and marginalization restricting their physical mobility and visibility.[1] Although such an involvement is severely undermined by class and regional differences, it is important to recognize that it was subtle and strategic for a long period of time before becoming more daring and creative over the last decades of the twentieth century. While it is not the only driving force, technology has been an enabling tool in this process. As film producers/directors, journalists, publishers, magazine editors, and/or members of organizations and research groups, an increasing number of women in the MENA are producing alternative discourses and images about womanhood, citizenship, and political participation in their societies. They are creating alternative discursive spaces where it is possible to redefine patriarchal gender roles while questioning the sociocultural, economical, political, and legal institutions constraining them. Thus, instead of highlighting the forces of exclusion that restrict women's full access to the public sphere, my focus is on women's creative initiatives to access and

impact this sphere *despite* the multiple constraints challenging them.

Drawing on examples from countries within the region, I demonstrate ways in which women strategically use old and new communication technologies to achieve greater participation in the production and dissemination of alternative knowledge bases. Examples also reveal how women are creating transformative spaces while establishing alliances at the inter/national levels to broaden their solidarity bases beyond the censoring mechanisms of the state and/or fundamentalist groups.

Without trivializing the achievements of women activists in the MENA prior to the 1980s, examples drawn from the last decades emphasize some innovative initiatives and emerging trends in the areas of press/writing, publishing, filmmaking/production, the Internet, and satellite communications. I use "communications" in a more fluid definition of the term, free from the unchecked optimism of the technologically deterministic discourse where women's empowerment is systematically equated with technological innovations. Here, communications refers to different mediums—traditional, modern, personal, and technological—that women use strategically and efficiently to organize, mobilize, and produce alternative forms of knowledge that advance their struggle. Such a fluid definition permits the appreciation of women's capacity to consciously diversify the communication tools they use to meet their goals. This is how women use communications to bargain with patriarchy and "strategize within a set of concrete constraints" (Kandiyoti 1988:274).

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The confluence of postmodernist and feminist insights has drawn our attention to the undemocratic exclusions in the idealized Habermasian model of the male bourgeois sphere.[2] My use of the public sphere in the context of the MENA region refers to open discursive spaces that include "subaltern counter-publics," where subordinated social groups such as women challenge the patriarchal public/private divisions. As Nancy Fraser explains, "Subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the

dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides" (1992:124). This "dual character" of subaltern counter-publics is certainly useful for understanding women's creation of "inner spaces" before negotiating their access to the wider public sphere in the MENA region.

The gradual inclusion of women into the public sphere, though a remarkable development in the modern history of many countries in the region, is still incomplete and contested. This is because the public sphere has remained as the self-acclaimed space of male absolute power and dominance until relatively recently. Women's access to this sphere is contested because the male-dominated politico-religious centers of power in Muslim societies remain ambivalent in their positions toward the scope of women's mobility as well their visibility. As a recent, large-scale survey on Arab attitudes confirms, this ambivalence is reflected by the views of the general public in Muslim societies. The survey focused on Arab attitudes toward knowledge, good governance, and gender equality, the three main deficits/challenges identified by the first Arab Human Development Report (UNDP 2003). While Arab respondents to the survey unequivocally praised the pursuit of knowledge and condemned authoritarian rule, they expressed the limits of their democratic aspirations with regard to gender equality and empowerment. In other words, "Arabs stood for gender equality in education but not in employment…. Arabs expressed support for building the human capabilities of women but not for their utilization" (UNDP 2003:2).

This schizophrenic position toward women's formal access to the public sphere in the region is anything but new: its intensity and manifestation might vary with the changing politico-economic realities of the countries, but it remains a phenomenon that women activists have been working with, through, and against. This is to say that central to women's movement and activism in the MENA is precisely this struggle to have their "internal public spaces" open up and extend to the larger public sphere of the nation-state (Daoud 1997; Moghadam 2003a; Sadiqi 2000).

Women's movements for emancipation in the MENA are becoming more organized in pushing for reforms that legitimate women's full participation in public life and in revising the images and discourses defining women's realities. Undoubtedly, women's movements in the region have not followed the same path in all countries or been shaped

by the same forces. Each is determined by a confluence of forces, the most significant of which are socioeconomic and cultural conditions, state policies, and regional political developments. Despite existing differences, however, there are important commonalities in the continuous struggle to legitimate access to the public sphere and the relentless effort to participate in defining the terms and conditions of women's own inclusion into this space (Al-Hamad 2002; Collectif 95 1999; Karam 1998; Moghadam 1995, 2003b).

In most MENA countries, access to the public sphere does not necessarily translate into gender equality or women's achievement of their politico-economic and legal rights. True, the number of women in schools, private and public sectors of activities, political structures, and decision-making positions is slowly on the rise. However, the significance of these numbers is threatened by the vigilant eye of the political regime and Islamist groups and very often negated by conservative family laws institutionalizing discrimination. Thus, while the sources of resistance remain numerous, women are forced to be more strategic in their interventions and creative in their actions and alliances if they want to transform their realities in a meaningful way.

Women's strategies over the last decades have become more diverse and dynamic. Activists work on many fronts by raising consciousness, engaging in grassroots mobilization, conducting research, and collecting and publishing pertinent data that serves as a basis for advocacy work. These efforts are increasingly expressed on, among other things, the pages of newspapers, magazines, and periodicals, on television programs (including satellite television), radio programs, documentaries, feature films and on the Internet. Women use different mediums to articulate their needs and multiply the opportunities of creating alternative discourses on womanhood and citizenship, as sections below will reveal.

ARAB WOMEN IN/AND MEDIA: EMERGING TRENDS AND TENDENCIES

Research on women and the media in the MENA region is relatively recent and scarce. One of the areas most documented is the negative stereotyping of women in print and broadcast media.[3] Greater interest has been expressed through women's journalistic experiences as well as

the social and political implications of women's entrance to print culture (Akharbach and Rerhaye 1992; Baron 1994; Khiabany and Sreberny 2004). Existing scholarship explores ways in which contemporary female journalists use their professional skills to advance women's struggle and further the work of the pioneers in journalism who participated with their pens and voices in debates over the "woman question."

In a region where female illiteracy claims a high percentage of women, it would seem almost irrelevant to talk about women's appropriation of the written word as a strategic act in the overall struggle for emancipation. Yet, writing by women is precisely that: a strategic and transgressive act that increasingly permits women's voices to enter the larger public sphere despite the multiple filters seeking to neutralize its subversive impulses. The subversive potential comes from an attempt to interpret reality in ways that contradict, correct, and even discredit reductionist dominant male discourses (Skalli in press).

Some women journalists in the MENA have become more confident, competent, and aggressive when informing the public about subjects considered taboo. Whether we talk about domestic violence, rape, female genital mutilation, or sexual harassment, individual journalists are contributing to breaking the culture of silence surrounding women's reality. The efforts of reporter Rana Husseini have become a classic example, as she has unveiled the cultural and legal institutions directly or indirectly sanctioning "honor crimes" in Jordanian society. In speaking out about it, she has not only triggered public debate around an overlooked issue but also provided support activists with concrete data to press for legal reform (CMF-MENA 2000:33). In Algeria, female reporters like Horia Saihi and Salima Tlemcani contributed to breaking the heavy silence Islamic groups imposed on professional women (Rayan 1998), by collecting women's testimonies of war trauma and ideological bigotry.

In Morocco, investigations of sexual exploitation, domestic violence and harassment at school and work have been published since the 1980s by commercial and feminist magazines. In the mid-1990s, journalists from *Femmes du Maroc* and *Citadine* extended a practice initiated in the mid-1980s by *Thamania Mars* (March 8), an early feminist periodical published by the Union of Feminist Action (Skalli 2006; Lewis 1993).

Despite the multiple episodes of censorship and threats from conservative groups, professional women remain determined to give a voice

to the marginalized by articulating in public what society seeks to over-look, silence, or forget. The cost of publicizing this type of information is often very high, as progressive women journalists often are targeted by both religious and political circles that perceive their voices as a threat and deviance (Abu Fadil 2001). The murder of Hedaya Sultan Al-Salem, a noted Kuwaiti female editor, by a policeman is allegedly a reaction to her criticism of him and his tribe. The arrest, trial, and sentencing of Neziha Rejiba demonstrate the intolerance of Tunisian local authorities to the writings of the human rights activist and editor-in-chief of the Arab edition of the e-magazine *Kalima*. The killing of female journal-ists in Algeria is seen as *jihad*: "We shall fight with the sword those who fight us with the pen," said the Armed Islamic Group (International Pen 2003). Algerian author Aicha Lemsine comments on the price of women's speech:

> Algerian women writers live under the twin threats of religious funda-mentalism and a quasi-fascist military regime. For us, women's issues are issues of survival, our financial resources are nil and our psycho-logical balance is weakened by fear and anxiety.... The intimidations of the regime and the threats of the Islamists have one purpose: to reduce us to silence. Fear is supposed to drive us away from critical thinking and writing, or stress and exile render us unable to produce any liter-ary creation.... Arab and Muslim women need not only to have their lives saved, but also opportunities to create and write. Our voices must be strengthened; we need a network that will give us space for free expression, publication and international media exposure (Tax 1995).

Being a vocal female media professional in the MENA is an act of heroism. Women work within a context rife with physical, psychologi-cal, and emotional blackmail in addition to gender discrimination. The socioeconomic and political structures media professionals function within are based on entrenched power differentials that disadvantage women irrespective of their competence or areas of expertise. Thus, while the number of women journalists in print and electronic media is on the increase and a greater number of female students are in jour-nalism schools (Dabbous-Sensenig 2000), women remain considerably underrepresented in management and decision-making positions. Egypt stands out as an exception to the rule: the number of women journalists

in print and broadcast media is estimated higher than that of men, with many important positions occupied by women (Dabbous 2002). Yet, the case of Egypt also tells us that the number of women journalists does not guarantee an improvement in the representation of women or the media's more supportive role (Gallagher 2002; Sakr 2002).

In 2002, the Cairo-based New Woman's Research Center conducted a large-scale content analysis of 18 Egyptian series aired regionally during Ramadan. The results showed that 500 episodes included violence against women, with 43% of women characters subjected to violence and 13 percent killed. Since Egyptian cultural and media industries play a strategic role in the region, the researchers used these findings to demonstrate Arab media's failure to advance women's justice or to enlighten the public about women's oppression (Raad 2004).

There is an increasing realization among activists and media professionals in the MENA that the creative use of communication can participate in refashioning the political culture and challenging the definitions and confines of their roles in society. This is precisely what women's groups and activists seek to capitalize on by broadening the scope of their intervention and fusing research with action. An important development in the region over the last decades is the creation of larger networks of solidarity and alliances among activists, advocacy groups, media professionals, and academic researchers. This trend is reflected in the high number of media workshops, training sessions, conferences, and study days on women and media that are organized in the region. Additionally, centers and research groups have been created to target both the media and its professionals.

In 1999, the Jordanian-based Arab Women Media Center was founded by Al Emam Mahassen, the first woman editor-in-chief of a Jordanian weekly and the first woman elected to the ten-member press council. The center seeks to play a pivotal role in journalists' lives and careers by offering training sessions and sharing information and experiences at the local and regional levels. One of its goals is to raise the public's consciousness about the long tradition of negative stereotyping and establish an advocacy structure to facilitate changes in discriminatory policies.

Similar motivations were behind the organization of the first Women and Media Forum, held in Abu Dhabi in 2002. The forum is an

extension of the efforts from the Extraordinary Arab Women's Summit, held in Cairo in 2000. More than 1,000 Arab women met in the media forum to denounce the media's trivialization of women's lives and its failure to support women's achievements. Participants in the forum called for a large-scale transformation of the legal, social, and intellectual dimensions of the media so that societies in the region can move "Towards an Interactive Media Sphere."

Although the forum acquired more of a diplomatic character than a democratic space for contestation (Sakr 2002a), the initiative signaled the urgency of women and media-related issues. The forum stands as an historical moment when media experts, professionals, and scholars formally denounced the long tradition of gender bias in the media and the constraints limiting female professionals. The Abu Dhabi Declaration, issued by the forum participants and organizers, documents this.

THE PROMISES OF SATELLITE TELEVISION

One of the important trends in the last decade is the emergence of the powerful, professional female journalist on Arab satellite television. Satellite television in the MENA is expected to destabilize old images of passive womanhood by presenting images of powerful women whose appeal is not restricted to their physical traits. Amin Hussein argues that satellite technology "has the potential to empower Arab women in the exercise of their right to seek and receive information and ideas" (2001).

For Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi, this vision has materialized to a certain extent. The emergence of articulate and competent women on Arab satellite channels signals women's "aggressive invasion" of the new public space of the "digital *umma*" (2005:4) but also admiration for those who embrace their professionalism with courage. Ghada Fakhri, Muntaha al-Rimhy, news anchors Jumana Nammour and Khaduja Bin Guna, economics expert Farah al-Baraqawi, and Palestine-based Al Jazeera reporters Shirin Abu 'Aqla and Jivara al-Badri are women who have won over viewers with their eloquence, professionalism, and journalistic skills. These qualities are also attracting the attention of media critics, researchers, and professionals in the field. According to Ali Aziz, columnist of the Egyptian magazine *Al-Nuqqad* (The Critics), "History will remember that day when there was no one to speak

up in the entire Arab nation, from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf, but women such as Shirin Abu 'Aqla and Jivara al Badri and Leila Aouda…. while male leaders and gallon-hat-wearing generals have disappeared from our sight and hearing" (Mernissi 2005:11).

Female journalists are no longer content with competing for visibility and powerful positions at the local level. The changing context in which the media are operating today is creating an environment where "Arab women are competing for pan-Arab influence and, beyond it, for global sway" (8). The stiff competition between and among Arab satellite channels is favorable to the promotion of female professional skills. As Naomi Sakr rightly observes, "Channels that want to be viable are required to rely much more heavily on high-impact 'brands' and product lines" (Sakr 2001b). This suggests that with the rise of satellite television, a new dynamic problematizes the roles, images, and position of the female media professional. While the media industries capitalize on the intellectual competence and rising popularity of the powerful female media figure, the female professional is gaining greater negotiating power within the competitive media market. This dynamic is not to be taken as a "revolution" in the profession because of technological possibilities. It simply indicates that interesting trends are emerging within a context generally hostile to women's presence in the public sphere.

PUBLISHING HOUSES: THE POWER OF THE PRINTED WORD

One of the significant initiatives that has been undertaken by women since the 1980s is the creation of publishing houses by and for women in some MENA countries. The initiatives translate a will to increase women's voices among the reading public and validate the alternative knowledge being produced. Iran's Roshangaran Publishing, Morocco's *Le Fennec*, and Egypt/Lebanon's *Nour* demonstrate women's efforts to engender an otherwise exclusive masculine sphere of activity.

In 1983, Shahla Lahiji founded Roshangaran Publishing and became Iran's first woman publisher. A prolific writer, feminist activist, and director of this prominent publishing house, Lahiji has since published over 200 titles, many of which are by women or deal with women's issues. She is also the director of a women's studies center and an active defender of women's rights. Her work as a publisher and women's rights

advocate disturbs Iranian conservatives and local authorities,[4] but Lahiji estimates over 400 Iranian women publishers, many of whom directly contribute to women's projects of knowledge production (Khiabany and Sreberny 2004).

The founding of Morocco's Le Fennec in 1987 represents one of the early initiatives to establish a publishing house that promotes writing by and on women (Maroc Hebdo International 2000). The approach of founder Leila Chaouni is innovative in that she promotes the work of individual women writers while working closely with both male and female members of research groups and organizations fighting for women's rights. Over the years, Le Fennec has made serious contributions to the interdisciplinary and multilingual research on women in North Africa by strengthening regional research networks among Moroccan, Tunisian, and Algerian activists, media professionals, and academics; bridging the linguistic gap by publishing texts in both Arabic and French; and bridging the gender gap by encouraging men and women researchers/activists to work, write, and publish together. The collaborative work has resulted in a rich body of knowledge on North African women's lives ranging from the political, legal, cultural and religious to the most personal (Femmes Maghreb 2000).

Established in 1994, Nour works to "encourage writing for women, by women, on women" (Al-Ali 2000; Guenema and Wassef 1999) and focuses on literature, social sciences, and general culture. In 1998, the founding members decided to split the association's responsibilities by maintaining the Nour publishing house in Cairo and making Nour Lebanon a center for research and writing on Arab women's issues. Other activities include creating larger forums for knowledge-sharing and spaces for network building for women in the Muslim world—the group's newsletter is an attempt to achieve these goals. Nour organized the first Arab Women's Book Fair in Cairo, in November 1995, a remarkable multicultural and multilingual space acknowledging women's writing talents and establishing bridges between Arab women's voices.

Writing, publishing, and producing alternative forms of knowledge on women are among the driving forces behind the creation of research of groups in many MENA countries. An important development since the 1980s has been the emergence of spaces and initiatives to produce the types of knowledge needed to meet women's strategic feminist needs, re-

search centers or groups that may or may not be affiliated with academic centers. A review of all the centers in the MENA is outside the goal of this paper[5] but what is worth noting are the similarities in their aims and approaches despite their sociopolitical differences. Behind virtually all these initiatives is the ambition to provide pertinent information previously unavailable to policymakers and the general public because it was considered as either irrelevant or unimportant, e.g., domestic violence, rape, and sexual harassment at work or on the street. The other but equally important ambition is to produce alternative bodies of knowledge to complement the often abridged or incomplete official accounts.

In this context, the work of the Women and Memory Forum stands out as one of the most remarkable contributions of women's activism in the last decade of the twentieth century (Guenema and Wassef 1999:53-5). The project that began in 1995 has sought to address the injustices mainstream orthodox history has committed against women, hence the attempts to rewrite history from a gender-sensitive perspective and recuperate the forgotten and/or marginalized female voices that shaped the history and culture of their society. "History matters in the Middle East," as David K. Blanks rightly observes in his "Gendering History":

> …and the history of women is being used by scholars/activists to critique narratives favored by conservative religious and political groups and to challenge constructions of gender based upon those narratives. Research on the history of women and the discourse of gender provides women's advocacy groups with the arguments they need to discredit the myths and misconceptions about Middle Eastern women that prevent them from entering the public space. Because history in the Middle East is so highly politicized, the point still needs to be made that women participated in major historical events and that feminism is not a [W]estern import (Guenema and Wassef 1999:16).

The initiative is innovative because the group combines the written, oral, and visual forms of women's communication in order to valorize all of them. By using oral narratives, life stories, and testimonies, the forum seeks to change women's self-perception and the perception the entire society has toward them. In publishing *An Introduction to Women's Issues in Words and Images* (among other book titles), the group

seeks to refashion the consciousness of a whole new generation and re-construct the collective/historical memory with a more gender-sensitive material.

The above examples direct us to ways in which women in the MENA diversify their uses of communication in their struggle over the public sphere. Women increasingly strategize their uses of communication to better advance their call for a revision in the laws and policies restricting their citizenship rights and freedoms. Activists increasingly diversify their use of communications because they work on more than one front: they seek to target the state and its institutions by sensitizing them to the rewards of gender equality to the project of sustainable development. At the same time, they target civil society organizations and the general public with the hope of sensitizing them to the high cost of excluding women from the project of democratization.

THE POWER OF THE CINEMATIC IMAGE: THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL IN THE SYMBOLIC ORDER

Cinema is a powerful ideological tool that shapes mental images and the perception of social reality. The perspective of MENA women filmmakers, though barely explored in depth, contributes to reshaping the dominant discourses and images about women. Since 1927, when Mofeeda Mahmoud Ghoneim (known as Aziza Amir) gave the Arab cinema its first long feature film, women filmmakers and directors have used a feminine "lens" to capture and articulate distinctive angles of women's realities and sensibilities. Though limited in numbers, women's productions have managed to survive censorship from the state, religious groups, and occasionally the public itself (Abu-Lughod 2005; Ibrahim 2005).

Whether or not filmmakers identify their work as feminist, their camera work offers an aesthetic vision that can be personal, bold, creative, challenging, and disturbing at the same time. Through fiction and documentary, female filmmakers are beginning to offer a reinterpretation of social reality that affirms women's agency and translates the complexity of women's worlds and identities. In particular, women's camerawork suggests the potential for visual media to counter dominant representations of womanhood.

Egyptian filmmaker Atteyat al Abnoudi's classic 1971 short film *Hussan El Ttain* (Horse of Mud) has established her as a pioneer in women's documentary filmmaking and ushered a new generation of women's artistic production (Wassef 1998). Abnoudi uses the documentary format to explore the impact of class and gender on women's daily lives. As she puts it, "I'm not only a documentary filmmaker; I'm also a researcher and a social worker. I'm using the profession I'm good at to expose things" (Digges 1998). What Abnoudi exposes are women's struggles in a society that restricts the meaning of their full citizenship. In 1992's *Elli Baa Welli Eshtra* (Sellers and Buyers) and 1995's *Rawya*, she depicts the challenges faced by female-headed households to support themselves and their families in Cairo. *Girls Still Dream* (Ahlam El Banat, 1995) explores the problems related to girls' early marriages. In 1996's *Ayyam Al Demokrateyya* (Democracy Days), Abnoudi documents the experiences of female candidates in the 1995 Egyptian parliamentary elections and the obstacles they face. In all her films, Abnoudi communicates her concerns and convictions to the larger public.

In Iran as elsewhere, filmmaking is "an intensely political process," and the film industry is heavily controlled by men. Despite this, Iranian women have been gradually imposing themselves on the national and international scenes with productions that speak to the socioreligious and political dimensions of women's lives in the postrevolution era. Samira Makhmalbaf, one of the most established filmmakers, won the 2000 Cannes Jury Prize for *Blackboards*, which recounts the trials of two traveling teachers in Kurdistan. Marzieh Mashkini won a prize at the Toronto Film Festival for *The Day I Became a Woman*, an eloquent rendering of the lives of three Iranian women metaphorically in dialogue with their own society.

Rakhshan Bani Etemad is the leading figure in contemporary Iranian cinema who injects her projects with political and social commitment. Her documentaries and films, such as *Nargess* and *Banoo-Ye Ordibehesht* (Lady in May), deal with poverty, crime, divorce, and polygamy (Farsaie 2004). Despite her unabashed interest in strong political and social issues and Iran's strict censoring mechanisms, she was recognized in 1991 as Best Director by Iran's prestigious Fajr Film Festival.

However, women's cinematic voices are often costly if not silenced. When Tahmineh Milani's *Nimeh-Ye Penhan* (The Hidden Half) was

shown in 2001, she was arrested immediately and interrogated before being released on probation after three days (thanks only to public protest at home and abroad) (Farsaie 2004).

Similar efforts to increase the visibility of women's perspectives are provided by the work of Algerian Assia Djebar and Horria Saihi despite multiple death threats on their lives. Novelist and essayist Djebar turned to filmmaking with *La Nouba des Femmes du Mont Chenoua* to document women's cultural histories and roles in Algerian society (Ellerson nd; Salhi 2004). Her work is part of a larger project to liberate women's vision. As she explains, "I realized that the woman was forbidden any relationship to the image. While her image cannot be taken, she does not own it either. Since she is shut away, she looks on the inside. She can only look at the outside if she is veiled, and then, only with one eye. I decided then, that I would make of my camera this eye of the veiled woman" (Ellerson nd).

Horria Saihi, on the other hand, denounces the atrocities committed by fanatics in the name of religion and tradition in Algeria. As one of the leading Algerian documentary filmmakers, she explains that "my main goal is to break [Islamist] propaganda, to try to show the world how they really live … We need to write the real story of Algeria" (Rayan 1998). Her work takes her to the Death Triangle, one of the most dangerous areas in Algeria, to document the brave Algerian women fighting the Islamists. *Algerie des Femmes* recounts the horror of kidnapping, torture, and rape inflicted on Muslim women. Restricted by government censorship and threatened by religious dogmatism, Saihi inscribes her work within a larger struggle for truth and justice. "The struggle is not only against terrorism," she explains, "but against the politics of exclusion. I know what awaits me in the end is a bullet in my head, but what kills me more is censorship when I am not allowed to produce or create" (Ellerson nd). In 1995, Saihi was awarded the Courage in Journalism Award by the International Women's Foundation.

In Morocco, Farida Belyazid exposes the contradictory demands that tradition and modernity place on Moroccan women. Her first film, *les Portes du Ciel*, is a semiautobiographical rendering of the spiritual and physical journey of a young Moroccan woman in search of a peaceful reconciliation with her country and culture. Her second feature film, 1999's *Ruse de Femmes* (Women's Wiles), is a retelling of a popular folk

tale to valorize women's intellectual capacities. The film that seduced the Moroccan public across gender, generation, and class lines recounts the tales of a merchant daughter outwitting the son of a king; set on subduing the "rebellious" side of the young girl in a fashion reminiscent of the *Taming of the Shrew,* the prince's son gets a series of humbling lessons from the young girl.

This brief overview of MENA women's filmmaking suggests that although film culture is not developed evenly across the countries of the region, women are carving out a space for their talents and stories. The few projects discussed above reveal a common concern about issues of representation, expression of alternative voices, and the articulation of a vision that challenges dominant images about women.

ACTIVISTS, THE INTERNET, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Access and use of the Internet in the MENA are clearly defined by gender, age, class, and regional differences. The advent of the Internet in the region has been slow and women's access limited to an estimated six percent of the population. Constraints that prevent the region and women from reaping the benefits of the information society include the cost of a computer/connection, low computer literacy, relevance of language and Internet material, exclusionary patriarchal ideologies on- and off-line, and censorship (Al-Zu'bi 2003). Despite these real challenges, the number of users seems to be increasing rapidly by introducing the technology to educational institutions and the multiplying number of cyber cafes throughout different centers in the region (Weaver 2004).

Emerging research on women and the Internet in MENA indicates that the newer technology is beginning to affect social and gender relations as well as facets of public life in ways that are only beginning to be understood (Weaver 2004:139). Internet use by gender activists in particular signals the emergence of new, empowering trends that could impact the gendered nature of the public sphere if technology's potential is exploited fully. Fereshteh Nouraie-Simone's investigation into the interaction of global communications with Iranian society documents the emergence of an Iranian "blog community known as Weblogestan," where discussions range from personal dis/likes to gender politics and feminist aspirations (2005:64). The community of female "bloggers"

became cyber-visible when a twenty-four-year-old woman launched the first blog, in November 2001, with the online identity of "lady sun" (64). The community of women bloggers includes Tehran-based journalists, NGO activists, and literary and social critics.

All accounts seem to suggest that the technology promises to be enabling and empowering educated women in politically and religiously constrained environments. For women activists, the technology is useful in at least three interrelated areas. First, it permits access to information and knowledge outside the mechanisms of censorship, so that relevant and pertinent information can be received and retrieved in a faster, more cost-effective and timely fashion. Second, it increases the volume of women's voices, initiatives, and activities at the regional and inter/national levels without relying exclusively on traditional media. Third, it encourages women to think about new ways to establish professional relations, forge alliances, and broaden the scope of their interventions.

To translate some of these promises into reality, important initiatives are beginning to take place through the joint efforts of local and international organizations—this was the case of the First Regional Symposium on Women and Information/Communication Technologies (ICT), held in Cairo in December 2003. The symposium brought together policymakers from fifteen Arab countries, international organizations, civil society agencies, and public and private companies. The aim of the symposium was to exchange expertise about innovative ways to support women's development in the ICT sector at the regional level and to explore how to build awareness on gender considerations, policies, and strategies to ensure women's access to ICT. The meeting also established the Information Technology Arab Regional Women Task Force in preparation for the World Summit of the Information Society, to be held in Tunis.

Prior to this, the Arab States Regional Office of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) launched the Arab Women Connect website (Arabwomenconnect.org), both in Arabic and English. The website contains studies, reports, and statistics on Arab women as provided by women's organizations in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. In the words of UNIFEM Regional Project Director Haifa Abu Ghazaleh, "The website aims at facilitating access to much-needed information, analyses and

resources on Arab women to policy-makers, researchers, donors, UN agencies and Arab women's organizations" (Husseini 2000:1). Over the last few years, there has been a steady increase in the number of sites hosted by Arab/Muslim women organizations catering to the different needs of women in the Muslim world.

Also important is the emergence of women's electronic magazines. Although the phenomenon of "e-zines" is recent, and its scope or implications remain unexplored, it suggests that women are trying to carve out a space in the cyberworld to reach a larger and geographically more diversified readership. The Iranian feminist magazines *Bad Jens* and *IranDokht* are interesting examples. *Bad Jens* refers to itself as an "Iranian feminist newsletter" and issued its first edition in March 2000 with its coverage of the various activities on Women's International Day. The initiative of Tehran-based feminist activist Mahsa Shekarloo seeks to increase the visibility of alternative feminine voices and "deconstruct stereotypes" in Iran and the West about the dominant images of passivity and victimization produced about Iranian women. The magazine includes interviews with Iranian feminists, artists, and activists and publicizes their work, activities, and various activist achievements.

Similar motivations characterize the California-based *IranDokht*. The online magazine expresses in its mission the desire "to cross boundaries, surmount limitations, and traverse the divide between East and West. This media outlet, by and for Iranian women, empowers and demystifies the voices of Iranian females, celebrating an identity that has all too frequently been cast as the 'other.'"

Clearly, more research is needed to assess the impact and reach of these online publications, and more documentation on the uses of this technology is needed before we can state with confidence, as Musa Shteiwi does, that the newer technology is "significantly contributing to the silent gender revolution in the Arab world" (2003).

CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN ENGENDERED PUBLIC SPACE

The sociopolitical transformations unfolding in many MENA countries are not taking place in the absence of women's contributions and participation. I have demonstrated in this paper the multiple ways in which women are engaged in a gradual process of redefining the public

sphere in their societies despite the economic, political, cultural, and legal constraints imposed on them. The strategic use of communication by women reveals a search for a lucid articulation between local realities and an indigenized vision of women's struggles for their legal, economic, and political rights. Creative efforts by activists are beginning to allow the establishment of meaningful networks of solidarity and information-sharing at the local, regional, and international levels.

Muslim women are using communication creatively and assertively to produce knowledge that challenges hegemonic gender discourses and definitions. The examples used throughout this paper point toward women's relentless efforts to engender the public sphere and promote a culture of equality celebrating partnership instead of hierarchical gender relations.

It is easy to be skeptical about the portent of women's uses of communication within an environment that weakens women's legal position and marginalizes their political and economic participation. It is also easy to dismiss the implications of women's communication strategies when access to technology is largely still an urban and elite phenomenon marked by class differences. However, the subtle nature of women's activism and the fairly limited scope of interventions should not urge us to condemn existing initiatives to silence or invisibility nor minimize their symbolic and/or real transgressive acts. The impact of women's interventions and initiatives are often more subtle and symbolic than openly radical or revolutionary—this is precisely how women activists bargain with structures of patriarchy in the MENA. Attempts to measure women's interventions by standards of achievement in regions with different politicoeconomic and sociocultural realities are simply counterproductive. Hasty comparisons risk condemning women's creative efforts to double marginality: overlooked by the local hegemonic structures of power, they are condemned to invisibility by unrealistic comparative measures.

It is important therefore to celebrate each initiative valorizing MENA women's voices. The paucity of democratic spaces and the fragility of democratic institutions makes women's voices all the more meaningful and oppositional. Years of advocacy and agitation by Moroccan women's groups to change the discriminatory legal texts of the *Mudawana* (Personal Status Code) resulted in hard-won revisions in 2004. Public denunciations of discriminatory laws related to divorce,

child custody, or the age of marriage (to name just a few) have been appearing in Moroccan feminist/feminine periodicals and magazines since the 1960s. Over the last decades, the strategies used by activists have ranged from press conferences to peaceful demonstrations, sophisticated media campaigning, and the creation of solidarity networks (Skalli 2006). After decades of pressing for their political rights, Kuwaiti women have finally seen an amendment to the Kuwaiti electoral law that would allow them to vote and stand in parliamentary and local elections. The media strategies and ideological sacrifices that have contributed to these achievements have been diverse and adapted to local constraints. This is happening, even though analysis of the political economy of media ownership and control in MENA confirms that both state and the market-owned media have built-in mechanisms minimizing and neutralizing women's oppositional views and voices (Sakr 2001).

Activists, researchers, and human rights advocates are creating new possibilities for debating, researching and articulating their gendered vision of more egalitarian societies. The articulation of women's voices and views in print and broadcast journalism, research centers, publications, films, and cyberspace are disturbing if not destabilizing the "sacrosanct" division between the public and private realms of life and experience.

Taken together, the efforts and initiatives discussed above have managed to start the process of mainstreaming gender issues, raising awareness about women's complex realities, and interrogating the silence around family laws and other forms of institutionalized physical, mental and psychological violence. Women's use of communication contributes to the production of a valuable capital of knowledge that MENA leaders and policymakers cannot afford to overlook if they seriously want their countries to achieve a meaningful level of sustainable human development.

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NOTES

1. This paper focuses mostly on secular women's groups, organizations, and activities, as its limited space does not permit an investigation into the creative and pertinent communication strategies utilized by Islamic women's groups and Islamic feminisms in the MENA.

2. Habermas' early conceptualization of the emergence and decay of bourgeois public sphere has been criticized extensively for its idealization of a space overlooking the existence of prebourgeois and nonbourgeois forums in which other classes engaged in rich debates. For a comprehensive discussion of these limitations, see the excellent collection of articles in Craig Calhoun's *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992). Feminist critics such as Johanna Meehan, *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), and J. McLaughlin, "Feminism, the Public Sphere, Media and Democracy," in *Media, Culture and Society* 2(88):427-34, have contested the gendered nature of the public sphere and denounced the patriarchal ideology behind the division of public/private areas of life. Their revision of Habermas' model calls for a redefinition of the category "political" to include different social and personal experiences already imbued with power relations, hence always relevant as political issues. The different criticisms do not suggest that the concept loses its validity or vitality as much as underlining the need to contextualize the concept within current historical developments. The concept also needs to be revised to account for the important temporal and spatial displacement of technologically mediated communications that increasingly shape most social interactions.

3. Interestingly, this line of research is produced not only within academic circles but by research centers and women's organizations such as the North African Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité. The goal is to document ways in which gender biases in the media reflect as well as reinforce dominant patriarchal institutions, beliefs, and practices in Muslim societies. Negative portrayal, all studies confirm, prevents an accurate understanding of women's contributions to their societies' development and trivializes any achievements or changes taking place in their lives. Stereotyping also freezes women in historical images and discourses that betray the unwillingness of the Muslim male un/conscious to rethink womanhood and femaleness in more realistic terms. See K. Sadek, *Woman and Media* (Konrad-Adenaeur Stiftung: Cairo, 2004) and various documents about women and the media produced by the Tunis-based Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR) and the Jordan-based Arab Women Media Center.

4. See Shahla's interview in which she recounts her imprisonment after participating in the Berlin conference ("Feminism Needs to be Translated Here," *Bad Jens Iranian Feminist Newsletter*, 21 November 2000).

5. For a review of some of these centers, see CMF; for an interesting discussion of Egyptian research centers like Markaz Dirasat Al-Mar'a Al-Gedida (the New Woman's Research Center) and others, see Nadje Al-Ali's *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

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