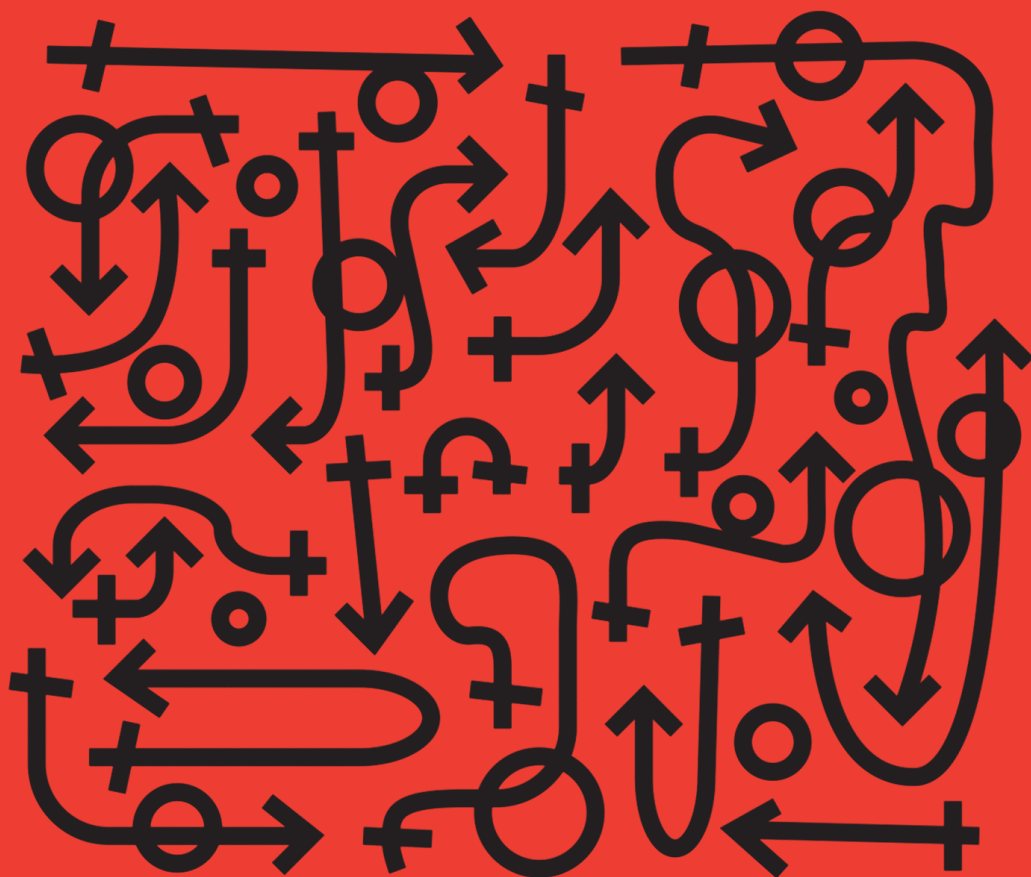


GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2015

Sexual rights and the internet



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch 2015

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YEMEN

“LIKE A RAVING MONSTER”: USING THE INTERNET TO CONFRONT SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE STREET IN YEMEN



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Introduction

In order to confront the phenomenon of sexual harassment against women and girls in the streets of Yemen, a group of female activists used the internet to circumvent the societal and cultural restrictions that have prevented women from speaking out about this long-ignored epidemic.

This report presents an example demonstrating how the internet helped Yemeni women speak out, arguably for the first time, against sexual harassment. Yemeni traditional norms have contributed to maintaining a deafening silence about this topic, forcing women to endure abuse for decades.

So what is it that made the internet the medium of choice for women to take this bold step? And how effective was the campaign? Those are the main questions that this report addresses, while highlighting the limitations of the internet in this respect and concluding with ideas that could support similar efforts in the future.

Policy and political background

Yemen is one of the world's most conservative countries, where addressing sexual rights of any kind is highly controversial due to extremely conservative norms that are influenced by a strict interpretation of Shari'a law.¹ Articles 263, 264, 267 and 268 of the Yemeni Penal Code impose penalties ranging from 100 lashes² to death by stoning for non-marital sex.³ Yemen is one of seven countries where homosexuality is punishable by death.⁴

Similarly, the country's 1990 press law prohibits the publishing of content deemed in violation of religious and cultural norms.⁵ With strict interpretation

of Shari'a law, it becomes apparent that the legal system would place content advocating for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) sexual rights in the prohibited category.

When the state-owned magazine *Al Thaqafiya* published an article in 2012 suggesting that homosexuality should be allowed based on a review of a lesbian love scene in the Egyptian film *Heena Maysara*, the writer received death threats and was accused by religious and political leaders of corrupting society, leading to the shutdown of the magazine and investigation of the editorial team.⁶

While there are no national laws governing the internet,⁷ nudity and pornographic content and LGBT websites are also categorised as a violation of Shari'a law and are often blocked. The act of blocking the sites is largely approved by the Yemeni society, as would be the case in Arab countries in general.⁸

Sexual harassment: An under-reported epidemic

Despite the fact that sexual abuse and harassment are crimes under Article 273 of the Yemeni Penal Code, women who fall victim to these crimes do not usually talk about it openly, mainly due to fear of being shamed by their family or community.⁹ They are often blamed and scorned by society, and are often unable to create a family or even marry.¹⁰

A 2009 study found that over 90% of Yemeni women surveyed indicated that they had been exposed to some kind of sexual harassment in the past.¹¹ The cultural norms in Yemen compel women

1 Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. (2004). *Yemen: Situation for homosexuals in Yemen, including societal attitudes*. Ottawa: IRBC. www.refworld.org/docid/41501c7615.html

2 The words “whipping” and “flogging” are explicitly used in the Penal Code.

3 Law 12-1994, Yemeni Penal Code (in Arabic). www.unodc.org/tldb/showDocument.do?documentId=11097&country=YEM&language=ARA

4 www.refugeelegalaidinformation.org/yemen-lgbti-resources

5 Law 25-1990, Yemeni Press and Publications Law (in Arabic). yemen-media.gov.ye/DefaultDET.aspx?SUB_ID=418

6 Ireland, D. (2010, 1 May). Yemen Mag Shut For Pro-Gay Article. *LGBT Asylum News*. madikazemi.blogspot.se/2010/05/yemen-mag-shut-for-pro-gay-article.html

7 There have been calls to introduce a cyber crime law to deal with issues ranging from cyber terrorism to national security threats, but the law has not been adopted mainly due to the dysfunctional state of the parliament since 2011.

8 Al-Saqaf, W. (2014). *Breaking digital firewalls: Analyzing Internet censorship and circumvention in the Arab world*. Örebro: Örebro University. oru.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:710477/FULLTEXT02.pdf

9 Manea, E. (2010). Yemen. In S. Kelly, & J. Breslin (Eds.), *Women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress amid resistance*. Washington, DC: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

10 Ibid.

11 AP. (2009, 15 December). Harassment across Arab world drives women inside. *USA Today*. usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2009-12-15-sexual-harassment_N.htm

to dress modestly and cover all parts of their bodies except their face and hands, and if a woman has part of her hair showing, she could be subject to street harassment.¹² However, there have been cases when fully covered women wearing a *niqab*¹³ were also harassed. Because cases of harassment are not usually reported, there is a perceived sense of submission to and acceptance of street sexual harassment against women as a fact of life.¹⁴

An initiative inspired by the internet

However, something changed during the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, when popular protests in Yemen, led by a few young women, harnessed the internet to organise and mobilise the public to support a campaign challenging long-held traditional norms that marginalised women and their rights.¹⁵ The campaign specifically called for ending societal tolerance of sexual harassment of women in the street by raising public awareness of the problem and suggesting ways to address it.¹⁶

Named “Safe Streets”, the campaign was initiated on 16 August 2011 by young Yemeni activist Ghaidaa Alabsi, who wanted to “break the silence” and called upon the community to wake up from this “phase of denial”.¹⁷ Having been subject to sexual harassment at the age of nine, Ghaidaa felt that the internet had something new to offer to confront this phenomenon head on. So she started the project with partial funding from Tactical Tech, an international non-governmental organisation concerned with advancing the use of information and digital technologies by activists worldwide.¹⁸

Starting in 2011 and ending in 2013, the campaign aimed at reducing the prevalence of sexual harassment, particularly in the Yemeni capital Sana’a.¹⁹ Ghaidaa believes that achieving this is not possible without new legislation penalising perpetrators and protecting women in public ar-

reas.²⁰ She has emphasised that special units may be required in certain areas in the city to ensure that the culprits are brought to account. Ghaidaa was motivated to start the campaign by her belief that society has to realise the “catastrophic effects” sexual harassment is having and the need to find lasting solutions.²¹ While the project had a focus on sexual harassment, it also captured other forms of sexual violence against women, which suggests a strong need for a broader look at gender dynamics, power and violence in Yemen.

As one of the Arab Spring countries, Yemen has seen a positive side to social media when it was used to help democratise the country, giving voices to citizens regardless of social, economic and ethnic considerations.²² In the case of the Safe Streets campaign, the internet was used in several ways, including starting a Facebook page²³ and Twitter account,²⁴ and setting up an Ushahidi-based interactive map²⁵ which anyone could use to report incidents of street harassment. As of 1 June 2015, 66 cases from several Yemeni cities had been reported on the website. While those 66 cases are merely a fraction of the actual number of cases of harassment that occur, the website can be seen as a proof of concept. As Ghaidaa pointed out, it offered a way to reach out to victims and to encourage them to talk about what happened to them in the streets.²⁶ She ultimately wrote a book entitled *Happening Along the Way* where she reflects on the reports that were submitted to the website and on other related subjects such as the cultural and religious understanding of sex and gender in the Yemeni context.²⁷

To illustrate the level of detail reflected in some of the reports, below is a quote taken directly from the website in a report exposing an act of harassment that happened in the capital city on 26 May 2013:

Just as the woman was entering a narrow lane, the youngster not only verbally harassed her with abusive sexual words, but he also quickly attacked like a raving monster and forcefully

12 Al-Sharifi, E. (2014, 18 November). Yemeni women face verbal harassment. *Yemen Times*. www.yementimes.com/en/1834/culture/4587/Yemeni-women-face-verbal-harassment.htm

13 A niqab is a head covering – often black in color – that some Muslim women wear to cover their face except for the eyes.

14 IANWGE. (2010). *Country Assessment on Violence against Women: Yemen*. New York: UN.

15 Al-Absi, G. (2012, 23 July). Street sexual harassment: breaking the silence in Yemen. *Open Democracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/ghaidaa-al-absi/street-sexual-harassment-breaking-silence-in-yemen>

16 Ibid.

17 Skype interview with Ghaidaa Al-Absi, 15 March 2015.

18 Email exchange with Ghaidaa Al-Absi, 8 April 2015.

19 Al-Absi, G. (2012, 3 December). Who is to blame? Street sexual harassment in Yemen. *Open Democracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/ghaidaa-al-absi/who-is-to-blame-street-sexual-harassment-in-yemen>

20 Email exchange with Ghaidaa Al-Absi, 8 April 2015.

21 Ibid.

22 For an in-depth analysis of how the internet contributed to democratising the country, please refer to my doctoral dissertation: Al-Saqaf, W. (2014). *Breaking digital firewalls: Analyzing Internet censorship and circumvention in the Arab world*. Örebro: Örebro University. www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:710477/FULLTEXT02.pdf. (p. 213)

23 <https://www.facebook.com/SafeStreets>

24 https://twitter.com/safe_streets

25 www.thesafestreets.org

26 Email exchange with Ghaidaa Al-Absi, 8 April 2015.

27 The book is also freely available online: go.thedh.org/SSB1

held her from behind after he had opened his trouser zipper and exposed his penis. He refused to let her go, but took advantage of the calm in that particular street, because there was no one around. The victim's screams continued until other women residing in the neighbourhood opened their windows and started screaming as well. The perpetrator ran in panic, but was chased by the victim and others, who ended up catching and beating him.²⁸

As the report shows, the term "sexual harassment" is in many instances a euphemism – the incident reported here looks like attempted rape. Over 92% of the reports were verified by multiple sources by talking to more than one eyewitness and sometimes the police.²⁹

Despite internet access only being around 15%,³⁰ Ghaidaa believes that the internet in Yemen was a powerful tool for the campaign because it introduced the issue for the first time in such a public and open manner. The Facebook page was useful to garner support from the public by requesting willing individuals to post a photo of themselves carrying a sign supporting the cause. This part of the campaign was successful, with many people participating in Yemen and from abroad.³¹ Social media was also used to generate feedback, allowing the campaign organisers to monitor and assess public reaction and the overall reception of such a pioneering effort. Ghaidaa received her share of threats and abuse in response to the campaign. She said that the Yemeni society considers the subject of sexual rights and sexuality as taboo issues that ought to be avoided altogether.³²

"When I raised the issue of sexual harassment in the street, I received comments indicating that I am an immoral person and trying to give Yemenis a bad reputation," she said, highlighting the risk she has taken by launching the campaign. Ghaidaa found out the hard way how difficult it is to change deeply engraved patriarchal norms and traditions that have been enforced over time. The risks may have also been the reason why she was the first to come up with this kind of campaign.³³

It could be argued that the internet has the potential to help end the state of denial when it comes to harassment in the street, because it can be used anonymously and prevent possible negative consequences when advocating for sexual rights.³⁴ The state of denial is often attributed to the belief that, as Muslims, such practices are not supposed to happen. According to Ghaidaa, there are even cases when a woman walking alongside other family members is harassed. Instead of confronting the harasser, the family members often choose to ignore the harassment.

Apart from mobilising support, raising awareness, and sourcing reports from victims and feedback from the community about the issue, the internet helped the campaign join a global movement with the same cause. The campaign was part of the "Meet Us on the Streets" global campaign, in which more than 70 organisations from 21 countries coordinated protests against this form of sexual harassment in their respective countries during the International Week Against Street Harassment from 18 to 24 March 2012.³⁵

Besides this, the Safe Streets campaign attempted to raise awareness through a short film with actors portraying the negative impact of street sexual harassment on society.³⁶ The fact that none of the Yemeni television stations played the clip made the internet the only means through which it could be watched. The video proved to be a success, with over 120,000 views on YouTube.³⁷

A blog for the campaign was also created to allow anyone to publish stories or essays on the topic.³⁸ Apart from real stories told by and on behalf of victims, the blog also includes fictional tales inspired by real incidents.

However, given the low level of internet access in Yemen, Ghaidaa thinks that offline tools are also necessary to reach those who do not have access to the global network, particularly in rural areas and small cities.³⁹ This is one reason why she ended up distributing hard copies of her book widely.

In its attempt to raise awareness of the need to address the ongoing problem of sexual harassment in the street, the Safe Streets campaign should not be considered a failure by any means. However, the campaign appears to have lost its momentum

28 www.thesafestreeets.org/reports/view/79

29 www.thesafestreeets.org/reports/

30 www.internetworldstats.com/me/ye.htm

31 <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.189932984408695.41939.171971969538130&type=3>

32 Email exchange with Ghaidaa Al-Absi, 8 April 2015.

33 A campaign against sexual harassment of children named "Don't Touch Me" was also initiated in 2011 and used Facebook and YouTube for a while, but did not continue for long. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ai462VGI5w>.

34 Shaikh, R. (2014, 15 September). How crucial is anonymity for sexual exploration and promoting sexual rights activism? *GenderIT*. www.genderit.org/es/node/4147

35 meetusonthestreet.org

36 goo.gl/JRZyl

37 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pg-AllJV15og>

38 safestreeets.blogspot.com

39 Al-Absi, G. (2012, 23 July). Op. cit.

in recent years and needs to be jump-started again by publicising its services and maintaining a high level of public engagement. More than four years after the start of the campaign, the situation of sexual harassment of women does not seem to be resolved. And since its peak in 2012, the drive behind the campaign has declined considerably. At the same time, it is reasonable to say that much more than this kind of campaign is needed to change deep-rooted cultural paradigms.

As an organisation aiming at addressing internet-related issues, including gender and the internet, the Internet Society Yemen Chapter (ISOC-YE) has indicated its intention to help these kinds of initiatives use the internet productively to engage the public. ISOC-YE has recently started a special working group – formed and led by female members – to explicitly address women’s rights. One of its main objectives is to provide women with an opportunity to organise workshops and activities around issues they care about.

It is hoped that by collaborating with advocates such as Ghaidaa, ISOC-YE can leverage its resources and contacts to establish long-term projects that connect the virtual with the real, and hopefully have a strong impact on society in positive ways.

Conclusion

The internet had a positive role in the Safe Streets campaign that was initiated by a young Yemeni woman to address social and cultural problems that limit women’s sexual rights. The internet has helped expose the issue of sexual harassment in a way that was not possible before. One of the reasons for this is the ability to report incidents of harassment anonymously without fearing the consequences, which could otherwise be devastating to the victim and her family.

Speaking openly about sexual harassment is not easy in the Yemeni context because even families of women who fall victim to harassment often ignore it, as they believe the negative implications to the woman’s career and family’s reputation outweigh any compensation they could get. The fact that the project not only exposed acts of sexual harassment, but also identified signs of widespread violence against women, suggests a broader need in Yemeni society to address all forms of violence against women.

Along with the ability to report harassment, the internet allowed the campaign to harness social media for organising and mobilising, which were necessary to raise awareness about the issue. Sharing a video clip online was another demonstration

of how powerful the internet can be in triggering public discussion around sensitive issues.

It has become evident that the internet has the potential to bring issues that would otherwise remain off-limits out into the open. It starts by opening up a particular topic for discussion and encouraging others to be involved. Sometimes this approach works, as demonstrated in the Safe Streets campaign. But when it comes to other topics, such as those dealing with LGBT rights, this is simply not possible due to the strict social norms and the clear laws that prohibit dealing with those subjects.

What becomes apparent is that the internet in itself cannot change society, but can help show how society can change itself. To be able to trigger positive change, someone has to take the initiative and do something out of the ordinary. But in order for the movement to emerge, it has to be embraced by a “first follower”, who will then serve to encourage others to follow as well. In a popular TED Talk, speaker Derek Sivers explains that this is the way to create a movement. He says that the “first follower” has a crucial role because he or she shows everyone else how to follow, and in that way assumes a leadership role. As Sivers says: “Now it’s not about [a] leader anymore but it’s about ‘them’, plural.”⁴⁰

While the Safe Streets campaign had a strong champion in the person of Ghaidaa Al-Absi, it has not yet transformed into a movement, because the campaign remained a project led and managed by one person. The internet can be a tool to recruit more followers, but in order to sustain the campaign and have it achieve more lasting results, it needs to be supported by dedicated followers and by funding.

When the project’s funding ended in 2013, the campaign became less active. To change societies, more is needed. There is a need for long-term projects that deal with deep-rooted cultural problems with a mind on the next generation, on legislation and on sustained campaigns that do not depend on temporary funding.

It is important to note that while the Arab Spring helped show what is possible using the internet, it was not enough to sustain the movements that were part of the uprisings. The internet alone cannot change longstanding cultural and religious beliefs.

Yet the internet’s role in the Safe Streets campaign is undeniable – it brought a subject that is often ignored straight to the forefront of public attention. Therefore, one way to support such

⁴⁰ ted.com/talks/derek_sivers_how_to_start_a_movement

projects in Yemen is to advocate for increased internet access so that it can be used to reach and inspire more people to take action and follow in a champion's footsteps.

Action steps

What can be done at this stage is to focus on maintaining the presence of the Safe Streets campaign through sustained funding and support. A collaboration with ISOC-YE, which is involved in supporting internet-related projects, would be welcome. Despite limited funding, the Safe Streets project made strides in exposing sexual harassment on the street in new and innovative ways. If it had sustained funding, one could argue that it could have achieved a stronger and lasting effect.

Finally, we need to appreciate the challenges that such initiatives face and the risks their champions take. It is important for the state and other actors to give them institutional encouragement and support. This will boost a campaign's publicity and credibility and allow campaigners to engage with lawmakers, businesses and other major actors on the ground. Only by linking the virtual with the real can positive social change happen in Yemen and beyond.

Sexual rights and the internet

The theme for this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) is sexual rights and the online world. The eight thematic reports introduce the theme from different perspectives, including the global policy landscape for sexual rights and the internet, the privatisation of spaces for free expression and engagement, the need to create a feminist internet, how to think about children and their vulnerabilities online, and consent and pornography online.

These thematic reports frame the 57 country reports that follow. The topics of the country reports are diverse, ranging from the challenges and possibilities that the internet offers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities, to the active role of religious, cultural and patriarchal establishments in suppressing sexual rights, such as same-sex marriage and the right to legal abortion, to the rights of sex workers, violence against women online, and sex education in schools. Each country report includes a list of action steps for future advocacy.

The timing of this publication is critical: many across the globe are denied their sexual rights, some facing direct persecution for their sexuality (in several countries, homosexuality is a crime). While these reports seem to indicate that the internet does help in the expression and defence of sexual rights, they also show that in some contexts this potential is under threat – whether through the active use of the internet by conservative and reactionary groups, or through threats of harassment and violence.

The reports suggest that a radical revisiting of policy, legislation and practice is needed in many contexts to protect and promote the possibilities of the internet for ensuring that sexual rights are realised all over the world.

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