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Table of Contents

High Speed Rail in the United States: The Current Debates and Practices	1
Claire M. Beck, MA '11	
The Mobility Commons: An Application of Network Neutrality	23
to the Common Pool Resource of Mobility	
Todd O'Boyle, MSW, PhD '13	
Virtual Activism in Patriarchal Societies:	49
Educating, Engaging, and Empowering Women	
Maggie Norris, MPA	
Labor Unions, Corporations and Right-to-Work Laws:	58
Impacts on the American Economy	
Cara Robinson, MA, PhD '11	
Moving Away from Zero?	
The Current State of Zero Tolerance in America's Schools	84
Kerrin C. Wolf, JD, PhD '12	

**VIRTUAL ACTIVISM IN PATRIARCHAL SOCIETIES:
EDUCATING, ENGAGING, AND EMPOWERING WOMEN**

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Abstract

This paper examines the emergence of the Internet as the primary way for women to speak freely in patriarchal societies. The foundations for female suppression in patriarchal cultures are reviewed. Then this paper reveals how women in these cultures are using the virtual world as a resource for social change.

Passionate citizens ignite change. Resourceful action sustains change. Advancing technologies have created a plethora of information and tools to enable individuals to act; thus, access to technology is a major resource for social change. Specifically, the Internet has transformed how individuals interact globally. Tools such as blogs provide a platform for citizens around the world to speak out about their political and personal opinions. In Western democracies, Internet tools enhance citizens' ability to speak freely. In patriarchal cultures, the Internet is emerging as the primary way for individuals, particularly women, to speak freely. Suppressed women in patriarchal cultures are utilizing Internet tools to find their own identity and voice. These women are using the virtual world as the main resource for social change to educate, engage, and empower future generations.

To understand the phenomenon of female virtual activism, it is essential to examine the foundation for female suppression in the patriarchal culture. A majority of this activism is found in the "belt of classic patriarchy" that includes countries located in the Muslim Middle East

(Kandiyoti, 1991). Social scientists have defined patriarchy as “a precapitalist social formation that has historically existed in varying forms in Europe and Asia in which property, residence, and descent proceed through the male line” (Moghadam, 2003). Therefore, in a patriarchy, men hold power in both the public and private realms over women within that society. This power is the foundation of the social repression of a woman’s self-identity and voice (Shukri, 1999).

In the private realm or household, the patriarchal ideals suppress any self-identity women might have in their lives. According to Naila Kabeer (1988), “Men are entrusted with safeguarding family honor through their control over female members; they are backed by complex social arrangements that ensure the protection - and dependence - of women.” Therefore, the patriarchal household causes women to feel that their identity is dependent upon male-dominated beliefs and actions. Further, women are given the role to reproduce and to be the caregiver in the household, which is where they tend to find their identity. In the patriarchal culture, “women must marry and reproduce to earn status” (Moghadam, 2003). A social scientist, Shirin J.A. Shukri, crudely illustrates the true meaning of being a mother in a patriarchal family, stating: “[C]hildbearing is the central female labour activity. But just as in capitalism what a worker produces is not considered the property of the worker, so in a patriarchal context a woman’s products - be they children or rugs - are not considered her property but those of the patriarchal family” (1999). Traditionally, women in patriarchal cultures define themselves in the context of their father or husband. They are suppressed to identify solely with their family.

In the public realm, women are expected to be submissive to male authority. According to Asef Bayat (2007), “Patriarchy is entrenched in religious authoritarian polity [and]... where conservative Islamic laws are in place, women have turned into second-class citizens in many domains of public life.” As stated by Bayat, the public sphere is a combination of Islamic religious

law and male dominance that regulates the actions of women. For example, the citizens of Iran follow a social policy referred to as *urf* that is formed from cultural beliefs. Specifically, *urf* regulates how women should act in the public sphere. For example, the guidelines of *urf* control the relationships between men and women in the public (Amir-Ebrahimi 2008). According to Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi (2008), “The rules of *urf* evolve over time as the will of the people. . . . [M]any *urfi* rules, especially those that regulate and control the sexuality of women, have been institutionalized by the Islamic Republic.” Societal policies in Iran are implemented to suppress women based on beliefs found in *urf*; therefore, aspects of the law are created around the patriarchal culture.

Additionally, in many Muslim Middle Eastern nations women wear the hijab in public, which can range from a veil covering the face to a dress covering the entire body. Even though women have some choice in whether to wear the hijab, the public and societal norms have a strong influence on their choice. “According to this cultural perception, disclosing the self was considered . . . exposing the vulnerability of the person to society, attracting misjudgment and misevaluation. . . . All information about a woman’s life was to stay under the cover of veils, walls, anonymity, and secrecy” (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008). Therefore, within the patriarchal culture and under the strong influence of societal control of women, the hijab becomes the tangible symbol of female silence or the repression of the female voice.

As noted, within the patriarchal culture, women’s identity and voice are suppressed in the private and public sphere. Over the past two decades, women have organized small changes to conservatively step beyond and speak outside of the restricted boundaries. However, the patriarchal culture is still a powerful foundation. According to Loubna Skalli (2006), “Women’s access to this sphere is contested because the male-dominated politico-religious centers of power in

Muslim societies remain ambivalent in their position toward the scope of women's mobility, as well as their visibility." The combination of the nature of the patriarchal society and modern resistance to inequality has laid a foundation for passionate women who are seeking change.

As stated previously, passionate individuals must engage in resourceful action to sustain change. A major resource is the use and broad access of Internet technology. In the Middle East, research has shown that an increasing number of individuals have access to the Internet. For example, in 2001, Iran identified 1 million Internet users; 6 years later, that number had climbed to 18 million (Ministry of ICT Iran, 2008). Because of the nature of the patriarchal culture, it has been identified that only a small percentage of the Internet users in these societies are women; however, a growing number of Internet users are young women (Skalli, 2006).

Access to the Internet has provided a strong voice for women in the virtual world that is referred to as cyberfeminism. Sadie Plant (2000) argues that "cyberfeminism is an insurrection on the part of the goods and materials of the patriarchal world, a dispersed, distributed emergence composed of links between women, women and computers, computers and communication links, connections and connectionist nets." Plant points out that technology, especially the use of the Internet, connect women who can begin to break down the foundation of the patriarchal culture.

In the virtual world, women are beginning to step outside the boundaries and red tape to voice their opinion. According to Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi (2008), "The absence of the body in virtual space generally allows more freedom of expression and at the same time more security through the possibility of concealing gender, age, and personal positions on political, social and cultural issues." Among the Internet tools available, blogs are being utilized by women to write their opinions in a virtual notebook. Women feel free to use blogs because of the anonymity of names and identities. Blogs have become a viable resource for social change. Masserat Amir-

Ebrahimi (2008) argues that “blogging spread among ordinary young women of the urban middle class who for the first time found a medium in which to express themselves... Through bold narration in their blogs, they unveiled a hidden woman.” Thus, women can use blogs as an interactive tool to build a cohesive unit and influence others who read the writings on the blogs in the virtual world.

With the substantial increase in Internet use among female youth, the virtual world has provided a platform for older women to educate, engage, and empower the future generations to become activists. It has been observed that “transgressing social conventions is considered part of youth culture ... and with the rise of global youth culture, especially via satellite TV and the Internet, ... their new self-representation in public space has become increasingly disturbing to the Islamic Republic” (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008). Thus, in future generations, the opinions and social movements in the virtual world will break down the strict boundaries of the patriarchal culture.

Education is the universal instrument to ignite passion that brings about change. It has been noted that education is an essential element in evolving the position women hold in patriarchal cultures (Shukri, 1999). Research has been conducted correlating education levels between mothers and daughters in the Middle East. A survey conducted in the 1980s concluded that mothers who attended a higher education institution and achieved a university degree positively influenced the aspirations of their daughters (Moghadam, 2003). A daughter looks to her mother as a role model and a benchmark for what she can achieve in society. Thus, a “trickle-down effect” can occur between mothers and daughters in educating the female youth on the importance of having an identity and voice in society.

In the context of education, the Internet has increased the capacity and speed with which the youth are able to acquire, absorb, and act on political and cultural information (Skalli, 2006).

The Internet has created a resource for cyberfeminists to disseminate educational materials, such as electronic magazines. These “e-zines” educate the female youth on the importance of rising above male dominance to find their own identity and voice. Several examples of “e-zines” are found in Iran. Skalli (2000) reports the following:

Although the phenomenon of ‘e-zines’ is recent... it suggests that women are trying to carve out a space in the cyberworld to reach a larger and geographically more diversified readership...The initiative of Tehran-based feminist activist Masha 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.

Female activists in Iran are using the Internet to disseminate information that breaks down the boundaries of being a woman in Iran. The combination of education of female youth, mother/daughter involvement, and electronic magazines can alter their behavior. Ultimately, education will engage and empower young women to become social activists.

Engaging the youth is essential to strengthen the movement toward social change. Young women’s access to the Internet has increased their engagement. Through electronic magazines, the youth are educated about the current issues facing women. By blogging, they are given a platform to confidently express educated thoughts about the issues without feeling threatened or lacking sufficient competencies. This increase in engagement can be correlated to a current Western practice of utilizing the Internet for social change. In Australia, for example, disabled women

connected through the Internet have created a platform for changing their role and place in the Australian society. Women in patriarchal cultures are silenced to the point of social disability. According to Helen Meekosha (2002), “[A network of women] have begun to create communities of the imagination, where they are welcomed for their capacities rather than excluded for incapacities. While being ‘virtual,’ these ‘imagined’ communities work to produce spaces that celebrate possibilities in the lives of women.” The findings from Meekosha’s research on the virtual disabilities movement emphasize the importance of blogs to engage the female youth by having an unrestricted and underestimated voice. The tools within the virtual world enable cyberfeminists in patriarchal cultures to reach and engage the female youth.

The combination of education and engagement leads to empowerment. According to Valentine Moghadam (2007), “Women’s empowerment is defined as a multidimensional process of achieving basic capabilities, legal rights, and participation in key social, economic, political, and cultural domains.” Empowering women in patriarchal cultures is the ultimate goal to break down the red tape and boundaries these women face on a daily basis.

The virtual world within the Internet has started to empower women and female youth at a faster speed. Because of the anonymity and secrecy of the virtual world, suppressed women have started to achieve the basic abilities of possessing a self-identity and having an active, confident voice. According to Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi (2008), “[The] feelings of courage and self-confidence, along with the means of self-expression, allow bloggers to cross some red lines in private and personal matters in the virtual environment.” Additionally, Loubna Skalli (2006) indicates that technology, especially the Internet, is a powerful tool in the empowerment of women. She states that technology “encourages women to think about new ways to establish professional relations, forge alliances, and broaden the scope of their interventions.” Thus, in a

specific sense, the Internet has created a cohesive unit of women who are finding their identity and voice. These connected women are using Internet tools to educate, enable, and eventually empower female youth to become social activists.

As noted throughout this paper, the Internet has become an essential resource for women activists in patriarchal cultures. The speed with which women are becoming educated and engaged in various movements to bring about social change can be attributed, at least in part, to advancements in the Internet. The virtual world has presented a platform to ignite social change in suppressed countries. Current Middle Eastern feminists have been able to quickly disseminate educational materials to the female youth. The opportunity to have an anonymous voice on blogs has engaged women in conversation toward social change. The combination of education and engagement has started to empower the female youth to break down patriarchal boundaries.

After analyzing the history of patriarchy and the current increase in Middle Eastern female activism, it is easy to attribute the fast changes in female empowerment to Internet technology. In several aspects, the future of female empowerment in patriarchal cultures depends upon advancements in Internet technology in the upcoming years. It is difficult to predict the future; however, a hypothesis can be identified. Once women and the female youth feel confident enough to voice their opinions without anonymity on blogs, they will feel empowered to become activists in the public world. In the decades to come, the cohesive voices in the virtual world will be empowered to break down the walls of the patriarchal culture in the public world. The women will become social activists for change. This confidence in social collaborative change among women in the future will come from the knowledge, as shown in past social movements, that passion can ignite change and resourceful action can sustain change. As twentieth-century activist Margaret

Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

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