The Egyptian blogosphere: home of a new feminism?

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Note

I have followed the THIS system of transliteration. When individuals or groups suggest an English transliteration that diverges from the standardised form, I have used their version, and in cases where an Egyptianised spelling is more appropriate when translating dialect (namely, using ‘g’ instead of ‘j’ and *hamza* [’] instead of ‘q’), I have used one. All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

When referring to bloggers, I have used their real name, where given. Where the real name is withheld, I have used the pseudonym used by the blogger. For the sake of neatness, when referring to websites I have given an abbreviated version of the web address in the body of the thesis. Full URLs and a link to an archived version of the page can be found in the bibliography.

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Introduction

> Has there been a time in your life when you experienced, felt or even heard about a story at the heart of which lay the oppression of a woman because she, a female, lives in a male society?[1]

These were the first words of an email sent in 2006 to Egypt's female bloggers, calling upon them to speak out about the problems faced by women in their society. The authors of the invitation were a group of five female Egyptian bloggers who, weeks earlier, had begun *We are all Laila* – a blogging initiative set-up in order to shed light on the frustrations of being a woman in a patriarchal society. On 9th September, over 70 bloggers contributed to *We are all Laila* day, successfully creating a storm both in the world of blogging and beyond.

The group formed at a time of enormous growth in Egypt's online sphere. The popularity of blogs – websites usually run by an individual, made public for anyone to read – took off in the three years up to 2007: pre-2005 there were around 40 Egyptian blogs,[2] by 2005 there were about 400,[3] and by September 2006 that number is estimated to have been 1800.[4] This parallels the growth in the global blogosphere[5] which was home to 70 million blogs by April 2007.[6] Unlike some other types of website, the content of blogs is organised in chronological order, with the newest contribution at the

[1] Email from *We are all Laila* organisers to potential contributors, September 2006 (courtesy of Eman Abd el-Rahman).
[2] Radsch (2008), 4
[3] Howeidy, Amira. 'Battle of the blogs.' *Al-Ahram Weekly,* 17th November 2005.
[4] Zuckerman, Ethan. 'Alaa on Egyptian blogs and activism.' *My heart's in Accra.* 16th September 2006.
[5] The term 'blogosphere' refers to a wider community of blogs, in this case, all of those in existence throughout the world
[6] Information and Decision Support Centre (2008),3

top. On a well-maintained blog, new articles (called 'posts') are published on a regular, often daily basis, hence the name 'blog' - an abbreviation of the term 'web log.'

The Middle East was behind other parts of the world in catching the blogging bug. However, a 2002 government initiative making connecting to internet free for every home, with the user having to pay only the cost of the telephone call, both increased internet usage and spurred on the competition to provide faster, cheaper services.[7] The development of Arabic-language software and search engines also provided a boost to Arabic-language content, including blogging. A whole new Arabic vocabulary has grown up around the world of internet, and the term *mudawwana* (traditionally used to mean a record or note, taken from the root d-w-n, which denotes the act of recording or writing) has been adopted as the accepted term for a blog. Egypt is at the forefront of blogging in the Arab world and a report by Egypt's Information and Decision Support Centre, a government think tank, put the number of Egyptian blogs in April 2008 at 160,000 – 37% of the Arabic blogosphere.[8]

Political blogging, in particular, has gained prominence thanks to its adoption by Egypt's opposition movements and human rights groups. In a country where much of the media is controlled by the state, blogging has proved a powerful new outlet for exposing corruption, police malpractice and human rights abuses,[9] as well driving protests, strikes and other civic action. Some bloggers have paid a heavy price for this new-found form of expression, with several bloggers being arrested and held for long periods without charge. Partly as a result of this, political bloggers have received much attention both in the press and in academia. Less space, however, has been devoted to

[7] Abdulla (2005), 155
[8] Information and Decision Support Centre (2008),7
[9] See Ajemian (2006), Isherwood (2008), Lynch (2007), Rifat (2008)

the realm of personal blogs, which, though less prominent, are also pushing boundaries, this time in the social sense. Unlike political blogs, which are dominated by news and current affairs, personal blogs tend to focus on the writer's experiences and thoughts, making them more like a traditional diary or a scrapbook, but one that is publicly available not only to their friends but to anyone who stumbles across it.

Personal blogs, in general, tend to have much smaller readerships than the more prominent blogs, but many argue that are still proving influential and important in Egypt. In his study of personal blogging, George Weyman argues that three factors differentiate blogs from other arenas for forms of self-expression: the youthfulness of those who contribute to it, its interactive nature, and the potential it offers for total anonymity.[10] As I shall show, interactivity is one of the crucial ways in which blogging sets itself apart both from the mainstream media and from other forms of personal expression, thanks to the ease of dialogue online and also because of its capacity to bring together people who would never usually meet in 'real life.' It is important to note, however, that the Egyptian blogosphere still reflects a very limited segment of the country's society. Several of the basic requirements for writing a blog rule out large swathes of Egypt's population: literacy, computer literacy, access to the internet, as well as the free time to write and publish blog posts and in 2006 just 7 percent of the country's population were internet users.[11] As Weyman points out, youth is also massively over-represented in the blogosphere. 70 percent of Egyptian bloggers are under the age of 30, meaning that there is strong focus on issues important to the age group, such as relationships with parents and the opposite sex, education and careers.

[10] Weyman (2007)
[11] www.internetworldstats.com

Young women, however, are underrepresented online, and face many barriers in accessing the internet. These barriers can partly be attributed to lower levels of literacy and education among women, but are also a consequence of the patriarchal nature of Egyptian society. Due to restrictions placed on them by fathers, brothers or husbands, whether these be in terms of time, privacy or accessibility of the internet, women are less likely than young men to be able to access the internet and, importantly for the contributors to *We are all Laila*, to do so without being monitored or censored. The honour of men in traditional Arab society depends on the comportment of their female relations, who are considered less able to control their behaviour, and therefore a potential source of shame, so writing about controversial or taboo subjects, and even the mere act of a woman writing has the potential to be a cause of familial shame. For this reason the need for anonymity online becomes even more important but also more difficult for women in contemporary Arab societies.

It was partly this culture of patriarchy and the taboo of women's open discussion of their problems that prompted Egyptian blogger Eman Abdel-Rahman and four fellow bloggers to found *We are all Laila.* Together they came up with the idea of a creating a designated day on which Arab women would blog about their problems. The group has now been running for three years, but in this thesis I have chosen to restrict my analysis to the first year of the project and the reactions it provoked. This is because in the first year the event was kept secret from Egypt's male bloggers until they began to read the posts, as the organisers did not want their aims or self-expression to be altered or hindered by criticism before they had even begun. In the event, the response from male bloggers, in particular, was more hostile than they had expected, and studying the first

year provides a unique opportunity to examine the aims of a campaign invented, planned and implemented solely by women.

Like the wider Egyptian blogosphere, the majority of contributors in 2006 were, as far as is possible to tell, middle-class and well-educated. This is reflected both in the personal information given on their blogs as well as in the subject matter of their writing. Ramla Khalidi and Judith Tucker identify four key issues of concern to Arab women in the modern period: personal legal status, political rights, education and health, and employment.[12] All of these topics were covered by *We are all Laila* 2006, but it is access to university education, for example, that its contributors voice concern over, rather than basic literacy teaching or healthcare provision.

When considering how the campaign might fit into a feminist framework, it is important to first understand the history and context of feminism in Egypt. Marnia Lazreg has highlighted the dangers inherent in writing about Arab feminism from a Western standpoint, such as the tendency to focus on the negative aspects of women's situation in the Middle East, or to attempt to examine it in a Western social context.[13] In order to avoid these pitfalls, it is important to analyse Egyptian women within their own cultural and religious framework – one that is Arab and Islamic, rather than Western and secular. Many of the contributors to *We are all Laila* go out of their way to distance themselves from Western feminism and its stereotypical connotations, choosing instead to set their arguments within an Islamic discourse, calling for an end to the cultural customs and traditions that have corrupted the rights granted to women through Islam. Another common feature is the decision of the participants to

[12] Khalidi and Tucker (1998)
[13] Lazreg (1988)

accompany their descriptions of discrimination and hypocrisy in the treatment of men and women, particularly in the realm of sexual freedom, with disclaimers tempering their arguments, emphasising that they do not seek to emulate these men's behaviour, but to bring it in line with their own and with the rules of Islam.

In chapter 1, I shall show how the stance of the *We are all Laila* contributors represent a form of feminism, but one that is made apparent implicitly through its assertions rather than its declared aims. The processes of tempering and moderating that are used by the contributors, not only in terms of subject matter but also how they present themselves through language, imagery and their online personas can be seen as a form of Arlene MacLeod's 'accommodating protest' - a presentation of their cause in a way that is acceptable to and effective on wider society.[14] In chapters 2 and 3 I shall explore the groundbreaking potential that blogging provides for self expression, as well as the group identity created by *We are all Laila*. The encouragement and support provided by its all-female network creates an effective defence against some of the hostile responses that the campaign elicits, while also offering its contributors a louder and more prominent voice through the size of its internet presence.

[14] MacLeod (1991)

1. What is *We are all Laila*?

How was it born?

We are all Laila is very much a product of the internet age. Before it began, none of the contributors knew each other beyond the online sphere, and until this day very few of them have met in the flesh. The project began on 28th August 2006 when Eman Abd el-Rahman, an engineering graduate from Cairo who blogs under the name *Lasto Adri* (I didn't realise), started chatting to *Shaimaa,*[1] a fellow female blogger, over an instant messaging service. Abd el-Rahman described to me in an interview[2] how she pitched the idea: "I told her that I'm so frustrated with our society, and what frustrates me even more is that girls do not talk... So I told her, 'I want all girls to speak on one day, and to make it a surprise for guys.' That was it." She explains in a blog post that *Shaimaa* was not only keen on the idea but "enthusiastic about discussing it with [fellow blogger] *Bent Masreya* [Egyptian Girl]."[3,4] Three other female bloggers – *Arabesque, Epitaph and Krawan*[5] – then joined in, and the five founding members began their search for other participants."

[1] Some bloggers, such as *Shaimaa* do not give their real names. In these cases I shall use the pseudonym they use.
[2] Personal interview conducted over Skype (a 'voice over internet protocol' [VoIP] online telephone service popular throughout the world, including the Middle East), 1st March 2009
[3] Abd el-Rahman, Eman 'We are all Laila.' *Lasto Adri*. 9th September 2006.
[4] All posts are translated from Arabic unless otherwise stated
[5] It is unclear what the author intends by this name. It may be a misspelling of the word *karawan* - a type of bird that is variously translated as a plover, nightingale, or curlew. I have chosen to reproduce the name as she spells it throughout.

After deciding to organise a day on which female bloggers could blog about the situation of Arab women, united around a single theme, they then set about choosing a name for the campaign, looking for a figurehead who would represent their cause. They settled on the name Laila, inspired by the fictional Laila Soliman, the protagonist from Latifa al-Zayyat's 1960 novel The Open Door (*al-Bab al-Maftuh*). The book is set in Cairo in the period from 1946 to 56 and depicts the life of a middle-class young woman who finds both empowerment and true love by embracing Egyptian nationalism, and interweaves her "coming to political and sexual consciousness" with "the struggle for national identity and independence, with an intricate emphasis on the 'dailiness' that shapes the women characters' lives."[6] Comparisons with this 'dailiness' can be drawn with the world of blogging, through which readers can get to know an author through the regular insights she provides on her thoughts and her everyday life. And so the group became *Kolena Laila* – 'We are all Laila.' *Bent Masreya* designed a logo for the group and set up a central blog, shown in Fig. 1.


كلنا ليلى 1

Sunday, September 10, 2006

كل نا ليلى

بدأت فكرة "كلنا ليلى" بليلي/ واحدة منا تشكو و تبوح ل/ليلى أخرى ليزيد العدد لثلاثة فخمسة فأكثر من خمسين فتاة و سيدة، لنكتشف أنه على اختلاف خلفياتنا و أفكارنا و أولوياتنا كلنا في النهاية ليلى.

و ليلى هي بطلة رواية بعنوان " الباب المفتوح" للروائية لطيفة الزيات وقد تحولت تلك الرواية إلى عمل سينمائي يحمل نفس الاسم - قامت ببطولته فاتن حمامة . ليلى هي نموذج للفتاة المصرية التي تتعرض لمواقف حياتية مختلفة في مجتمع يعلي من شأن الرجل ويقلل من شأن المرأة، ولا يهتم لأحلامها أو أفكارها أو ما تريد أن تصنع في حياتها.

ومع ذلك فقد استطاعت ليلى التي تعرضت منذ طفولتها لأشكال مختلفة من التمييز أن تحتفظ بفكرتها الأصيلة عن نفسها وتظل مؤمنة بدورها كإمرأة لا تقل أهمية بأي حال من الأحوال عن الرجل سواء في البيت أو في العمل أو في الدراسة أو في العمل العام.

كانت ليلى هي اختيارنا لأنها قصة مصرية، تحمل في طياتها الكثير من الروح التي تعيش بداخلنا وتتعرض لنفس الضغوطات التي تولدت في مجتمعنا المصري بكل تقاليده وأرائه عن المرأة عبر الأزمان، و لا ينفي هذا مشاركة مدونات من بلاد عربية معنا في هذا اليوم فالثقافة التي تظلم ليلى موجودة هناك أيضا.

هدفنا من هذا اليوم إعطاء فرصة لكل ليلى لتتحدث بصوت مسموع و تسمع من أخريات مختلفات عنها و تعلم أنها ليست بمفردها في رفض ومواجهة الظلم الواقع عليها. هدفنا أن يكون لنا صوت يعبر عنا بعدما سأمنا من محاولات التحدث باسمنا. و هدفنا الأكبر هو أن نشارككم جزء مهم و جوهري من عوالمنا المختلفة، جزء مخبأ بعناية في أحايين كثيرة بداخل أختك أو زوجتك أو زميلتك في العمل...جزء قد تشارك في تكوينه بوعي أو بدون وعي أحيانا.

أول رد فعل إعلامي عبد اسلام اون لاين:
http://www.islamonline.net/Arabic/news/2006-09/10/02.shtml

posted by Lasto-adri *Blue* at 2:11 PM 4 comments رابط هذه التدوينة

Fig. 1: A post on the main *We are all Laila* page, showing the '*Kolena Laila*' (We are all Laila) logo in the top right hand corner[7]

[6] Booth, Marilyn, 'al-Zayyat, Latifa,' *Encyclopaedia of Arabic Literature* (1998), 825

[7] Former *We are all Laila homepage* – http://laila-eg.blogspot.com, accessed 10th September 2006, courtesy of Eman Abd el-Rahman

Having chosen a name and a theme – 'speaking out' – the founders began publicising the day. They sent out the first invitations on 1st September 2006, targeting both individual bloggers and groups, and received over a hundred responses. On 9th September 2006 (and also 8th and 10th, as some bloggers posted a day early or late), over 70 female Arab bloggers composed posts on the theme of 'speaking out,' and posted a link to http://laila-eg.blogspot.com[8]. In turn, the main website listed all of their posts, providing a directory of where all the other contributions could be found.

The term 'synchronised blogging' (or synchro-blogging) is used by some to describe this type of project. It is defined by Wikipedia as follows:

> Synchronised Blogging [is] where a group of bloggers agree to post on their own blogs on the same broad topic on the same day. The titles are circulated a day or two beforehand, and each blogger includes links to the other blogs.[9]

One of the largest groups to use the technique (although it does not describe itself as a synchro-blog) is *Blog Action Day* (www.blogactionday.org), which began in 2007. The organisers asked people across the world to blog about a specific issue -'environment' in 2007 and 'poverty' in 2008 - on a designated day and, like *We are all Laila,* each individual blogger linked to the main website, with links to all the individual responses also posted on this central hub. This approach is very advantageous for the organisers, for in creating a host website while also allowing contributors to publish their posts on their individual pages, both *We are all Laila* and *Blog Action Day* create a network that encourages a reader of one post (perhaps written by a favourite blogger who they

[8] The page has now migrated to a new site (www.kolenalaila.com) with a new design. The old page automatically redirects there after five seconds.
[9] 'Blog carnival,' *Wikipedia,* Accessed 14th March 2009 URL:http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog_carnival

regularly follow) to visit the central page, learn more about the group, and go on to read further contributions.

In the case of *We are all Laila*, specifically, this approach created an effective way of raising the profile of Arab female bloggers and increasing awareness of the wider campaign. This is significant as the contributors were not, on the whole, part of Egypt's well-charted political blogosphere but rather authors of personal blogs, which, according to Weyman, tend to have a smaller readership, run by a single individual for "a close-knit group of friends and peer bloggers."[10] In general, they tend not to deal with politics or other national or international affairs, but to "events in individuals' direct experience, thoughts they may be having, or problems they are facing."[11] There are exceptions to this among the *We are all Laila* contributors, such as Zeinobia, whose post for the campaign was flanked on her blog *Egyptian Chronicles* by pieces about the Israeli war in Lebanon and on the right of the Egyptian press to criticise President Mubarak. She was unable to provide statistics for the number of hits her post received, but as of March 2009 she had received 23,339 profile views – a good indication of the popularity of her blog, especially compared to the other *Laila* participants, several of whom had fewer than 1,000 profile views by the same date. Her blog was created in August 2004, well in advance of the first *We are all Laila* day, so it is reasonable to assume that it was relatively well-read by September 2006. Blogs such as this, with an established readership, would have helped to fuel interest in the other contributions to the campaign.

[10] Weyman (2007), 3
[11] Ibid, 3

The choice of Laila as the group's figurehead reveals how the organisers view the position of Egyptian woman and the problems they face. As they stipulate in the 'about' section of the website:[12]

> In the opinion of the organisers of this blog, the situation of Laila in the novel, and the oppression she faces, is not very different from the position of the Arab woman in the same society today.[13]

In an email invitation sent out to female bloggers, calling for participants, the organisers began by appealing to the recipients to recall and write about instances or areas of their lives where they have faced oppression, and the project's brief encourages participants to use the device of the eponymous Laila as a point of entry into exploring what this means. The chosen theme – 'speaking up' – reflects the group's priorities: not only are the issues seen as important, but also 'speaking out' itself is an act of resistance to patriarchal culture, as is asserting the position of women within the (predominantly male) Egyptian blogosphere. In doing this, they say, they hoped to use blogging as "the first step" in order to

> improve the status of women, to put an end to the out-dated societal traditions and customs that diminish the standing of women in society and give preference to men over women and, most importantly, to convey our collective voice to a large part of the other half of our societies.

Despite this declared aim, the group gives out mixed messages on the status of *We are all Laila* day. Rather than a synchro-blog, discussion forum, or campaign, the website describes the event as an initiative (*mubādara*), and the organisers also refer to it as a day (*yaum*), and according to Abd el-Rahman, the aim of the group is simply to 'speak out' within the realm of the blogosphere:

> I don't have a plan for real life. There are a lot of NGOs that are working on real life. What I wanted to do is something different – just let girls speak and

[12] Most reputable websites have an 'about' page, where a reader can find information on the website's ownership, its funding (if relevant), and a basic mission statement or purpose

[13] 'About.' *Kolena Laila.* Accessed 25th February 2009.

> encourage a community for them to speak to in the very limited circle around you. Doing sessions, lectures, whatever the events that such NGOs do - they already do it, and they're doing it well. I want to work on the other way – on technology, the internet.[14]

She and the other organisers were keen to assert on a public level that the group does not represent any kind of lobbying or protest, as demonstrated by a comment left by *Arabesque*, one of the founders, on a post written by *Shababek* (Windows), a male blogger:

> By the way, the actual name that we agreed on [for the event] was a 'day', not a 'campaign.'[15]

However, in the final paragraph of the secret email sent out by the organisers, the word campaign (*ḥamla)* is used twice. This shows an awareness of how the group is perceived in the broader online sphere, and a willingness to moderate their language in order not to seem overly provocative or radical. As I shall show, this is a pattern that occurs repeatedly throughout the project, in a telling reflection of the pressures that the group and its contributors are subject.

Who took part?

The 2006 list of female contributions provides links to 73 posts by 65 separate bloggers, as well as 16 replies containing afterthoughts from the women who took part. Of the 73 initial posts, 21 (29 percent) have fallen victim to 'link rot' – the phenomenon of websites or their content becoming invalid, because their owner's choose to delete them, or to migrate their content elsewhere. As far as is possible to tell from the

[14] Abd el-Rahman, Eman, personal interview, 1st March 2009
[15] Shababek.'We are not all Mursi' *Shababek.* 9th September 2006

personal information and content posted by individual bloggers,[16] *We are all Laila* participants are all female, with an age range of 18-35, and the strong emphasis on youthful themes such as education, problems with parents, and getting married reflect this demographic.[17] While the campaign declares itself to be for all Arab women, from the location displayed on most of the posts it is possible to see that the majority are from Cairo. One blogger, *Mysterious Eve*, is from Beirut, but most of the remainder are from other Egyptian urban centres. This mirrors Egypt's national blogging trend, with 82.1 percent of Egyptian blogs created and maintained in the capital in 2008.[18]

The group has not compiled statistics on its contributors, but it is possible to deduce information about them through how they write, what they write about and by the very fact that they are using a cutting-edge form of expression. As in previous Egyptian feminist movements, *We are all Laila* is dominated by educated, middle-class women who are relatively cosmopolitan by the standards of the larger society. In 2005, female literacy in Egypt stood at 59.4 percent, compared to 83 percent among men,[19] meaning that over half of Egypt's female population would be unable to take part in such a project as a result of their basic levels of literacy, regardless of whether or not they had internet access. In September 2006, Alaa Abd el-Fateh, who runs an Egyptian blog

[16] I gleaned this information from the 'profile' page of the bloggers who participated. This is a page built into the template of all Blogger blogs, but it is up to the blogger to decide how much information to offer the reader. Everyone must complete a 'name' field, but most choose a pseudonym, and there are then options to complete 'age', 'gender', 'occupation', 'astrological sign', 'about me', 'interests', favourite film, music and books. Some also include a contact email, which is how I got in touch with some of the contributors.
[17] Information and Decision Support Centre (2008), 21
[18] Ibid, 3
[19] U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. 'Egypt.' *The World Factbook*. Updated 19th March 2009. URL: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html. Accessed 2006-03-25.

aggregator, estimated the total number of Egyptian blogs to be just 1,800[20] and in April 2008 an estimated 27 percent of Egypt's bloggers were female.[21] Therefore, if the percentage of women bloggers was the same (or lower) in September 2006, the 63 contributors to *We are all Laila* would represent at least 14 percent of the total female bloggers in Egypt – a huge participation rate in comparison to *Blog Action Day's* 12,800 contributors in September 2008, who represented 1percent of the 186 million bloggers worldwide (as of March 2008).[22]

Some of the contributors attempt to include other women without access to technology, either by exploring what they consider to be their voices and concerns or, as in the case of Eman Abd el-Rahman, by posting a piece written by a friend. In an introduction to the post Abd el-Rahman writes, "Posting it here doesn't indicate that I either agree or disagree with her thoughts, but as Laila day is for all groups, she has every right to express her opinion wherever possible."[23]

How did the contributors approach the writing?

An underlying theme within the posts is the insecurity of the women who write them, and their feelings of vulnerability to outside critics. Their posts are full of disclaimers about the quality of their Arabic, their criticisms of lax attitudes towards men's behaviour (which several posters say they seek to highlight but not to imitate), or their defence of feminism. In response to some of the criticism the group received, the *We are all Laila* organisers also posted a disclaimer on the main webpage that defended the

[20] Zuckerman, Ethan. 'Alaa on Egyptian blogs and activism.' *My heart's in Accra.* 16th September 2006.
[21] Information and Decision Support Centre (2008), 21
[22] Technorati. 'State of the blogosphere/2008.'
[23] Friend of Eman Abd el-Rahman. 'We are all Laila - written by a friend.' *Lasto Adri*. 9th September 2006.

group's stance. Under the heading 'Our position on men,' they state that "the main purpose of "We are all Laila" day is to direct public attention to these [women's] problems in an attempt to resolve them and change the way society deals with similar problems."[24]

In order to understand comments such as this, it is important to appreciate the contextual framework within which the contributors are airing their view, and how feminism and women's rights are viewed within the Arab world. The question posited by this thesis asks whether the Egyptian blogosphere is home to a 'new feminism,' but the English word feminism and its connotations must be treated with caution when dealing with Egypt and the Arab world, as argued by Fadwa Al-Guidi:

> Approaching Muslim women's rights through liberal feminist agendas cannot be effective because these agendas are based on the Western experience and derive from Western values hence they are irrelevant to most issues of concern to Muslim women. Matters pertaining to women and the family are based on scripturalist-derived decrees and laws. To be effective, these issues must be dealt with within the same framework that created them.[25]

While the group is not explicitly feminist, its stated aims and the responses it elicited show that many understood it to be implicitly so. Like the organisers, some contributors tried to distance themselves from what they see as the prevailing Egyptian stereotype of feminism and feminists, described by Najde al-Ali as "men-hating, aggressive, possibly lesbian (but most likely to be obsessed with sex), and...Westernized,"[26] and by Margot Badran as "aggressively anti-men and in conflict with the culture's moral code."[27] Walaa Emam, a student at Cairo's Ein al-Shams university and owner of the blog *Sheer*

[24] 'About.' *Kolena Laila*. URL:http://kolenalaila.com/about. Accessed 2009-02-25.
[25] Al-Guindi (1999), 182
[26] Al-Ali (2000), 4
[27] Badran (2009*),* 142-143

mental garbage, dedicates her post entitled 'What feminism is all about' to an attempt at outlining and then confronting some of these stereotypes that come with the term (written in English):

> I was talking to a friend a few days ago and the word "feminism" was brought up in the conversation, and despite being a refined 25 year old guy he thought it is about stuff like getting everyone to be a lesbian, promoting abortion, rebelling for dumb reasons and insulting men all the same. I was shocked!! [28]

She uses the post to argue that men are being harmed by the restrictions placed on women in society, which prevent them from fulfilling their potential. The thrust of her argument is that this does not just harm women, but also men. "Feminism fights for you too. Even if you can't believe this, then think of women as fighting for your daughter [sic], your mother, you sister, your wife." In order to justify supporting feminism, she feels the need to promote it in terms that are appealing to men. Again this is evidence of a willingness to compromise in order to be listened to and accepted.

The 'bad' connotations of the word 'feminism' mean that if Egyptian women describe themselves feminists, they do so on their own terms which are distinctly different from those of the Western variety. This is the case with Eman Abd el-Rahman, who considers herself a feminist but in a very clearly defined way: "The word feminism, I don't have a problem with it [as long as it is] not translated like how it's understood in the West."[29] On the same subject Zenobia, author of *Egyptian Chronicles*, says, "I am not that feminist despite [the fact that] some consider me so!! but I believe there are lots of rights we deserve in our country based on our religion and our constitution and we do

[28] Eman, Walaa, 'Kolona Layla - what feminism is all about.' *Sheer Mental Garbage.* 9th September 2006.
[29] Abd al-Rahman, Eman, personal interview, 1st March 2009

not have it , we should work to get these rights."[30] Why are these bloggers so hesitant about the term 'feminism?' From its outset, Egyptian feminism has had negative connotations of cultural imperialism, as the need to emancipate Egyptian women was used as one of the justifications for the British colonial project in the country, rendering it, according to Leila Ahmed, "suspect" in the eyes of Arabs, and "vulnerable to the charge of being an ally of colonial interests."[31]

With this in mind, it is interesting to analyse the language of the contributions to *We are all Laila.* Of the 42 individual participants whose blogs are still active, 6 wrote their *We are all Laila* post in English, 14 used Arabic that could primarily be defined as *fusḥa* – the formal, standardised form of modern Arabic – and 22 used Arabic that most resembled Egyptian dialect. [32] Zeinab Samir, who writes under the name *Bent Masreya* (Egyptian girl), posts in a variety of standard Arabic, colloquial Arabic and English, with her choice depending on "the kind of issue, and my personal mood."[33] She opted for standard *fusḥa* for her *Laila* post, which deals with the historical context and current issues surrounding women's ability and willingness to speak out. Zenobia, author of the blog *Egyptian Chronicles,* always posts in English, but chose to write in *fusḥa* interspersed with Egyptian dialect for her contribution to *We are all Laila*. She felt the need to give a disclaimer at the start of her post: "Warning: this is one of the few times that I am writing in Arabic so please don't correct my many grammatical mistakes."[34] This comment reflects the widely-held notion that *fusḥa* is a language that must

[30] Zeinab (author of *Egyptian Chronicles),* personal correspondence (in English)
[31] Ahmed (1992),167
[32] This distinction is partly subjective, but I attempted to define the type of language used both by assessing its general style and syntax and by looking out for common features of Egyptian Arabic, such as the colloquial form of negation and the colloquial present tense marker.
[33] Zenobia (author of *Egyptian Chronicles).* Personal correspondence (in English)
[34] Zeinobia. 'The revolution of the harem in the 21st century.' *Egyptian Chronicles.* 9th September 2006.

respected, both due to its close relation to the language of the Qur'ān and its more general connotations of prestige, logic and beauty.[35]

This reverence for *fusḥa* is reflected in the reasoning behind Eman Abd el-Rahman's decision to write in dialect*:*

> I feel that [*fusḥa*] Arabic is a very, very respectable language and I fear to be humiliated by writing my bad Arabic. It's not that bad, but I'm bad at the grammar, but I feel I have to respect it... so don't expect me to write proper Arabic.[36]

But if Zenobia (*Egyptian Chronicles*) doesn't feel confident in her ability to write in Arabic accurately and well, why didn't she write in English, as usual? "I felt that I need to speak in my language," she says. [37] Her post is a long, strongly-worded argument that criticises the lack of equal rights for women in modern Egyptian society and accuses many so-called religious men of being unaware of the true meaning of Islam, which, she argues, has been corrupted by un-Islamic traditions and customs.

The decision by these bloggers, who often post in English, to write in Arabic for *We are all Laila* shows both an awareness of the purpose of the project – to speak out to Arab societies on the position of women - and of what kind of language prove an effective tool in reaching the greatest number of readers. Moreover, given the suspicion with which feminist ideas are treated within Egyptian society, their decision to write in Arabic is an attempt, conscious or unconscious, to defend themselves against accusations that they have been corrupted by Western values. Al-Guindi argues that mastery of Arabic and knowledge of Islam are "fundamental" for the existence of a

[35] See Haeri (2003)
[36] Abd el-Rahman, Eman. Personal interview. 1st March 2009
[37] Zeinobia (author of *Egyptian Chronicles).* Personal correspondence (in English)

"genuine" Arab-Islamic society,[38] and by posting in some form of Arabic, these bloggers are not only targeting their writing to their audience but arming themselves against critics who use Islam as their weapon.

Can it be considered feminist at all?

Given the prohibitions against criticising men or being seen to promote Western ideals, it must be asked whether the writing that takes place within the framework of *We are all Laila* can be portrayed at feminist at all. According to Margot Badran, women who consider themselves feminists but do not say so in public can be described as feminists. [39] There are also those who want to fully dissociate themselves with the term in any setting, while still voicing sentiments that can be aligned with feminist thought. These, according to Badran, can be considered 'pro-feminists' – a group she defines as "those who take various stands that can be understood as feminist but who reject, both in private and public, any identification as feminists."

While Walaa Emam is one of the few who neatly fits into one of Badran's boxes as a publicly-declared feminist, the others are less easy to categorise. Abd el-Rahman is prepared to discuss the term 'feminism' in private, and is reluctantly prepared to associate with it as long as it's on her own terms, making her fit somewhere between a private feminist and pro-feminist. Lila Abu-Lughod sees feminism as "not just the organized women's movements... but the wide range of projects that have or had as an explicit goal or necessary foundation the remaking of women."[40] In this light, many or

[38] Al-Guindi (1999), 177
[39] Badran (2009), 142
[40] Abu Lughod (1998), 23

even all of the contributors to the campaign can be considered feminist – by simply participating in the group they are endorsing its aims. In turn, *We are all Laila* can be seen as a pro-feminist, if not openly-declared feminist women's movement along the lines of those described by Abu-Lughod, even if it has no expressed intention to move beyond the online sphere.

2. *We are all Laila:* home of a new feminism?

Background

Despite both local ambivalence to the term 'feminism' and Western stereotypes of oppressed Muslim women, Egypt has a long history of feminism, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century. With the rise of liberal reformism, Muslim modernists such as Muhammad Abduh and Qasim Amin controversially called for the emancipation of women, and pioneers arose throughout the twentieth century, from Huda Sha'rawi, who dramatically threw off her face veil upon her return from an international women's conference in Rome in 1923, to Nawal Sa'adawi, who campaigned against the practice of female genital mutilation and spoke boldly on the subject of female sexuality. With the failure of the secular liberal vision of the first half of the century, the dramatic shift in the mood of Egyptians (and all Arabs) after the devastating 1967 defeat at the hands of Israel, and the subsequent collapse of Pan-Arabism, a new discourse on the rights on women began to emerge in Egypt, this time centred on Islam and its teachings.

There have been numerous attempts to define and categorise feminism and women's activism in Egypt today. One of the most common approaches is to differentiate between Islamic and secular feminism. Margot Badran defines the former as:

> A feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm... [that] seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence.[1]

Secular feminists, on the other hand, according to Azza Karam,

[1] Badran (2009), 243

> firmly believe in grounding their discourse outside the realm of any religion, whether Muslim or Christian, and placing it instead within the international human rights discourse.[2]

Secular feminists, she argues, see religion as a private matter, and do not want to be hindered by discussing the status of women within religion. But Najde Al-Ali contests these hard and fast definitions, arguing that her work in the field suggests that "their boundaries might not be so clear-cut, and the categorization, in some ways, even misleading."[3] As the subject matter discussed within *We are all Laila* will reveal, categorisation of the group's ideology is indeed less easy than Badran and Karam make out.

What kind of feminism is contained within *We are all Laila*?

The writing contained within *We are all Laila* is diverse in its approach to the group's theme, both in terms of subject matter and ideology. The most prominent themes are discriminatory treatment of men and women within the family and within society, especially with regards to individual freedoms; marriage, both in terms of the lack of consultation of women on the subject of their future husbands as well as the way that women are viewed first and foremost as potential wives and mothers; the problem of sexual harassment; and the dominance of customs and traditions over the laws of Islam in matters relating to women. But the social and religious diacritica within which these discussions are set varies between contributions, with some using Islamic imagery and references, some using 'human rights' terminology and some totally avoiding mention of any structure of rules or rights.

[2] Karam (1998), 13
[3] Al-Ali (2000), 140-141

Rania Yusuf's post most closely fits the model of 'Islamic feminism' and, as might be expected from a post inspired from key Islamic texts, is written in a careful, elevated *fusḥa*. She begins by lamenting the fact that, despite the teachings of Islam, women do not have the rights they are granted:

> Although the coming of Islam and its establishment and granting of women's rights were 1400 years ago, in general, woman are still subjugated and oppressed. The oppression of women in the Arab world is not a result of religion, but of improper behaviour in society. The vast gap between what is called custom and what is Islamic religious rulings must be made clear to people, and we must not disguise the erroneous behaviour of many undisciplined Muslims with Shari'a rulings, whether out of ignorance, disobedience or obedience to traditions that contradict Islamic Shari'a.[4]

In the crux of her argument is founded on a *ḥadīth* – a tradition based on the words and deeds of Muhammad – in which the Prophet turns to Umm Salama, one of his wives, for advice on how to deal with a problem he's having. Her wise words resolve his dilemma, and Yusuf uses the story to illustrate her argument that good Muslim husbands should consult their wives and respect their opinions.

In one of the most lengthy posts of the campaign, Zenobia, author of *Egyptian Chronicles,* discusses discrimination against women at home and at work, taking a similar, Islamic stance:

> I won't talk about the liberation of women and equal rights for them and men in the Western fashion because, quite simply, I believe that my religion gave women their rights and freed them from customs and traditions that, unfortunately, still exist. And the reason for their continued existence until today to an even greater extent than religion itself is that they give men total power over women.[5]

She goes on to denounce, albeit indirectly, the secular approach to women's rights, emphasising the existing provision for women's justice within Islam:

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[4] Yusuf, Rania. 'We are all Laila: Islam treats her with justice and those who neglect it oppress her.' *Rania Yusuf.* 9th September 2006.
[5] Zeinobia. 'The revolution of the harem in the 21st century.' *Egyptian Chronicles.* 9th September 2006.

> Just as we teach children to pray and fast, and that heaven is at the feet of mothers, we must teach them the rights of women in Islam. We must teach them that the Egyptian woman doesn't want Western-style liberation, and that not everyone who calls out for the rights that have been stolen from her is a secular person who wants to destroy mankind. We must teach them that women used to teach and learn like Our Lady Aisha[6] and Our Lady Nafsia.[7]"

Other contributors take a less explicitly Islamic line, choosing to talk in broader terms about the need to combat the customs and traditions that oppress women. Nesrina, a 27 year-old from Cairo, who writes her blog *Sailing* in English, lists "worshipping god" as her top interest, and "the Holy Koran" as her favourite book, but in her post criticising society's interference in women's lives[8] she mentions religion only in passing.

While on the one hand, the employment of Islamic imagery by these bloggers may reflect the genuine belief that a return to a more Islamic society would make Egypt more egalitarian, there is also the possibility that they are embedding their arguments within contemporary Egyptian social practice in order to be considered less subversive. Without the opportunity to meet and interview these authors it is impossible to be certain how much they are couching their argument within Islamic terms and how much of it is genuine personal conviction. But in certain examples a discrepancy in their superficial appearance and their more detailed writing can sometimes offer clues. Particularly in the example of Nesrina, whose protestations of piety such as 'favourite book: the Holy Koran' are not followed up by any deeper discussion of Islam, the employment of religious symbols may be an attempt at proper conduct in the public sphere. Choice of language, too, can used to cultivate a certain external appearance. The advantages of using Arabic over English have already been discussed, but the choice

[6] The third wife of the Prophet Muhammad
[7] The great-granddaughter of Hasan, the elder of the Prophet Muhammad 's two grandsons
[8] Nesrina. 'Kolenya [sic] Layla.' *Sailing.* 8th September 2006.

between dialect and *fusḥa* can also be significant – the former bringing with it nationalist overtones, and the latter of sacredness and beauty.

In her study of the trend of veiling among lower middle class women in Cario, Arlene MacLeod argues that her research subjects are undertaking a form of 'accommodating protest.' One the one hand, veiling, which is seen as a personal decision taken by a woman to, represents a form of resistance, and of empowerment, enabling women to continue to work, to feel safe on the streets, and to join the realm of the middle classes. But, she says, it simultaneously symbolises "women's acquiescence to the existing power relations which structure their lives," arguing that it also shows "compliance and the desire to be obliging, accepting and grateful for concessions granted."[9] In the same way that *We are all Laila's* contributors cultivate online personas to shape external impressions of them, veiling plays an important role in shaping the identity of MacLeod's subjects and "demonstrates a public and obvious flaunting of women's point of view."[10]

The considerations of online appearance made by *We are all Laila* participants suggest that they see the blogosphere as their equivalent of MacLeod's women's street or workplace, rather than a private or semi-private sphere. As I have already discussed, most of the contributors are strangers to one another and unlike the 'real world' where friends and family can appraise individuals by deeds as well as appearances and words, these online friends can only see what is presented to them. Because they cannot be judged for their looks, their dress, the way they talk or how they act they can instead

[9] MacLeod (1991),138
[10] Ibid, 158

use language, imagery and Qur'anic references to shape a public impression of themselves, and to adjust their online personas according to how they want to appear.

A different form of accommodation is adopted by women who take a more 'secular' approach to their writing (i.e. those who avoid discussing religion). They point out hypocrisy and discrimination within society, especially in social rules surrounding sex, for example, but are often then quick to point out that they do not condone this behaviour, but merely want to highlight it. In a model example of this, Batabeet, a blogger from Cairo who was 21 when she wrote her contribution to *We are all Laila,* lists a series of things that young men are allowed to do: stay out late, swear, dance at discos, speak to strangers, and do (sexual) things with girls. Young women who engage in this behaviour are considered by society to be "cheap." However, she then goes on to defend having raised this issue: "I'm not saying I want to do all that [what men do], because religion and morals govern me. But the religion that governs me is theirs too!!! No... they forget all that and hold onto the composition and form of society."[11]

Soosa el-Mafroosa, an Egyptian pharmacist (she doesn't give her age or exact location, although the contents of her post suggest she is not from Cairo) tackles discrimination between boys and girls within family life:

> Ask any parent about their daughter and they'll say they treat her the same way as her brother... But ask any girl, ask me. Never in my life has anyone forbidden me from doing anything, but that's because, since I was small, I've known the limits, limits that restrict, day after day and year after year.[12]

[11] Batabeet. 'We are all Laila: something crippled... a society in need of a re-education.' *Batabeet*. 9th September 2006.
[12] Soosa el-Mafroosa. 'We are all Layla... the signal is red.' *Soosa el-Mafroosa.* 8th September 2006.

She tells how at school she was discouraged from getting into acting, medicine, the media, politics and economics because that would mean leaving her district and going to Cairo, and that would be considered shameful. The culmination of her argument is that, these days, women don't even have faith in themselves. "We see ourselves as second-class citizens," she says."It's not just men that do it - we do, too... Circumstances tell me to go out, learn and work... but inside me is a red light that frightens me and fills me with shame." This is a different form of restraint – *Soosa el-Mafroosa* does not question why women like her don't have confidence in themselves and stops short of making accusations or suggestions for change, choosing instead to focus on conveying her personal feelings of frustration.

The author of *A7lami al-Mob3thara* (My Scattered Dreams),[13] a 25 year-old blogger from Cairo, who gives her name as simply *AZ*, chooses to speak out about sexual harassment in another issue-focused post. She embraces the idea of *We are all Laila* by posting a story about a girl named Laila whose life is ruined after she is sexually harassed on public transport. She tells how she used to take a microbus[14] to attend her far away secondary school until one day she was assaulted by a 30 year-old man:

> He put his hand on her right thigh. Laila was frightened and couldn't speak, because Layla was respectable and everyone knew that... and respectable girls don't say anything when a stranger touches their thigh.[15]

After the incident Laila was very upset and decided to give up her far away classes. Her mother wanted to know why, so she told her what had happened. Earlier in the text, *AZ*

[13] This name is written in a new form of transliterated Arabic, developed by internet users, with roman script being supplemented with numbers, which are used to represent the sounds that are unique to Arabic. In a standardised transliteration, this would be written 'Aḥlāmī al-Mob'athara.'
[14] A small bus for local journeys; common across the Middle East. Men and women sit together on the bus on closely-packed seats.
[15] AZ. 'We are all Laila.' *A7lami al-mob3thara*. 8th September 2006.

has purposefully made a point of describing Laila as a "respectable"[16] girl who wears a head scarf and loose clothing. Despite this, Laila's mother's response to the incident is to say: "My daughter is not respectable. If she were, then no one would have touched her thigh." The story ends abruptly, with no comment or analysis – the criticism is instead implied. In writing about sexual harassment in a public forum, *AZ* is taking a stand, and saying that the silence surrounding it is unacceptable but, like *Soosa el-Mafroosa*, she offers no potential causes or solutions to the problem.

In a similarly issue-focused post, Ghada Abdel Aal, the author of *Ayza Atagawwaz* (literally 'I want to get married' but henceforce referred to 'Wanna-b-a-bride,' as she translates the name in English), complains about the way that Egyptian society restricts women to the role of a bride, no matter what their talents, skills, or interests. In an entertaining, colloquial and light-hearted style she parodies three conversations in which people seem to be asking a woman a question about her achievements or her assets, when in fact they are asking how many children she has. In each example, when the original intention of the question becomes clear, she replies "I'm not yet married," and the interrogator expresses varying levels of shock or embarrassment.[17]

Abdel Aal's blog, however, is somewhat hypocritical. As the name of her blog suggests, Ghada, a 27 year-old pharmacist from Cairo, is not adverse to the concept of marriage; in fact, at the time of writing the blog, she was actively seeking a husband, and has devoted her blog to charting the process. While this in itself an act of defiance in a culture that expects women to play a passive role in the process of marriage, it also

[16] *Mu'addaba* – a complex Arabic word meaning well-bred, well-mannered and refined.
[17] Abdel Aal, Ghada. 'We are all Layla... I'm not worthless.' *Wanna-b-a-bride.* 8th September 2006.

contradicts her declared frustration at the obsession of Egyptian society with marriage, and shows a desire to conform to certain social expectations, despite her apparent dislike of them. Mohamed Hossam Ismail argues that these issue-focused bloggers apply "strategies of the third-wave feminism discourse to identify their problems and attack types of discrimination against them."[18] He uses the term third-wave to define bloggers who approached the campaign with 'mini-narratives' - their personal stories of injustice - rather than "a particular ideological framework."[19] But this suggestion that they are approaching *We are all Laila* from a third-wave perspective is misleading. As discussed above, very few of the women who participated would call themselves feminists, let alone 'third wave feminists' and, by virtue of their being 'personal bloggers,' they approach writing as a means of conveying a particular presentation of the self through personal experience, rather than taking an ideological or political stance. They have been specifically invited to write about women's issues for a day, and while their participation makes them 'feminist-friendly', or pro-feminist, it is wrong to see feminism of any kind as their goal.

Is it 'a new feminism'?

The subject matter in *We are all Laila* is not new - famous radicals of all varieties, from Aisha Abd al-Rahman to Nawal el-Saadawi, have been raising issues considered far more controversial for decades**.** What is new is the fact that ordinary women – the urban middle classes – are saying it themselves and in their own words. Not only are they making their voices heard, but they are gaining empowerment in doing so by presenting themselves to a society that acknowledges their presence in traditionally male domains

[18] Ismail (2007), 2
[19] Ibid, 2

with ambivalence. In a patriarchal society such as Egypt's, it is not socially acceptable for parties other than the dominant males (namely young men and women of all ages) to voice their thoughts or opinions, and especially not in the public sphere.

As Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke describe in *Opening the Gates*, their collection of feminist writing from across the Middle East, the act of a woman simply voicing her thoughts can be seen as "radical."[20] Hoffman-Ladd argues that in Arab societies even women's voices are not meant to be heard, and are sometimes even considered shameful.

> The entire body of a woman (except her face and hands) is to be treated as pudenda; it is a vulnerable, weak object that must be covered to avoid embarrassment and shame. Even the voice of a woman is 'awra[21] and should not be heard. On the other hand, woman is also a potentially destructive element in society. Her appearance causes fitna (chaos or discord), and she therefore must be covered for the protection of men.[22]

Just as a women's body is considered dangerous and shameful, so too is voicing her opinions. Badran and Cooke explain that (from the nineteenth century, when women began to gain access to publishing houses) "the very issue of literacy for women was inflammatory and remained anathema to entrenched male patriarchy which has linked female immorality with literacy."[23] Now, thanks to the internet, ordinary middle-class women (albeit those with relative freedom to access the internet) are not only writing and publishing themselves, but tackling controversial issues and breaking taboos, bringing subjects such as sexual harassment and virginity to the internet sphere. The act of self-publishing and the control it gives women over their portrayal of themselves to

[20] Badran and Cooke (1990), xxi-xxi
[21] Defined by Hoffman-Ladd (1998:28) as "that which ought to be covered and protected, because of the shame of having it show."
[22] Hoffman-Ladd (1998), 43
[23] Badran and Cooke (1990), xxxi-xxxii

others who are beyond the realm of the family represents an implicit challenge to patriarchal authority.

As previously discussed, blogging has some similarities with diary-writing, in both the nature of the content and what the process of keeping a diary offers the writer. In her study of the diaries of young Egyptian effendis in the early decades of the twentieth century, Lucie Ryzova argues that "socially constructed 'minors' used the tool of private writing to wage (secret) wars against, or to subvert, transgress or cope with authority pertinent to their time and place."[24] As with blogging, she argues that another of the main rewards of diary-writing was the cultivation of "separate selves" (a term she borrows from Jane Hunter .[25])

Historically, there has been a tendency within the Arab world to downplay the importance of the individual, as Hazim Saghie explains:

> In Arabic newspapers you rarely find the word 'I'. The news is, for the most part, written in the passive... The autobiographies written by Arabs are, for the most part, still political and social in the broad sense. But when it comes to questions concerning religion and sex, the tendency to be indirect is still dominant. Most writers still apologize for dealing with personal matters, or invent excuses for so doing.[26]

In this light, it is interesting that the format of *We are all Laila* offers its participants to use 'she' rather than 'I' to discuss the problems of women in society is interesting in this respect, and many do choose to write semi-fictional stories in the third person, or to recount incidents that happened to a 'friend,' as demonstrated by *AZ*'s tale of sexual harassment. This approach is also common in Arabic autobiographies, the famous example being Taha Hussein's memoires, The Days (al-Ayyām).

[24] Ryzova, 278-279
[25] Hunter (1992) 54
[26] Saghie (2001), 57

Anonymity can be another important factor in building confidence and developing an individual voice. Tom Isherwood explains how one of his case studies, a female blogger named Marwa Rakha, first began blogging using the pseudonym Jenny Anderson,[27] and tells how the pen name gave her "strength and determination" until she was finally confident enough to write under her own name. For women in particular, anonymity also offers protection against the potential damage to their reputation that could result from writing about controversial topics. There are issues, however, with the extent to which it is possible to achieve complete anonymity on the internet. While Weyman argues that it is possible for bloggers to be totally anonymous and to discuss their innermost thoughts without either the consent or knowledge of their family,[28] in reality it is difficult for an Egyptian woman to blog from home without the knowledge of any male relative. A possible alternative - Egypt's many internet cafes – are male-dominated environments, with the result that some women may be forbidden from using them, or else find it difficult to feel comfortable or to write about intimate topics or thoughts. Women who have laptops that they can use in the safe, female-friendly environs of Cairo's expensive, Western-style coffeeshop chains may be among the most likely to have unrestricted access and freedom to write, but the number of women who fit this category is undoubtedly very small.

Several of the *We are all Laila* contributors told me that their families both know and encourage their blogs, and seemed proud and happy of this fact. However, it is not only possible but likely that they are carrying out a certain amount of self-censorship as a result of this, knowing that their families will be a large portion of what they write. Eman Abd el-Rahman used her 2006 *We are all Laila* post to convey the reaction of her

[27] Isherwood (2008), 91
[28] Weyman (2007)

uncle to her setting up the project. He told her that she was "making herself into a feminist leader" and that she would "ruin her market value" (*hatawa'afi su'ik*- a colloquial expression meaning that she would decrease her worth on the 'marriage market.') She goes on to vent her anger at this comment in an entertaining way, "I will ruin my market value*?!* Ok; a question: I will ruin the value of what? Is it that I am a car... or a piece of antique furniture?" In highlighting the criticism she faced for setting up the group, Abd el-Rahman goes some way towards undermining her uncle's argument by showing her willingness to discuss what he sees as a potential embarrassment in public. Abd el-Rahman was not put off by his warning, and her blog now bears her full name. This is not to say that either she or others who blog openly write in an unhindered manner – in many ways removing the element of secrecy from blogging may cause the writers to be more cautious about what they say as they bear in mind how their mother or father might react to what they write.

But, by virtue of being a domain that is public, or at least populated by strangers, the realm of blogging offers bigger and better opportunities than the diaries of those young effendis. This is true for the development of individualism, for it is an individualism that benefits from the interactivity of the internet and the blogosphere. A writer can firstly assert individuality and explore his or her personality and thoughts online; as the slogan underneath the header of *AZ's* blog, *A7lami al-Mob3thara* (My scattered dreams), reads: 'This is about me... the way I see the world' (see fig. 1). Secondly, the author can test out this manifestation of themselves on an audience, and gauge their reaction through comments and links. In the terms of 'transgression of authority,' the fact that it is available to all to read means that this act can become a public rebellion against accepted systems of power or accepted behaviour.

Fig. 1: The header of the blog *A7lami al-Mob3thara* (My scattered dreams), archived by Wayback Machine[29]

This can manifest itself in numerous ways, one of the most interesting of which is in defying traditional regulators of language and expression. Religious and state institutions have traditionally had a powerful influence in the world of publishing, as Niloofer Haeri describes:

> This involvement clearly entailed the regulation of the form and content of what got printed through ownership of publishing houses, printing presses, recourse to law, educational institutions, [and] the imposition of a 'correct' language[30]

Through self-publishing, individual authors are free to choose not only what opinions they publish, but also the style of language in which they write them. This is particularly relevant to those writing in Arabic, which has traditionally been subject to strict rules regulating its proper use, despite the fact that many 'ordinary' Arabs feel more comfortable communicating (even in writing) in their local dialect. Haeri also points out that that the "grandiose character" of *fusḥa* is not always suited to depicting "what is ordinary, practical or spontaneous" nor to developing "a discourse concerning women, children, theatre, nature or personal feelings." In this sense, she argues, it is

[29] http://web.archive.org/web/20060813183310/http://www.alienzero.blogspot.com Archive date: 13th August 2006, Accessed 13th March 2009
[30] Haeri (2003), 60

"the language of a group, not of an individual, a language inherited from the age of aristocracy and not a democratic one."[31]

In addition to freedom from the constraints of language, the internet also offers emancipation from certain factors that affect 'real life' interactions such as appearance, social standing and personal circumstance, enabling them, according to Deborah Wheeler, to overcome 'inferiorities' and "interrupt... processes of social isolation."[32]

Within the context of *We are all Laila*, there are two tiers to the public exposure experienced by contributors. Firstly, there is the fact that any blog is more public than an equivalent diary would be. The contents of ordinary personal blogs can be considered semi-private for, as Isherwood has observed, personal blogs that stand alone rarely attract a large readership, and "tend to reflect offline peer networks."[33] However, while the blogs of the contributors to *We are all Laila* may have been semi-private before 9th September 2006, the important difference is that the group provided for a vast widening of this readership circle. This is the second tier of the 'public' component. The power of *We are all Laila* lies in the fact that it acts as a hub with a central driving force, connecting 73 individual female bloggers with each other and with a wider outside readership, both within the blogosphere and beyond it in the world of the mainstream media. It offers an opportunity for anyone, whether a well-known blogger or someone who had hitherto simply written for just a few readers, to be brought into the sphere website and have her voice heard.

[31] Saghie (2001), 57
[32] Wheeler (2008), 100
[33] Isherwood (2008), 85

Isherwood argues that by subverting patriarchal authority, "blogging does something previous changes in Egyptian society have not yet done."[34] In this way, the challenge presented to the traditional role by *We are all Laila's* bloggers has the effect of making them serendipitous participants in an exercise in feminism, even though doing so is not their primary motivation. In exploring publicly what it means to be a woman in Egypt, these woman, argues Sharon Otterman, are "adding complexity to the concept of femininity."

[34] Isherwood (2008), 93

3. Responses and reactions: the blogosphere and beyond

After the dot com collapse of 2001, the internet entered a second stage of its life that has become known as Web 2.0 – a stage that has seen the "blurring of the boundaries between web users and producers.[1]" One of the most important changes was an increase in interactivity – the potential for ordinary readers to contribute and respond to content – which impacts upon *We are all Laila* in three crucial ways. Firstly, as discussed, it means that anyone can, in theory, express themselves through the project provided they have access to a computer, an internet connection, and basic computer literacy skills. Secondly, it means that readers of any of the *We are all Laila* posts can post their own publicly-visible comments underneath any given contribution. Thirdly, it means that bloggers who disagree with the group's aims or principles can write counter-posts, voicing their criticism in the public arena. This potential for interactivity is what differentiates blogging from other, older media and forms of self-expression, and gives it the potential to shape not only the individual but also group identities, as well as the wider society beyond.

Comments and shaping 'the individual'

The simplest way for a reader to interact with the content of a blog is by posting a comment. All blogs have the facility to accept comments, although the blog's host can choose to disable them. However, doing this is unusual because they form an important motivation behind blogging, as the feedback they provide helps the writer to develop a

[1] Zimmer (2008), 1

sense of identity and relevance to their readership. Anyone can leave a comment, including those who do not have a blog of their own; commenting simply requires the reader to give an email address (which is not publicly visible). Many blogs have readers who regularly post comments under the same name, helping to build up a sense of a defined readership for the author, especially when the feedback is positive. Unlike in a personal diary, the author of a blog can 'try out' their thoughts in a post and then wait for feedback from their readers. According to Isherwood, comments provide a facility for "reinforcing in-group identities among regular blog readers," [2] and as a result of this they give the author a sense of relevance, self-worth and the motivation and encouragement to continue writing.

Commenters can also leave negative responses, or even abusive ones. However, allowing comments does not leave the blogger completely vulnerable, because she has the power to moderate the comments, and to remove anything she deems offensive. The original blogger can also take part in the discussion on the comments thread, engaging in dialogue and debate, clarifying ambiguities or responding to criticism. The number of comments left on *We are all Laila* contributions ranges from 0 to 80. Some commenters leave short notes of support and encouragement, some highlight particular parts that they agree or empathise with, some offer constructive comments, and some criticise or ridicule what has been said. Despite the potential for abusive messages, the majority of comments are polite, even if they strongly disagree with the post in question.

Some comments are encouraging and attempt to build up the self-confidence of the author. In *The theory of the vanilla-flavoured biscuit that tastes like chilli, Krawan*

[2] Isherwood (2008), 83

expresses her confusion at whether she should be a 'biscuit' – a metaphor for what she sees as a meek, delicate, feminine woman who is easily crushed - or one that is a strong and 'chilli-flavoured.'[3] In response, her fellow *We are all Laila* bloggers rally round with advice and words of support. Some tell her to be who she wants to be:

> You've got to be who you are. If that's a biscuit, be a biscuit. If it's a burning chilli pepper, be one of those. (*Soosa al-Mafroosa)*

Others urge her to be strong:

> Don't be a biscuit any more, Laila - they're easy to shatter and swallow. Be instead as you are in spirit and mind and being... Onward, Laila, the age of silence has come to an end. (*Sampateek*)

> I don't know what to say to you, except that you can be a biscuit, but don't let others crush you. Be a strong woman, in the framework of the delicate, weak woman inside you. I don't say this to make you like me but because this weakness exists inside all of us. (*Farida)*

Comments such as *Soosa al-Mafroosa*'s attempt to strengthen *Krawan*'s pride in herself, while *Farida* emphasises that she is not alone in feeling insecure and uncertain. *Sampateek* encourages her to find strength, using the device of Laila to emphasise the sense of community – a technique she also uses on many of the other posts.

Building a community

As well as being an important exercise in expressing and developing an individual, another key feature of *We are all Laila* is the sense of group identity that it creates. In his analysis of a blog of a young Egyptian woman (not involved in *We are all Laila),* George Weyman argues that "her critique depends on the reinforcing encouragement of a community of like-minded peer bloggers."[4] The encouragement and reinforcement

[3] Samir, Doaa. 'The theory of the vanilla-flavoured biscuit that tastes like chilli.' *Krawan.* 10th September 2006.
[4] Weyman (2007),8

provided by commenting and interactivity makes blogging unique in its ability to provide a community where anyone's voice can be heard. In a country where the mainstream, predominantly state-controlled media refuses to deal with many of the problems the contributors discuss – especially controversial ones – these women can write about their concerns and then not only receive individual encouragement, but also feel that they are part of a community of like-minded people who understand and share their problems.

In the realm of personal blogging, where many of the contributors are unknown and relatively unread, *We are all Laila* provides a ready-made support network that could otherwise be hard to come by. There is potential for bloggers with a small readership to write about something they deem to be deeply important but to then receive little feedback, leaving them feeling that they and their concerns are insignificant. Even if there is not a shortage of feedback, online discussions can often give rise to an aggressive atmosphere, as Susan Herring has observed in her study of online gender harassment. She argues that online discussion sometimes takes on a highly confrontational form, and can create "a hostile social environment for some women on-line, constraining their ability to participate on a par with men."[5] Given the fact that female bloggers are outnumbered at a ratio of more than 3:1 by men,[6] they are especially vulnerable to this culture. Furthermore, in light of the culture of honour and shame that condemns women in Egyptian society who dare to speak out, let alone publish their own blogs that discuss sexual harassment, marriage and childbearing, it is possible and even likely that in ordinary circumstances, negative comments outweigh the positive ones, dealing a blow to the blogger's confidence and sense of conviction.

[5] Herring (1999), 164
[6] Information and Decision Support Centre (2008), 21

We are all Laila provides a much safer environment for these discussions by harbouring a community of like-minded bloggers, helping contributors who tackle daring topics to not feel out on a limb. The group's central 'meeting place' (i.e. homepage) can direct bloggers to like-minded people and a network of young women able and willing to provide online encouragement. Many of the fellow *We are all Laila* contributors begin their comments on others' post by saying, 'Yes, we are all Laila,' reinforcing the sense of shared identity for, as George Weyman argues, comments allow the author to "shape a sense of belonging."[7] The group's founders make an effort to comment on as many of the contributions as possible, and their status within the group bringing legitimacy and approval to the posts they respond to. The community spirit of this 'online sisterhood' is further encouraged by the slogan - We are all Laila – and the specially-designed logo that every contributor is encouraged to include at the top of her post (see fig.1 below).

Fig. 1: Logo that reads 'We are all Laila' (the red text highlights the 'we' suffix)

The responses

This group identity plays an important role in forming a defence against some of the criticism levelled at the campaign. Blogging on the same day offer the contributors a kind of 'safety in numbers' against hostile responses, most of which come from men who oppose the group's aims. These critical responses are expressed not only through the comment facilities on individual posts but also through whole counter-posts. Some

[7] Weyman (2007), 15

express exasperation, some anger, some outright hostility to feminism and its aims. A few others also use it to express support, or solidarity.

There are 42 links on the responses page of *We are all Laila,* 30 of which still work. From the information available, it is possible to tell that 18 of them are male and 3 are female. It is not possible to discern the gender of the remaining 9 responses through information contained within their profiles or their posts. The criticism falls into a range of different categories. One popular tactic is to play on both the name and the logo of *We are all Laila,* spawning blog posts entitled 'We are all Egyptian, Laila,'[8] 'We all want to be Laila,'[9] and 'We are all against Laila.'[10] Some titles make use of famous 'Lailas' in Arabic literature and their associated characters, such as 'Laila and the Wolf'[11] (the Arabic name for the story of Little Red Riding Hood), 'Most of us are Hussein[12] (the idealised, nationalistic hero who Laila eventually falls in love with in *The Open Door),* and 'We are not all Mursi'[13] (a reference to Mahmoud Mursi, who plays Laila Soliman's conservative, controlling university-professor-turned-fiancé in *The Open Door*).

In his blog *Our Egypt, Dr. Tantawy* accuses *We are all Laila* of creating a "hostile female atmosphere" and of being a divisive force within the blogosphere:

> They well know that any problem that takes the form of criticism is built on factions that often end in never-ending quarrels and fights. In short, today male bloggers are responding to this movement with their thoughts. Tomorrow they

[8] Dr Tantawy. 'We are all Egyptians, Laila.' *Our Egypt.* 9th September 2006.
[9] Osama, Radwa. 'We all hope to become Laila.' *Hakazaana.* 11th September 2006.
[10] Tarek. 'Layla and the wolf.' *Kelmeteen.* 9th September 2006.
[11] Tarek. 'We are all against Laila.' *Kelmeteen.* 13th September 2006.
[12] Unbrainwasher. 'You are all Laila and most of us are also Hussein.' *Unbrainwasher.*10th September 2006.
[13] Shababek.'We are not all Mursi' *Shababek.* 9th September 2006

will mock its existence. And after that it will end in all-out war on the female bloggers among them.[14]

Fig. 2: We are all Egyptians[15]

He asks the women to unite instead under the banner of nationalism, and represents this stance visually through his own customised logo, which reads 'We are all Egyptians.' (see fig. 2).

Under the heading 'the problems of the fair sex,' *Ragin Raven* author of *I froze myself in a still life*, tries to trivialising the problems described by the *We are all Laila* contributors by presenting them in the form of a casual list, despite the fact that some of them – such as domestic violence – are real and serious concerns for the women who discuss them. He goes on to list a series of issues that he considers more important than the concerns surrounding women's rights:

> So, ladies of Garden City,[16] what do you think about the Middle East issue? What do you think about what's happened in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and Palestine? Or are things like that too repulsive and too sad for delicate beings like you?[17]

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[14] Dr Tantawy. 'We are all Egyptians, Laila.' *Our Egypt*. 9th September 2006.
[15] From Way back machine archive, 17th November 2006. URL: http://web.archive.org/web/20061117192746/http://masrena.blogspot.com/2006/09/blog-post_115783474914776735.html
[16] Garden City is a middle-class area of Cairo. The phrase is comparable to the English expression 'ladies who lunch', i.e. a derogatory remark about middle-class women. *Hawanim Garden City* was also a popular Ramadan soap opera in 1997.
[17] Ragin Raven. 'What's on my mind, Layla.' *I froze myself in a still life painting*. 10th September 2006.

He does not make any attempt to deal with contributors' concerns head-on, choosing instead to distract attention from the problems by trivialising them, dwarfing them in comparison to the broader political problems confronting the Middle East, and by attacking the author's social background. This last tack is not only distracting, but also hypocritical given that, according to his profile information, he is a banker from Cairo. Further hypocrisy comes from Mohamed Gamal, a 25 year-old journalist and cartoonist from Cairo, who uses his blog *Gemyhoood* to mock the aims of the women, saying:

> When all of society has taken its freedom you will be able to swim in liberty, and we will call for a campaign for an exchanging of roles, and for men bearing children and suckling them, too.[18]

He presents his proposed solution to what he sees as the trivial complaints of Arab women in the form of a cartoon showing an angry-looking woman with her mouth sewn shut (see fig.4). "What do I mean by this cartoon?" he asks his readers. "The true answer to this question...it is the key to solving this whole farce." Ironically, in his profile he claims to have "a great interest in freedom of expression and publishing on internet," but it seems that in his eyes this statement only applies to men.

[18] Gamal, Mohamed. 'A cartoon about We are all Laila.*' Gemyhoood's Blog*. 10th September 2006.

Fig. 4: Gemyhoood's representation of the 'solution' to *We are all Laila*

Abdullah Miftah is one of *We are all Laila's* most outspoken male critics. He describes the group and its aims as "destructive" and implies those who write for it as having been contaminated by Western influences:

> Lately I have been surprised by a series of articles that remind me of Nawal al-Sa'adawi and Iqbal Baraka[19]... They write things that are not found in our Arab society; things that have been corrupted by imposters, secularists and atheism.[20]

He makes this criticism despite the attempt of many of the contributors to couch their arguments in Islamic terminology, and their reluctance to associate with Western-style feminist discourse. He goes on to quote the late Sheikh Sha'rawi, a television preacher who was well-known for his conservative views on women and work:[21]

[19] Iqbal Baraka is an odd choice her – she is well known for her efforts to discuss feminism within an Islamic framework. See Abou Al-Magd, Nadia. 'Feminists behind their men.' *Al-Ahram Weekly.* 11th February 1999. URL: http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/1999/416/bfair13.htm.
[20] Abdullah Miftah. 'Oh Nawal Sa'adawi.' *Abdullah Miftah.* 9th September 2006. All the comments discussed below can be found underneath this blog post.
[21] Dawoud, Khaled. 'Mourned by millions.' Al-Ahram Weekly. 25th June 1998.

> Men have tasks and women have other tasks. Is it possible to make night equal day?

Again, this is despite the fact that many of the female posters acknowledge that there are differences between men and women, and several assert that they do not want absolute equality but merely an improvement of the status of women.

But the *We are all Laila* community hits back at his remarks. As a result *Abdullah Miftah* receives 35, mainly critical, comments. *Shaimaa* tries to engage him in constructive dialogue, asking, somewhat sarcastically,

> Could you tell me, Captain, what it is that you see as destructive in our thought, so that I can try and explain?

Bent Masreya's tone is more critical:

> You have not discussed any of the complaints that any of the girls have written about in their posts... Read carefully everything they have written, and think.

Nada's is witty and scathing all at once:

> Yes, all the prophets were men, but I wish that men would treat women as the prophets used to treat them.

Not all the response posts, however are as negative as those discussed above. In her blog *Hakaza ana* (That's me), Radwa Osama, a 23 year-old from Cairo, says she feels women themselves are sometimes responsible for not claiming their independence and their rights. She describes how some women want men to fulfil the role of parents, asking where there are going, what they are doing, and looking out for them and expresses confusion at feeling the same way, as reflected in the title of her post - 'We all hope to become Laila.' She says:

> I try to train myself to be independent and not to fall into the sphere of dependence, even in the name of love... Why do we feel safe when we surrender to weakness in front of those we love, while at the same time we refuse the role

> of Laila because, under the influence of the haze of love, we repeal all that matters to Laila?[22]

In a post on his blog *Gr33n Data* (in English), *Tarek* agrees that there is discrimination against women in Egypt, but he feels powerless and frustrated as to how to help. Consequently, his post entitled 'Laila, a call for comments' asks for practical suggestions from the contributors:

> We do not know what we are supposed to do, and what actions and attitudes we have to change. Also the Lailas are just telling individual stories, which are not easily generalized. So, I need all the Leilas to participate it this post, and tell us frankly the stuff that piss them off, and what are the points that they think we have to change.[23]

Shababek (Windows) is keen to assert that not all men are against an improvement in women's rights, and designs a logo especially to illustrate this (see fig.5):

> I'd like to say that we are not all Mursi – not all men are. I don't deny that there are some like him, but there are also many who defend Laila's rights, possibly even as much as Laila herself.[24]

Fig. 5 We are not all Mursi. You are not all Laila. From *Shababek (Windows).*

Perhaps unexpectedly, the central *We are all Laila* blog has a special page dedicated to hosting all of the responses, including those that condemn, ridicule and attempt to undermine the campaign. Although this may seem like a strange decision, it in fact

[22] Osama, Radwa. 'We all hope to become Laila.' *Hakazaana.* 11th September 2006.
[23] Tarek. 'Laila, a call for comments.' *Gr33n Data*. 14th September 2006.
[24] Shababek.'We are not all Mursi' *Shababek.* 9th September 2006

allows the organisers to mobilise a group of female respondents ready to challenge responses that are critical of the group. As a result, the reactions from the female bloggers are numerous and strong. In addition, by accommodating a range of responses within the space of the campaign, the organisers make it more for difficult for critics to accuse the group of being secretive or uninterested in the views of men. According to Najde al-Ali, this is an accusation often levelled at women's activist groups, who she says often experience "widespread criticism towards the flurry of conferences and seminars and the tendency to 'talk in circles.'"[25] By allowing men (and women who do not feel part of their campaign) to take part in the debate, *We are all Laila* removes some of the suspicion surrounding women's groups.

In this sense, the blogosphere also provides a new and different meeting place, facilitating dialogue between men and women who in 'real life' would not usually engage in debate for reasons of location, class, age or ideology, and also because of the social and cultural constraints that restrict interaction between strangers of the opposite sex. This meeting of what Otterman describes as "strangers from across the ideological spectrum"[26] makes projects such as *We are all Laila* a unique forum for dialogue. Weyman argues that this interaction between strangers met beyond the traditional family sphere represents a "direct threat to the constitution of social authority within the family."[27]

Expanding: beyond the blogosphere

[25] Al-Ali (2000), 172
[26] Otterman (2007), 3
[27] Weyman (2007), 18-19

While the diversity of this online meeting place is somewhat restricted by the demographic of Egypt's internet users, news of the activities of *We are all Laila* also went beyond both the blogosphere and the internet. The event was picked up in the Egyptian daily newspaper *al-Masri al-Youm,*[28] Islamonline.net,[29] the second-most visited Islam site on the web,[30] Elaph,[31]an online Arabic-language newspaper based in London, and on *Salt and Pepper*, a blog on the BBC Arabic website.[32] The only article that proved controversial among the organisers was the one published by *al-Masri al-Youm,* which made basic factual errors as well as being scathing of the group's participants. The writer, Usama al-Mahdi, claimed that those writing about the problems of Egyptian women were, in fact from the Gulf. He then said:

> As for female writers, they welcomed the idea, viewing it as an opportunity to acquire fame in the world of blogging as well as a chance to explore subjects relevant to them, rather than being forced into issues that would expose their scant knowledge compared with their male counterparts.

Arabesque responds in an angry post on her blog, *Seeking Freedom,*[33] as does Eman Abd el-Rahman, who urges her readers to contact the newspaper to complain.[34] By virtue of the interactivity of the web, the pair were able to publicly dispute the claims made by this inaccurate report, and demand a group effort to correct it.

The founders were also invited to appear on *al-'Ashara Masa'an* (10pm), a popular Egyptian daily current affairs programme, but chose to decline, perhaps as a result of

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[28] Al-Mahdi, Usama. 'The internet revolution of Laila and her sisters.' *Al-Masri Al-Youm*. 7th May 2004.
[29] Arafah, Muhammad Gamal. 'The revolution of 'Laila' leaps out of female blogs.' *Islamonline.net*. 10th September 2006.
[30] 'Top sites in Islam.' *Alexa.com*. URL:http://www.alexa.com/browse?&CategoryID=28448
[31] Mustafa, Abd al-Rahman. 'The stories of young Arabic women in blogs.' *Elaph*. 21st September 2006.
[32]El-Minshawi, Mustafa. 'My darling daughter, please don't come.' *Salt and pepper*. 3rd October 2006.
[33] Arabesque. 'Al-Masri al-Yaum's mistakes.' *Seeking Freedom.*. 31st May 2007.
[34] Abd el-Rahman.'Al-Masry al-Yaum.' *Lasto Adri.* 28th May 2007.

their *al-Masri al-Yaum* experience, as they feared it would misrepresent the group and its aims.[35] One *We are all Laila* contributor also achieved national fame through the world of publishing, for in 2008 Ghada Abdel Aal's blog *Wanna-b-a-bride* was one of three chosen by Cairene publishing house Dar el-Shorouk to be turned into a book.[36] Although the book's publication was directly related to *We are all Laila*, her contribution to the group would have helped to raise the profile of her young blog, which in September 2006 was only three months old.

The appearance of *We are all Laila* in the worlds of publishing and the press reflects a global trend that is allowing bloggers to play a role in shaping the media agenda. By coming together as a group, the contributors to *We are all Laila* generated a presence that was sizable enough to attract the attention of the mainstream media. Aaron Delwiche describes pattern as "a broader trend toward the decentralization of communicative power."[37] It is this decentralisation that enabled a group of female Egyptian bloggers to penetrate the
world of the mainstream Egyptian media, thus achieving their original goal – speaking out and having their voices heard – in an arena beyond the internet.

[35] Abd el-Rahman, Eman. Personal interview. 1st March 2009
[36] Soares, Claire. 'Reader, I didn't marry him.' *The Independent*. 28th October 2008.
[37] Delwiche (2005), conclusion

Conclusion

It remains to be seen whether *We are all Laila* has caused, or will cause, any real change beyond the sphere of the internet. Neither the group itself nor its content is by any means revolutionary – it represents a small part of the Egyptian blogosphere, which in turn is population by a very small part of Egyptian society – but both must be considered in their mediated context. By creating an environment that is beyond the control of patriarchal social structures or the state, blogging gives women a new form of presence that is unique in the history of modern Egyptian society. Even when couching their arguments about women's rights in socially-acceptable terms, female bloggers still have an unprecedented amount of freedom to publish their thoughts and experiences in their own language and their own style, enabling them to develop their own individual personas online.

We are all Laila, specifically, creates a framework that enables and encourages women to discuss topics considered off-limits by society. In providing a network of supportive, like-minded women, the group adds a layer of community identity to their individual identities enabled by blogging, while also exposing the views of individuals to a wider audience, online and beyond, thanks to the size and reach of the structure it provides. In addition to this, internet access continues to expand, and the blogosphere is continuing to grow. Further *We are all Laila* days took place in 2007 and 2008, and the group is still going strong, thanks mainly to the dedication of those behind it but also because of its relevance to its contributors, who have returned to write each year, bringing more people with them each time.

As I have shown in this thesis, the topics raised through *We are all Laila* 2006 cannot be considered groundbreaking or radical when examined through the pre-existing feminist frameworks. But attempting to classify the discussion by focusing solely on the 'ideologies' cultivated by academics and feminist leaders is neither productive nor useful. Instead, the *We are all Laila's* feminist element is being cultivated organically by its contributors who, in exercising self-expression in the 'un-policed' public venue of the world wide web, are breaking down social boundaries online. While the blogosphere may not yet have proved to be home to a new kind of feminism, it is already providing feminism with a new and exciting home.

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