The case of Harassmap: using social media to fight sexual harassment

Lauren Maffeo is studying an MSc in Gender, Media and Culture at the LSE's Gender Institute. In this post she explores how women are harnessing the power of social media to to fight sexual violence, harassment, and discrimination.

In the sphere of inspirational women, Madeleine Albright is a fixture. The former U.S. Secretary of State's speech at the Old Theatre last month was, for many, a highlight of the term, blending years of wisdom with a sharp sense of humour to discuss the role of women in democracy. The following afternoon, the Madeleine Korbel Albright Institute for Global Affairs at Wellesley College, which hosted Secretary Albright's discussion, held a panel debate at London's Landmark Hotel to discuss, among other topics, the "feminisation of social media." Rangita de Silva de Alwis, director of International Human Rights Policy Programs at the Wellesley Centers for Women, focused on how media expansion has allowed women in the global south to re-claim a cherished right often taken away – a voice, which she asserted offers a perspective just as critical as Secretary Albright's.

Dr. de Alwis argued that in societies such as Egypt, "When law enforcement does not respond and the media does not report, social media can make women's issues visible. It can give them a platform, a voice." She went on to use the example of microblogging in China, which allows those within the country to communicate internal problems to the outside world – a display of the power of the digital even in a regime where foreign social media is banned (China has their own networks akin to Facebook). Saudi Arabia's "Right to Drive" campaign is another example. Despite the kingdom's decision to block Facebook and Twitter campaigns encouraging a collective protest against the only country that legally prohibits female drivers, the movement brought worldwide attention to the prohibition's infringement of civil rights and was publicly supported by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

But perhaps the most empowered example of women using social media to ignite change is HarassMap. Dr. de Alwis discussed how, in the wake of virginity tests and other sexual crimes against women in Kenya after 2008 and in Egypt last year throughout the Arab Spring, a group of volunteers with backgrounds in technology and sexual harassment have fused the two to create a hybrid model of SMS messaging. Available for use by the estimated 16.5-27.5 million female mobile users in Egypt, HarassMap allows women to send an SMS message via email, Twitter, texting, or an online form detailing the location and description of harassment experienced on the spot. The team of experts reads and verifies each report before identifying harassment "hotspots" that women should avoid, offering assistance with services ranging from psychological help to self-defense classes, and, perhaps most importantly, allowing women, as well as men, to join together.

Useful as these tools are, Dr. de Alwis acknowledges that among nations that fail to meet first world standards, only the privileged are able to reap these benefits. "Most women in the rural global south don't have access to the Internet," Dr. de Alwis pointed out, "So does it represent accurately that population? No. But it does, in venues where women remain excluded from the political sphere, provide a much-needed voice." Indeed, a country where 83 percent of Egyptian women and 98 percent of foreign women surveyed report sexual harassment and two-thirds of surveyed men admit to sexual harassment, ranging from whistling and shouting to touching and exposure, without shame is a country in desperate need of widespread reform.

But why stop in the Middle East? Women in the West may reap the same legal rights as men, but one would be hard pressed to admit that their occupancy of the public sphere results in equal amounts of peace and safety. In my first two months as a student in London, I was sexually harassed three times – twice physically, once verbally, all in situations where I was in public. There is nothing unique about my situation – I'm willing to bet that a quick poll of your female friends will show that all of them have, at some point in time, been whistled at, ogled, or worse just for being a woman in public. We are fortunate to live in a city with resources to keep such abuse in check, even if the resulting punishments are, too often, not as harsh as arguably deserved. The most effective means of dissolving sexual harassment is to hold everyone accountable-and that, of course, includes addressing men as well as women in order to deter from committing assault. In this regard, there is still much work to be done across the globe. But all social movements have to start somewhere, and for the women of Egypt, HarassMap is a solid start.

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