

SOCIAL MEDIA AND GENDER EQUALITY

Why Online Activism is Just as Important as Offline Activism

by *Danielle Walker*

Gender inequality is the world's most widespread and destructive inequality, now top priority on the agenda of the world's greatest humanitarian organization, the United Nations. With the ongoing surge of communication technology gaining in force, young and old generations alike are communicating on a digital circuit of social media networks, blogs, and cellphone applications from one ocean to the next.

Beatrice Frey, Social Media Manager of UN Women, believes while education is the true key to gender equality and freedom, that social media can be a promising tool to empower women and girls.

This is a threatening yet exciting time – on the brink of sweeping global change – where injustice and human rights are now a world priority. Let's be clear on one specific point; offline activism, that is, grassroots organizing and groundwork, is as important as it has ever been, and nothing can ever replace face-to-face interaction. Frey makes the distinction between offline and online activism but notes that they are both useful and necessary for gender equality and social change. “I believe social media can be a great additional channel for activism if linked to other channels of offline activism,” she states. “Social media should never be the only communicative tool but one of several for outreach and communication which depends on the target audience and goal.”

After all, social media is not now beneficial to people who live in a region that does not have computers or the Internet. Frey comments that the digital divide is still present and limits global connectivity in certain parts of the world. Sometimes the most effective protocol is community radio, flyers, TV, or even cellphones that can send emergency alerts and provide hotlines. Though, if initiatives were taken to digitally connect a rural area, the potential to foster individual and community awareness for gender equality is endless. For instance, Frey

points out, access to social media allows women specifically to acquire health services and information, education, or even promote a political presence for those women running for office. UN research has indeed demonstrated when women are in decision-making positions in their communities, the gender gap is lessened. (*UN Women, 2011-2012 Progress of the World's Women*)

As long as the digital divide does exist, however, social media is instrumental for representing those women who do not own computers or have Internet access, enabling them to participate in social media. International organizations that work directly with these women – Amnesty International, Save the Children, Human Rights Watch, Vital Voices, Equality Now, and Soroptimist International are just a few that have access to social media – do broadcast to their international partners and the public to gain allies, volunteers, staff, and board members for funding and support. Social media has shown great strength as an alternative strategy for advocacy and global consciousness, supplying valuable information that may not have been so easily accessible.

Frey remarks on the public interest that has been aroused by online social networks, putting pressure on authority so that they cannot ignore the voices that otherwise may not have been heard without social media.

Even the UN began exploring uncharted waters a couple of years ago with several social media channels through YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, Linked In, Facebook, and more, whereas traditional media forms did not allow for outside interaction with the general public.

How can we contribute to the power of a collective – a collective body that fights injustice and overcomes barriers? How can we harness the

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power of the almighty tweet? Or the WordPress blog or the Facebook post? If government officials and civilians use technology to participate in global justice, then social media can be an influential means for resolution through cooperation and community.

Of course, social media can be used to *perpetuate* gender inequality just as much as it *challenges* it, which is why we need to be much more conscious of *how* we use social media. Social media networks that promote sexism, or any other kind of “ism” for that matter, are being used negatively but, unfortunately, effectively.

Anyone who has been following the latest news on Facebook pages degrading abused women, can testify to this. But let it not go unmentioned that a petition was sent to Facebook and tweets were sent to companies being advertised on these pages to pull ads in response, demanding that Facebook re-prioritize the material they censor and remove those hateful, sexist pages. After growing criticism, Facebook admitted to ineffective policies on hate speech and vowed more proactive training for staff moderators to prevent future occurrences.

What happens when social media is used for social good? It sparked enormous public outcry, for example, for Kim Lee, sharing images of her beaten face, and consequently becoming the first woman in China to be court granted a divorce from her abusive husband. Social media unified a socio-political revolution in Tahrir Square. It exposed, via Tumblr, a gang rape joke directed at a female audience member in a Daniel Tosh comedy show. It unveiled shared experiences of sexism to the Everyday Sexism Project on Twitter with over 54,000 followers. It mapped the location of a sexual harassment incident on a city grid map using the Hollaback! phone app or website.

Frey notes, “Global consciousness existed before social media but social media is a tool for accessing a worldly consciousness.” This promising technology is a bridge between human ingenuity and compassion. All great change

begins with an idea and the will to make it happen. Social media is the idea; social media users must have the will.

Is social media going to save the world?

With cautious optimism, it is not the only and absolute answer the world needs, but it is an essential new tool as we move into our future.

Progressive social media shatters the patriarchal myth that men and women are too different or separate to be equal, while eliminating the geographic borders between us. For this reason, every connected woman and man can be educated, enlightened, and connected. The UN bears great responsibility to its global citizens who, above all, value human rights. So too, does social media when it is utilized for this higher purpose, which is why social media must always enter the conversation on gender equality strategies inside and outside of the United Nations.

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