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Military, Islamism, and Liberal Democracy in Egypt وسط الشرق الأوسط في مواجهة الإرهاب في الإنسان في مواجهة الإرهاب في الشرق الأوسط

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A space for unveiling the minds of young Muslim women



By: **Dalia Ziada**

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I was once asked: if you were given the choice, would you choose to be born now in the new millennium? I replied: definitely, yes! Not only because I was given the unique chance to witness the end of one millennium and the beginning of another, but also because I was given free access to the whole universe from my small room via a laptop computer and an Internet connection.

The information technology revolution has done much more than merely making the world a small village. For us, young women activists living in Egypt and the Middle East, the information technology revolution gave us the space we needed to practice our lives the way we want, apart from the restrictions imposed on us by our patriarchal societies.

The life for us now is divided into two worlds, a real one (inside the real patriarchal society) and a virtual one (on the World Wide Web). In the real world, we are still looked upon as a "beautiful body" while in the virtual world we are treated as an "intellectual mind."

In the home, the young woman is the property that her parents are keeping "safe and sound" until the anonymous knight comes on his white horse and takes her to the golden cell of marriage. To keep her "safe and sound," they might commit an unlimited number of crimes against her body, mind and spirit.

These crimes might be as painful as Female Genital Mutilation in early childhood; as artificial as covering her body with as much clothes as possible when she becomes a teenager, or as frustrating as preventing her from traveling for study or work, preventing her from choosing her own career, blaming her for being ambitious and selecting the man she is supposed to live with happy forever – her husband.

One of the most painful experiences in my life based on the fact that I am a female took place while I was an undergraduate student. In the year 2001, after achieving three levels in the annual Students Chess Competition, I was prevented from competing for the title of University Master of chess because I am a "girl" and the final level was made

PROFILE



Dalia Ziada زيادة

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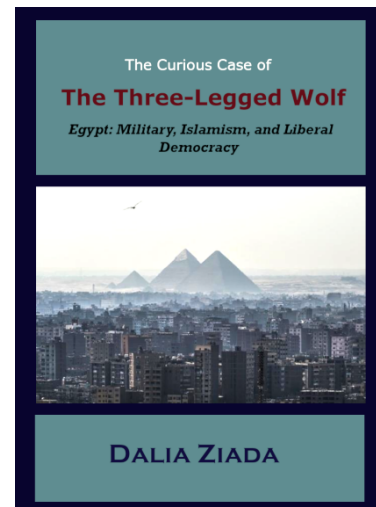
مدير ومؤسس المركز المصري لدراسات الديمقراطية الحرة، مركز بحثي متخصص في دراسات الديمقراطية ومكافحة الإرهاب في مصر والشرق الأوسط

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only for "boys."

I protested and proved to the organizers of the competition that the mind of the "girl" is one hundred percent equal to the mind of the "boy" and the difference between the minds of each has nothing to do with their gender. But, the answer from competition organizers was a threat to remove my previous titles. Of course, I had to shut up.

Even in the street and work place, young women are always looked upon as the sexual objects that men always desire to verbally or physically harass. What doubles the misery is that the society holds women – the victim – accountable for what the man does and blames her for being a "woman" who dared to walk in the site of men and must stomach the dire consequences of being professionally ambitious.

But online, in the virtual world, on the World Wide Web, the story is completely different. Thanks to the Internet, young women in the Middle East have proven to their patriarchal societies that they are equal active minds and not only beautiful bodies or passive properties of men.

Online, I am the woman I always wanted to be: I can "virtually" dress the way I want. I can "virtually" walk in the "web-sites" men walk without fear of being physically or verbally harassed. I can "virtually" challenge a "male" mind in an online chess game and win. I can "virtually" discuss critical, political, and social topics and my opinion is respected regardless of my gender. Online, I am enjoying the freedom I always wanted to have in my real life. Online, I am not the "beautiful body" any more, I am the "active mind" that people respect and follow.

Online, I am the FaceBook member who does not shy to write in her profile "I am in a relationship with ... whomever." I am the blogger who expresses herself without fear, who shares her own personal problems with the universe and networks with young women in different places in the Middle East in launching campaigns and changing the painful negativities of the real world.

Recently, on the day of the Mulid el-Naby celebration in Egypt – Prophet Muhammad's Birthday – I wrote an article about the suppression I suffer as a young Muslim woman for not being able to do a pilgrimage to Mecca, only because the Saudi law prevents young women access to the holy land of Mecca without a "mahram," or male relative chaperon. I posted the article on my blog and footed it with blaming the Saudi government for practicing such discrimination against all Muslim young women in the world.

On the same day, several international and local media outlets including Al Masry Al Youm and al-Youm el-Saba'a dailies, BBC Radio and website, PBS TV, Global Voices Website, Topix News Website and some other international blogs picked up the article and discussed it. Then, I received tens of emails from young Muslim women from different places all over the world offering their unconditional help and asking me to activate this campaign on a wider global scale. Thanks to the Internet, my very personal problem turned into a global one and I am gaining supporters from all over the globe.

By the way, Saudi women are prevented from access anywhere in real life and the virtual Internet world without the so-called mahram. One of the funny fatwas issued by a famous Saudi scholar that was released in 2006 said that young women may not use the Internet alone! A young woman must have a "mahram" a male relative chaperon with her while navigating the Internet, the fatwa said.

Under such Salifi restrictions, I wonder if the day will come for young women in the Middle East to transform the freedom we are enjoying in the virtual world to the real world. It is not about changing regimes or laws. It is about changing mentalities of both women and men. The first, but most important, step is for both men and women to believe that they are two wings of the same bird, which is our common society. If one wing is forced to be inactive, our society will fail to fly as high as we aspire. It will fall down faster than we would expect.

Empower woman; then you empower the whole society.

at [November 08, 2009](#)



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