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Can Facebook Usher in Political Inclusion for Afghan Women?

Historically, women have been excluded from the public sphere in Afghanistan. Their exclusion was at its peak during the Taliban regime (1996–2001) when women were banned from entering public spaces, one of many restrictions. With the US-led invasion in 2001, the ban on women's public appearances was abolished and women were regranted formal equality in the Constitution of Afghanistan (2004). However, their participation in the political sphere remains a challenge.

In Afghanistan, traditional patriarchal norms determine gender relations—women are expected to fully follow and submit to male members of their family. The notion of “honour” is fundamental and a woman is seen to bear her family's “honour” through her body, sexuality, name and even her image. Men have the power to determine the status and role of women in the family and in broader society; for instance, a father can decide whom his daughter should marry, whether she should attend school, and how she should dress in public. However, the extent and limit of the control varies based on class, ethnicity, geography, and economic, social and political position.

Afghan women face multilayered barriers to participate in the official public sphere. My master's research investigated whether their use of the Facebook platform is helping Afghan women to create an alternative public space where they can engage in politics and be heard by their government. I also considered how this new space imposes limits on their everyday lives.

In August 2019, I interviewed 14 women aged between 20 and 40 in Kabul and found that educated Afghan women with access to internet-based communications technology have created an alternative public sphere on Facebook where they debate women's rights and issues. Through this new form of online public space, they formed collective bodies to resist the patriarchal and traditional norms of their society. Their struggles started at home, where the patriarchal control began. These educated Afghan women had to stand up to the male members of their family for the right to use Facebook, upload their pictures, and to generally have authority over the ways in which they wished to use the platform. For instance, one of the participants who uses her real name and picture on Facebook, said, “Two years ago, when I uploaded my picture on Facebook, my family, [especially] my brothers disagreed, and this is normal in Afghanistan.”

My research highlights a paradox relating to the utility of Facebook in forwarding women's issues in Afghanistan. On the one hand, educated women are using it to create an alternative space to advocate for their rights. For instance, when Farkhunda Malikzada, a 27-year-old student, was lynched in Kabul in



Zahra Nader photograph

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2015, women used Facebook to coordinate protests and advocate for justice. On the other hand, the traditional and patriarchal society also utilized the platform to promote the maintenance of the cultural status quo. For example, individuals with animosity towards women—particularly those whose requests/demands women have rejected—created fake accounts under women's names and used their pictures without consent to spread misinformation about the targeted women. This technique is particularly common against female activists and politicians. Some men use Facebook to harass women by sending pornographic images. Some of my research participants reported being the target of surveillance by their family, relatives and peers. They have also become the target of harassment and online misogyny by strangers but also by individuals who know the targeted women. Yet, none of these attempts stopped my research participants from using Facebook with their real names and pictures.

Facebook has helped my research participants to express their opinions on women's issues and to reflect on social and political events in society (although not free of limitations). It has helped them to resist and fight back against some patriarchal norms of society. One successful example was the #WhereIsMyName campaign that challenged misogynist norms that denied a woman's individual identity that saw her only as an appendage of the family (e.g. as only the "mother of", "wife of" and/or "daughter of") and through laws that did not allow a mother's name to be included on her children's national identification cards. After years of campaigning (mostly online), the government announced in September 2020 that a mother's name can now be included, although it remains optional.

A 24-year-old research participant who works as journalist in Kabul explained her dilemma over Facebook usage and uploading her picture:

When I created my Facebook account, it was under a pseudonym associated with a male identity. My family was harshly against Facebook. They thought that if a girl has a Facebook account, she is a slut. In the second year of college, when I activated my account, I was ashamed to introduce myself to my professors, some would make a joke about it—"I thought you were a boy!" It was in a journalism course that we were told to have our own Facebook profile with our name and picture. With fear, I uploaded a picture that showed one side of my face. Then, my brother, who resided outside of Afghanistan, called and asked why I uploaded my picture on Facebook? "What do you want to prove? Getting an education does not mean to upload your picture and use Facebook!" I explained to him that thousands of people see my face on the streets, what will happen if I upload my picture? I am not doing anything wrong, and if needed, I can give you my Facebook password so that you can check it every day. He pressed me, and was calling my mom and my sister to convince me to remove the picture. It worked, and I removed the picture. I said to myself that if my brother is unhappy, why should I upload my picture?

She later received her father's approval and re-uploaded her photo.

While my research has shown that Facebook can help a group of educated Afghan women gain a form of political inclusion, it also reveals a major limitation. This inclusion presupposes the ability to read and write and to have access to smartphones/computers and the internet. In a country where 84 percent of women are illiterate, the educated women in my research represent a very small sample of Afghan women. The majority of women would still be excluded from this form of political inclusion, and these limitations narrow the prospects of social change for Afghan women via online activism. The political inclusion of all Afghan women remains a struggle.