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PRIVILEGE, MARGINALIZATION, AND SOLIDARITY: WOMEN'S VOICES ONLINE IN WESTERN SAHARA'S STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

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Much recent research has illustrated the power of online communities and social media outlets for presenting diverse women's voices, whose perspectives are too often invisible in mainstream news media (Dustin Harp, Jaime Loke, and Ingrid Bachmann 2014). Nevertheless, there is no shortage of women's voices in the Saharawi online community. From the poetic, birthing metaphors present throughout Fatma Aayache's testimony (2007) of forced disappearance and torture to the recounting of violent kidnaps by Hayat Erquibi (2009) on YouTube, women are as present in the online Saharawi nationalist struggle as they are on the frontline in the Occupied Territories and in the rearguard of

diaspora activism. Yet not all Saharawi women's voices are privileged. In this article, I firstly attempt to explain which ones remain in the shadows and why, and secondly, ask what could be done to open the platform for marginalized views. Using lessons from the UK, Kenya, and Nigeria, I argue that Saharawi feminists, and indeed feminists elsewhere, can achieve increased success in their activism by "having each other's backs" across lines of difference and privilege.

Western Sahara was invaded in 1975 by Morocco after its former colonizer, Spain, effectively sold it to the highest bidder. To this day the country remains partially occupied by a repressive Moroccan regime (indeed, occupied Western Sahara received joint first place with Tibet in Freedom House's 2013 "Worst of the Worst" list of the least free countries in the world), whereas the liberated part is peppered with landmines. The Saharawi refugees that managed to flee the fighter pilots and floods of napalm of the 1975 invasion to the safe-haven of Algeria, Western Sahara's ally, constructed desert refugee camps in which they continue to live. The ideological vacuum of these camps offered the opportunity for the POLISARIO, the Saharawi liberation movement, to construct a new society, a state-in-exile, in which to practice their radical, revolutionary politics.

Since the beginnings of its struggle, the POLISARIO has placed gender equality at the center of its nationalist and revolutionary discourses, which are articulated in opposition to "Moroccan nazism" (POLISARIO 1976, 4), and, regarding discourses on women's condition, what is viewed as the "backward" treatment of women in Morocco and indeed in other Arab countries. As Zahra Ramdan, a member of the Executive Bureau of the National Union of Saharawi Women (the branch of the POLISARIO responsible for women's development), comments, "the Saharawi woman has always had more consideration, more respect, than women in other Muslim societies, other Arab societies" (personal interview with Ramdan, February 7, 2008). Women, as signifiers of Saharawi democracy, freedom, and equality, are the border markers that differentiate the Western Sahara from dictatorial, feudal Morocco, where women are always represented in POLISARIO's discourses as subjugated and weak (Joanna Allan 2010). The constructed image of women's liberation is a vital part of Western Sahara's "PR" vis-à-vis the political elites and wider civil society of the "West," which, in turn, is of central concern to the success of the POLISARIO's current strategies of diplomacy and wider Saharawi non-violent resistance. As I have argued elsewhere (Allan 2010), Saharawi women's emancipation in the refugee camps that constitute the state-in-exile in Algeria is, in POLISARIO nationalist discourse, constructed as already achieved, whilst women's political activism is seen as natural and intrinsically Saharawi.

The majority of Saharawi women activists in their testimonials and blogs reflect POLISARIO nationalist discourse on women's empowerment.¹ Nevertheless, a group of anonymous writers that called themselves *Wurud Asahra* (*Flowers of the Desert*) began a blog in 2007 that took a more critical stance with regards to women's condition in the Saharawi state-in-exile. Their brave and cuttingly critical entries reveal what they saw as the hypocrisy of their government-in-exile in claiming the achievement of gender equality before the event and raised issues concerning women's (lack of) control over their reproductive functions and the treatment of women who give birth out of wedlock. Whilst a large proportion of Saharawi blogs are written by women, some of which are feminist, *Wurud Asahra* is, as far as I am aware, the only one that has been openly critical of the current situation of Saharawi women in the camps. Nevertheless, the editor, who found that reactions to her blog had mainly been "offensive, insulting and unconstructive," felt pressured to stop writing (personal communication, January 16, 2009).

Saharawi women's voices are privileged in the Saharawi online community as long as they echo the hegemonic, POLISARIO constructions of gender and images of women's emancipation, which serve the ideological function of garnering support for the Saharawi nationalist cause globally. How could the *Wurud Asahra* bloggers, and others who present a marginal voice, be encouraged to continue their work in the face of heavy criticism or abuse? In the following section of the article, I argue that fostering feminist online allies, across lines of difference and privilege, is one possible strategy that deserves further exploration.

In October 2013 I attended a workshop at the annual North East Feminist Gathering on feminist social media activism. One of the results of virtual abuse, our discussions revealed, is self-censorship. Some workshop participants had closed down their twitter accounts following a "summer of online misogyny" in which feminist cyberactivists were bombarded with threats of sexual violence and murder firstly online, and, as their home addresses became distributed amongst the perpetrators, through the mail, in retribution for the successful online feminist campaign led by Caroline Criado-Perez to have female historical figures represented on British banknotes. However, as workshop participants noted, it was remarkable how online feminists "had each other's backs": feminists took screenshots of abuse, investigated the identities of the "real" abusers behind the virtual profiles, and forwarded this information to the police on behalf of feminists that they had never met in *meatspace*. These acts of feminist solidarity inspired many women to continue and intensify their online activism, as well as encouraging other women to join them, thereby increasing feminist voices online as well as ensuring themselves more "allies" in the face of hostility. Indeed, one of the aims of the aforementioned workshop was to allow feminists with more experience of online activism to share their knowledge and skills with novices.

There are countless other initiatives to foster women's voices and increase feminist² allies online. For example, the "Blogs for African Women" (BAWo) mentorship project saw established Kenyan and Nigerian-based bloggers support young women (who were encouraged to actively engage with each other's posts) to blog with the aim of increasing gender parity in an online world that they see as dominated by male bloggers writing from outside Africa, and to "encourage African women to report their own stories as an alternative to the mainstream media" (Ore Somulu 2006). The use of webrings helped to reduce the isolation of new bloggers and encouraged mutual support whilst female mentors provided inspiration as well as technical guidance. The BAWo project illustrates the potential of solidarity between experienced and new bloggers for nurturing diverse voices online, which are often left unrepresented in mainstream media.

The African Women's Communication and Development Network (FEMNET) recently played an important role in another campaign that illustrates the power of drawing on global feminist solidarity online, across lines of difference and privilege. FEMNET was alerted by a partner organization to the case of Liz, a sixteen-year-old Kenyan girl left with a broken spine after an attack by gang rapists. Kenyan police saw fit to sentence the perpetrators, who had left Liz for dead, merely with an order to mow a communal lawn and to make a contribution to Liz's hospital fees. The women at FEMNET planned an online campaign to raise awareness of Liz's case, exert pressure for justice, and to ensure the gender mainstreaming of police training in Kenya. Their online petition, publicized through Facebook, a stream of blog posts, and through the hashtag #justiceforliz, attracted international attention and soon reached over 1.2 million signatures. It was FEMNET's

substantial and established online networks that allowed this “spiral effect” (personal communication with Kennedy Otina, March 17, 2014). Street protests, attended by women from more than twenty-five countries, a campaign by the Kenyan National Media Group to collect donations for Liz’s surgery, and meetings with Kenyan police’s Chief of Staff followed. At the time of writing, Liz’s case had been referred to court and the perpetrators await trial (FEMNET 2013). It was the global publicity of Liz’s case, possible thanks to FEMNET’s cross-border network of feminists in Africa and feminists in other continents picking up the baton to ensure press coverage elsewhere, which fuelled the campaign’s considerable impact. As Kennedy Otina, Program Associate at FEMNET, explains,

Since most women in different countries are aware of the issues and the pain of violence, this particular campaign received impetus from women who were able to share the information and mobilize their peers, friends and allies to sign the petition. In this way the petition went viral. (Personal communication, March 17, 2014)

The *Wurud Asahra* blog was an isolated voice in the online Saharawi community. Although, like other Saharawi commentators, the *Wurud Asahra* writers are passionate about their national cause and proud of Saharawi women’s political participation, they also tried to initiate a debate on some of the more problematic aspects of Saharawi women’s position in society in the state-in-exile. Faced with unconstructive and overwhelmingly negative feedback, and with no support network, the writers have stopped typing. It is my view that, had the *Wurud Asahra* writers been situated within a community of other feminist online commentators (as were the new BAWo project bloggers and their mentors), who could, in the style of the aforementioned UK activists, “have each other’s backs” in the face of unconstructive criticism, their blog may have flourished for longer. These examples illustrate the importance, for feminists, of “training up” other women not only to ensure a plethora of diverse voices online, but also to foster future feminist allies. Similarly, the #justiceforliz campaign illustrates how global feminist activists, when connected in online communities, can work in solidarity across national borders, lines of privilege and difference to push for change. If less privileged (Saharawi) women’s voices could rely on back up from such a network of allies, their voices would no longer be muffled by criticism and abuse.

NOTES

1. For an example in English see <http://saharawiyazeina.blogspot.co.uk>.
2. I use the term here in a very broad sense to describe those concerned with the amelioration of women’s condition.

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