January 2020

Where's the party at?

Research | Ikhtyar African Feminist Collective

In our journey excavating broken urls, Ikhtyar would like to thank all the women who shared their experiences with us, answered our calls and invited us into their homes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ikhtyar African Feminist Collective officially joined the global feminist internet movement toward the end of 2017. Our aim was to forge a widely accessible path for Arabic-speaking feminists to join forces and support internet freedoms from an intersectional feminist standpoint.

As one of the conversation starters regionally in North Africa, Ikhtyar partnered with the Association for Progressive Communication (APC) through its Women's Rights program to conduct a piece of research.

Through this research, Ikhtyar takes a closer look at *el-hafla* — a term meaning "party" that is used in Egyptian slang term to refer to an online trolling practice. The drive behind this research endeavor is to understand how *el-hafla* is used to undermine feminist discourses online in the Egyptian context.

The research team chose *el-hafla* in particular as it manifests different forms of online gender-based violence, such as trolling and online shaming, carried out by more than one online user to shame and discredit outspoken women online.

The study looks at harmful social norms perpetuating gender-based violence online to help understand and analyze internet cultures. It does not seek to be comprehensive with regard to the complexities of women's realities. Rather, this research forms an essential step in Ikhtyar's feminist organizing online, with a keen invitation for its community and interested Arabic-speaking feminist groups and collectives to join.

The research revisits a brief history of blogging in Egypt, followed by a contrasting glimpse of what it means to be online in Egypt today. Ikhtyar intentionally resourced women's experiences to guide our understanding of *el-hafla* and the mapping of potential strategies to challenge the practice. The research team interviewed eight outspoken feminist Egyptian women to document and analyze their online presence, their understanding of *el-hafla,* as well as their tools and mechanisms to deal with and survive *haflas*. We also explored whether their experiences with *el-hafla* influenced their online activity and expression.

The research is followed by an annex including the interview questions, a glossary defining certain terms used by the team and an outline of the quantitative data scraped from Twitter.

About Ikhtyar

Ikhtyar is a Cairo-based initiative run by three feminists. It was founded in 2013 with the aim of producing knowledge in Arabic on personal narratives & feminist theories, bodily integrity, and more recently, feministing the internet.

About APC

In 1990, the Association for Progressive Communication (APC) was founded as a global network by seven organizations: GreeNet (UK), Institute for Global Communications (USA), NordNet (Sweden), Web (Canada), IBASE (Brazil), Nicarao (Nicaragua) and Pegasus (Australia). From the start, APC was driven by a deep commitment to making new communication techniques available to movements working for social change. Today, APC is a non-profit association of member and partner networks around the world, committed to making the internet serve the needs of global civil society.

The Association for Progressive Communications Women's Rights Programme (WRP) works to strengthen the capacity of diverse women's movements to have the confidence, skills and resources to influence the usage, development and decision-making of the internet. This is so that they are able to engage with it as a political space to challenge discriminatory norms, structures and practices, amplify their work for women's rights and gender justice and respond to the barriers that prevent them from benefiting from information and communication technologies (ICTs).

2. BACKGROUND
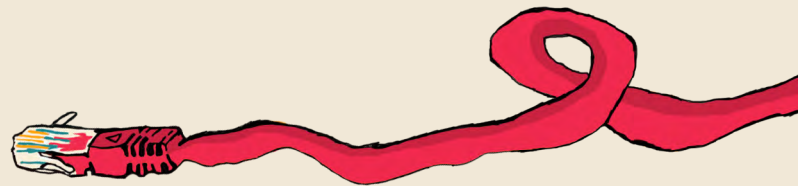
The internet is a key sphere tying together the private and the public. It might be seen as separate from daily routines and personal life, or conversely, as an extension of private space that is publicly displayed. On the internet, information and data are shared, products purchased and relationships established between millions of people around the world for work and for living. How this online space, that hosts and enables such different practices, is shaped merits further exploration.

Every internet user carries a set of social norms; on the internet we are not newly born but already formed by society. Some of these norms are fundamentally violent toward women and are manifested in different forms of online abuse. People use the internet with the discourses they already have in their daily lives including those about women, hence it is important to study how the discourse about women is shaped on the internet.

This research attempts to understand how harmful social norms in Egypt shape women's online presence, specifically for Egyptian women who face online abuse resulting from certain expectations on what constitutes "respectable" behavior for women. According to these expectations, women should refrain from engaging in public discussions in general, and about the body and personal

freedoms in particular. Internet users reflect these social norms through what they write, post, share and circulate as messages, but how does this enable gender-based violence online? What are the practices connected to these attacks? How can women change these practices? Or is such change not possible, making it necessary for women to employ various techniques to work around existing internet cultures in Egypt?

The research focuses on the power of a practice used online in Egypt to troll women and discredit their discourses. Targeted in particular by *el-hafla* are outspoken women who engage with politics, freedoms, bodily rights, sexuality, or layers of oppression against women in Egypt, and self-identify or get portrayed as feminists.

This trolling practice is commonly known in Egyptian slang as "*el-hafla*" which literally translates to "party" in Arabic. It is more or less a method of ganging up against a person/s, but the celebration here is about using toxic content to belittle the targeted person/s in the violent use of humor. It is a widespread organized practice of trolling and bullying the targeted person, relying on social norms which negatively affect women's engagement on the internet to shame and attack women and feminists. These norms shame women for very personal choices ranging from whether they remove body hair to having a boyfriend or girlfriend, and for life choices such as not getting married or not having children, or merely for expressing personal views.

A. Defining *el-hafla*

"*El-hafla*" is an Egyptian slang term used to describe an online practice that seeks to discredit its targets through mockery conducted by a group of people that can come together intentionally or unintentionally. This practice combines many harmful acts such as online stalking, screenshots of old posts or photos, creating fake accounts to trash people or sending violent comments and so on. It usually contains messages that are sexist and/or sexualized in order to degrade and silence women, men or gender-non conforming people. It is violent because it leaves those targeted vulnerable and violated.

"*El-hafla*" is the Egyptian word for "trolling" and part of its implicit violence is that the use of the term, which means "party," detracts from the severity of the act of violence. This both hinders any process of accountability and can confuse the target when it comes to understanding the extent of its psychological consequences.

A *hafla* moves, sometimes as a crowd, from one person to another but usually has a center subject. It is usually unclear when exactly a *hafla* starts or how it ends. It can last for days or it can be as short as an hour. Sometimes people join out of boredom, starting with "Where's the party at?" and they will be guided to the hot topic or discussion emerging that day. A *hafla* lasts as long as those

participating in it are responding to each other, and often feeds itself by the creation of memes (sometimes photos of the person/s targeted).

A *hafla* may be started by a Facebook group/page or by just one person and sustained by a group of people who know each other or a group of people who are connected simply by the 'disliking' of the person or argument they are attacking. *El-hafla* is a powerful practice that discredits the person and the topic at hand. It can lead the person/account who is at the center of the "party" to self-censorship, and has the effect of silencing others who watch *el-hafla* unfold.

3. COUNTRY CONTEXT
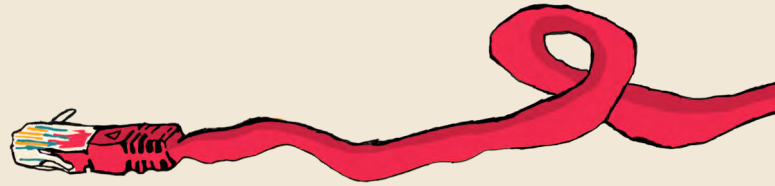
This section introduces general background on the status of women online in Egypt. It is important to mention that in 2018, the total number of internet users was 47.4 million. The gender-disaggregated data available dates from 2013, and reveals that female internet users made up 43.4% of total internet users in Egypt. The Internet Users Demographic Profile based on this data[1] reveals that 56.6% of internet users are males, 38% of users are between 25 and 44 years old, more than 73% of internet users are tertiary students, (university and postgraduate students), 45.9% of internet users are out of the labor force, as they include students, housewives, retired and military personnel, while the employed users represent 39.4% of total internet users.

A. Cyberactivism and feminism in Egypt

Using ICTs (Information Communication Technologies), in the mid-2000s an emerging Egyptian blogosphere sought to change oppressive realities by speaking up through writing and documenting regime brutality, building a political community and introducing citizen journalism that challenged the hypocrisy of the mainstream media. It was a form of cyberactivism that to an extent enabled political mobilization.[2]

There was a focused use of ICTs to address VAW (Violence against Women). On 9 September 2006, a day of collective blogging was launched by Kolena Laila (We are all Laila), a group of young women bloggers in Egypt, to blog about the realities of different forms of oppression in their and other women's

1. Measuring the Digital Society in Egypt: Internet at a Glance — Statistical Profile, 2015, Arab Republic of Egypt: Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, http://mcit.gov.eg/Upcont/Documents/Publications_1272015000_Measuring_the_ Digital_Society_in_Egypt_12_.pdf
2. Courtney C. Radsch, Cyberactivism and Citizen Journalism in Egypt: Digital Dissidence and Political Change, Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016.

lives. The idea was to build virtual communities mobilizing against injustices and to amplify feminist narratives, with the hope that it would become an annual day of collective blogging. The theme of the first day was "Speaking up!" in order to encourage women to write their stories and narrate their experiences. The following year, in 2007, the theme chosen was "Enabling Discussion" to give an opportunity for writers to self-reflect, examine and reassess where women themselves "have gone wrong" in their struggle.[3]

The initiative defined itself in the following way:[4]

The idea behind 'We are all Laila' started with Laila, a woman who was confiding her concerns to another Laila. Soon the two Lailas became three, then five and then more than 50 women, who discovered that despite the differences in their circumstances, ideas and priorities, they were all Laila at the end of the day. Laila is the heroine of The Open Door, by novelist Latifa Al Zayat, which was later made into a movie, starring Faten Hamama. Laila is your contemporary Egyptian girl who faces different circumstances in a society which elevates the station of men and overlooks women. No one cared for her dreams and ideas and what she wanted to achieve in her life. Despite all this, Laila, who was subjected to discrimination from her childhood, was able to maintain her belief in herself, and her role as a women equal in importance to men – whether at home, in the work place, at school or in society at large.

We selected Laila because it is an Egyptian story, which reflects a lot of what we go through and the pressures accumulated in our Egyptian society, and its traditions and views of women throughout history. This does not mean that bloggers from other Arab countries cannot take part in this initiative, as the culture which oppresses Laila exists there too.

If you search for Kolena Laila online today, you find a set of expired links, an inactive Facebook page, a Twitter account that last tweeted on 25 September 2011 and is followed by active feminists from all over the world. Its history of interactions testifies into its online power just over a decade ago. As you scroll through its history, you scroll through a memory of political resistance that realized the power of the internet as an alternative world, to organize and build communities aiming to uncover and change the reality of injustices faced by women. The Kolena Laila Twitter handle familiarizes you with activists' involvement at that time both locally and internationally.

Kolena Laila's interactions with the ongoing campaign Take Back The Tech! (TBTT!) began as soon as TBTT! itself kicked off in November 2006 as an outcome of that year's international 16 Days of Action Against Gender-Based Violence. Its theme was "Exploring the Connections between ICT and VAW,"

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3. "Blogging Initiative Amplifies Voices of Young Arab Women, 14 April, 2010, http://yfa.awid.org/2010/04/blogging-initiative-amplifies-voices-of-young-arab-women/
4. "Egypt: We Are All Laila," 11 October 2018, https://globalvoices.org/2008/10/11/egypt-we-are-all-laila

and led to the creation of a network that uses ICT to counter VAW.[5] And so, TBTT! was launched two months after the birth of Kolena Laila. It was the same year and the same strategy, with Kolena Laila engaging locally and in Arabic, while TBTT! sought to create an international language to understand the links between ICT and VAW, and analyze the internet through a feminist lens.

Courtney C. Radsch started her research with a paper at the 2006 International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) conference in Cairo, "The Revolution Will be Blogged: Cyberactivism in Egypt." In it, she observed the nexus of media, technology and rights from a range of vantage points: Arab media outlets, human rights NGOs, and the United Nations. In her research, Radsch monitors the echo of this cyberactivism leading to the growth of social media use in Egypt and laying the groundwork for the revolutionary change associated with the 25 January uprising in 2011.

Comparing Egyptian women's online engagement in 2006 with the period of this research (2017-2018), we can see that the internet itself as a playground has changed. In 2006, the internet was an alternative, new and unruly space, and over time it has acquired oppressive realities from the offline world. As we consider how women's online engagement has been affected by oppressive practices such as *el-hafla*, we notice that women's online engagement politically has also been changing. Kolena Laila was not able to sustain itself and the internet became another extension of the offline, particularly as authoritarian governments became aware of its power, as we further detail in this research.

B. Background on digital rights in Egypt

The most remarkable violation of digital rights carried out by Egypt's authorities was the internet and cellphone services blackout during the 2011 revolution.[6] It started with blocking both Twitter and Bambuser platforms to limit live broadcasting from across Egypt, then the cutting off of SMS services. Egypt was completely offline for three consecutive days.

Several years on from the uprising, the Egyptian authorities are focused on an expanding strategy of internet surveillance and censorship, which includes the monitoring of social media platforms, a new electronic crime law and the blocking of websites.[7]

The Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE), which is a local not-for-profit research center focusing on media freedoms, monitored the blocking of a number of websites in Egypt from May 2017 to 1 February 2018.[8] It started on 24 May 2017 with the blocking of 21 websites, escalating to 496

5. Take Back the Tech!, Interactive timeline of Take Back the Tech!, https://www.takebackthetech.net/timeline
6. "Egypt cuts off internet access," The Guardian, 28 January 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/jan/28/egypt-cuts-off-internet-access
7. "Decision From An Unknown Body: On Blocking Websites In Egypt," AFTE, 2 February 2018, https://goo.gl/nYR3tX
8. Decision From An Unknown Body: On Blocking Websites In Egypt, AFTE, 2 February 2018, https://goo.gl/nYR3tX

websites, and includes press and media, human rights platforms, tech websites, personal blogs, publishing platforms, political movement sites, torrents, VPNs and proxies. [9]

Egyptian authorities have made no official statements regarding the blocking of these websites. Such blockings are unconstitutional.

Article 52 of the Constitution states:

The State shall protect citizens' right to use all forms of public means of communications. Interrupting or disconnecting them, or depriving the citizens from using them, arbitrarily, is impermissible. This shall be regulated by Law.

Article 71 of the Constitution states:

It is prohibited to censor, confiscate, suspend or shut down Egyptian newspapers and media outlets in any way. By way of exception, they may be subject to limited censorship in times of war or general mobilization.

Egyptian authorities rely on "states of exceptions" such as the "war on terror" to justify limits to media freedom and to restrict the public's access to information. The anti-terrorism law, adopted in 2015, incubated several forms of criminalization and a wide range of powers to deal with certain crimes, including the authorization to shut down websites. Moreover, on 17 April 2017, a state of emergency was declared across the country for a three-month period, and renewed repeatedly since.

The Law on Combating Cyber Crime was approved by Parliament's Communications and Information Technology Committee in the first quarter of 2018.[10] Justified on the basis of safeguarding national security, its provisions are a further threat to digital rights.

The law, which contains 45 articles that relate to digital rights, threatens to tighten control over the content of the internet and codify comprehensive monitoring of communications in Egypt. For instance, telecommunications companies are required to keep and store users' data for up to 180 days, including data that identify users and describe all user interactions including phone calls and text messages, websites visited and applications used on smartphones and computers. The law compels telecom companies to comply with the decisions of the National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (NTRA), and national security authorities have the right to access this data held by telecommunications companies. The law states that,

..service providers and their affiliates must provide all available technical facilities to National Security Authorities upon demand, which allows those authorities to exercise their powers in accordance with the law.

9. See searchable list compiled by AFTE, https://afteegypt.org/blocked-websites-list?lang=en
10. The quarterly report on the situation of freedom of expression in Egypt, First quarter (January-March 2018), AFTE, https://goo.gl/F2wGEK

National security bodies include the presidency, the Armed Forces, the Ministry of Interior, General Intelligence and the Administrative Control Authority.

Other parts of Egyptian law potentially offer women certain digital protections. Article 113 of the Egyptian Criminal Code no. 58/1937 may be beneficial for women in cases of sextortion[11] as it imposes criminal penalties on the unauthorized collection of images or recordings of individuals in private places.[12]

Article 309-bis of the same law provides for:

..a penalty of detention for a period not exceeding one year [...] inflicted on whoever encroaches upon the inviolability of a citizen's private life, by committing one of the following acts in other than the cases legally authorized, or without the consent of the victim:

1. Eavesdropping, recording, or transmitting via any instrument whatever its kind, talks having taken place in a special place, or on the telephone.

2. Shooting and taking or transmitting by one of the instruments, whatever its kind, a picture of a person in a private place.

Notwithstanding these protections, the right to privacy of all Egyptian citizens is compromised by the Law on Combating Cyber Crime.

4. SCOPE OF THE STUDY
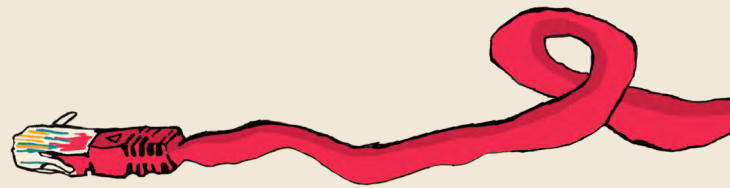
This study explores ways women get and/or feel discredited online through *el-hafla*. It focuses on women who present themselves online as feminists and/or use a feminist discourse in order to better understand the different interlocking layers of oppression faced by women in Egypt. This research relies on the stories of feminists who were targeted by the practice of *el-hafla*. The research team engaged in extended conversations with the participants during the focus group discussion and interviews, analyzing *el-hafla,* how it starts, continues, stops and how it might break out again. These discussions also covered aspects of online organizing against feminists and how feminists can counter such practices without reproducing the same harmful social norms to attack a person who discredits women and feminists online.

This study focuses on *el-hafla* as a violent online practice. Anyone can be a victim but our focus here is on its specific form when it targets outspoken feminists. The focus is on women who self-identify as feminists, are active online, and who

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11. See the Glossary, Section B of Annex.
12. State of Privacy Egypt, Privacy International, January 2019, https://privacyinternational.org/state-privacy/1001/state-privacy-egypt

have been targeted by *hafla(s)* on Facebook or Twitter. These two platforms were chosen as they are the two most widely accessed by internet users in Egypt.

This research was conducted qualitatively, aiming to analyze a certain practice, *el-hafla,* in a certain time (July 2017-July 2018) in an Egyptian context, exploring this practice's consequences on feminists' online participation and their safety to express themselves.

A. What is the question?

The main question this research asks is how *el-hafla* enables online violence against outspoken women and feminists. This was broken down by the research team into the following questions:

- Does this practice prevent women from expressing their opinions online and refrain from engaging in and contributing to online conversations in general?

- Does *el-hafla* make women self-conscious or influence how they express themselves?

- Does *el-hafla* push women and feminists toward creating online closed women-only   spaces?

- What are the alternative techniques to keep women and feminists active online? What are the techniques whereby women can be encouraged to shape online space not just contribute to it?

- Does *el-hafla* affect online feminist organizing?[13]

B. Methodology

In total, the research team interviewed eight women: four women participated in a focus group discussion and four were interviewed individually. The team believes in the value of relying on women's narratives and how they define *el-hafla,* as well as their experiences with it. Hence, the research team started with a focus group of four women who are active in engaging in online discussions, in particular around bodily freedoms and rights. All four had previously taken part in community-building activities organized by Ikhtyar. The team moved to in-depth interviews with another four women, based on similar criteria ie they are also active online and have previously been targeted by *el-hafla*. The questions were designed for each individual based on their personal history and work. In-depth interviews were conducted by two researchers, recorded, securely stored and coded for transcription with the interviewees' consent, and then safely discarded to ensure safety and privacy.

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13. See the interview questions in Section A of Annex.

The main themes discussed were participants' definitions of *el-hafla*, how they dealt with it and how it affected them, or not. The discussions also focused on how challenging this practice may help and inform feminist organizing online.

In all cases, the participants were asked if they agreed to the conversation being recorded. As soon as the data was extracted, all recordings were coded and archived anonymously.

One major challenge was in reaching women to share their experiences largely because they were busy and overworked. The decision on time and location of interviews were left to them to fit with their busy lives and so that they could feel as comfortable as possible. Potential interviewees were sent emails explaining the context of the research and how the data would be presented. Also, the invitation explained the importance of this research, and that all their information and personal identities would be kept confidential.

The team scraped data from Arabic-language Twitter accounts practicing *el-hafla* in order to identify the trends of violence and the forms of attacks, using this to guide the design of questions for the focus group discussion and interviews.

C. About the participants

Data was collected from a focus group discussion (attended by four women) and four in-depth interviews. The participating women, aged between 20 and 40 years old, all have experience of being targeted by *hafla(s).* They self-identify as feminists repeatedly in their posts online and in their offline lives.

Sandra Aged 24, undergraduate student, musician	**Linda** Aged 20, undergraduate, self-identifies as Christian
Amouna Aged 20, undergraduate student, leftist	**Najat** Aged 26, activist working on sexuality and bodily freedoms
Nerges Aged 24, content developer and documentaries director	**Zeena** Aged 40, visual artist
Mayar Aged 24, active in feminist research and knowledge production	**Ebtihal** Aged 29, artist

5. FINDINGS
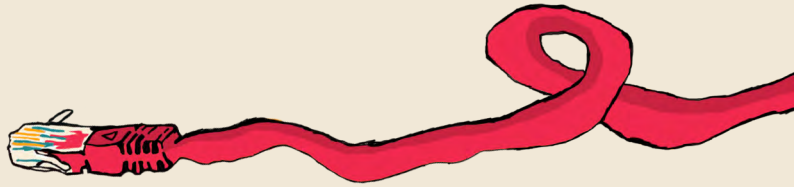
This section presents analyses of the interviews and focus group discussion exploring different experiences of *el-hafla*, its discourses, perpetrators and effects.

A. Feminist online: Identity and practices

None of the eight participants lists feminist or feminism on her online bio. In spite of this, they explained that their feminism is known both in their social circles and publicly due to their continuous online presence where they write and share feminist-themed content. As Zeena explained, "I do not have to add the word feminist to my profile on Facebook, I think what I do and say everyday expresses my feminist ideology."

They asserted that being a feminist is used against them to discredit their discourse drawing on the reputation of feminists as men-haters who encourage unacceptable social practices especially regarding control of their bodies and sexual freedoms.

In terms of online practices, it was found that Facebook is the most widely used platform among the participants. Of the eight women, only one uses Twitter and Facebook equally.

Linda described Facebook as "home" where she writes fun and light things. She feels comfortable there most of the time, but is aware that she cannot express her opinions all the time, giving the example of expressing solidarity with LGBTQ communities. She knows that she will be criticized by her friends and acquaintances, whom she knows from her younger days before her thinking developed and changed. Some of them are still on her friends list, but using a Facebook feature that allows her to choose what they access, they cannot see everything that she posts.

She said that she does not understand Twitter, while Zeena who was very active on Twitter during the uprising and the following period, lost the password to her account and did not trouble herself to change it.

The research team realized from the discussions that Facebook is the primary platform that the participants think of when discussing gender-based violence. Najat explained that she uses Facebook as an outlet for expressing her disappointments regarding a heteronormative conservative relationship. She elaborated that Facebook takes up a big part of her online presence as she is an admin of a page that challenges conservative conceptions of Egyptian women.

This priority of Facebook as a platform may explain why Twitter users sometimes tweet with reference to Facebook discussions, making it difficult to analyze

where attacks break out, and how a *hafla* starts and ends. The research team found that several tweets scraped with the term "feminist" in the month of April 2017 were sparked by a Facebook post.[14] One of these was a post by a woman who talked about Islamic feminism while another, posted by a man, compared a Nokia charger with a "feminist brain" claiming that, the first might develop sense at some point, while the second will not. Such an analogy speaks particularly to the Egyptian context where feminists are very commonly stereotyped as to be so narrow-minded that they care only about women's rights, ignoring more important things in the world.

B. *El-hafla* defined by participants

It was essential to understand how participants perceive the practice of *el-hafla,* and how they engage with it. Both **Zeena** and **Ebtihal** explained one aspect of *el-hafla* as expected excessive shares of something they have written accompanied by mockery and/or threats. **Nerges** focused on trolling and bullying as defining features of *el-hafla,* while **Najat** confirmed that the practice for her usually includes negative comments and insults. She further elaborated that *el-hafla* moves from one user to another in an organic and unpredictable way. A major disappointment for her is when feminists share memes mocking a woman who has expressed herself online. She explained that as online space is so violent and aggressive, and given that what is written or said there stays forever, women end up censoring themselves.

C. *m-hafla-tia:* Who carries out *el-hafla*?

The interviews and discussions described attackers as individuals — ranging from unknown random online users to known comrades — and misogynist online Facebook groups.

All-men private Facebook groups and pages mobilize their members in attacks on feminists. They try to undermine or exploit the reputations of their targets, in particular by sharing their profiles and publishing photoshopped material of them. In the focus group, both **Sandra** and **Mayar** described being targeted in *hafla(s)* by the group El Moltaqa (The Convening) and the page Zikorist (the word is a play on the word feminist and means "The misogynist").

The descriptions the women gave indicate that the attacks happen for a reason very much depending on the profile of the attackers. It is often "morality" or a performance of toxic masculinity[15] whether in the form of "intellectual criticism" or using comedy and humor to mock feminists' discourse.

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14. See the Quantitative Data Outline, Section C of Annex.
15. Toxic masculinity is a social science term that describes misogynist practices stemming from males practicing violence and aggression.

The difference between *haflas* perpetrated by groups of individuals as opposed to those driven by private groups is that the latter are more organized and coherent in their attacks. They gang up acting collectively to shame women and feminists using different forms of online violence. They are often systematic, spending time digging into the online history of the target to surface old opinions or posts, or even expose her former relationships. It is the *haflas* launched by these groups and pages that most often lead to the target going offline by either deactivating her account or suspending her online activities.

D. The attacks

The participants explained that *el-hafla* attacks vary in intensity and frequency. Some of the women described being attacked often, regardless of what they say. The popularity of profiles affected the frequency of *el-hafla,* as in the case of **Zeena** who had fought many wars offline and came to the online sphere with the status of a harsh talking feminist who played a major role in generating revolutionary discourse during the revolutionary period. She was thus in a sense feared online.

Lack of knowledge of Facebook privacy settings meant that many women who were page admins of women's groups on Facebook were easy targets of frequent attacks. **Najat** describes being the target of a *hafla* many times before learning to adjust her privacy settings.

As a *hafla* usually targets outspoken women who speak about personal freedoms and bodily rights, this is exploited in the *hafla* where several techniques are combined to discredit these women users and their online presence. A popular technique is to surface any "socially unacceptable" decisions, opinions, actions or choices in the target's history. Among the participants, **Zeena** was an exception to this. Her oldest history on social media is related to her revolutionary activism, which is difficult for attackers to manipulate. In **Sandra**'s case, however, in one *hafla* several pictures of her were dug out. One of these was a Facebook profile picture featuring a rainbow flag ribbon, with attackers assuming that this was an indication of her sexuality and subjecting her to homophobic abuse. Another picture featured a book that implies she is an atheist and a third image trolled on her baldness with transphobic comments. All these attacks can be used against her socially, and can potentially cause her trouble with Egypt's security apparatus given that she is a student at a public university.

In many attacks, women are subjected to body shaming, and two participants discussed being targeted in this way. While **Zeena** said she was not affected by it, **Ebtihal** felt violated. With Zeena, the attacker tried to shame her by saying she does not remove her body hair including around her private parts, and she replied saying she could send him pictures to check for himself. Zeena explained that she feels this is a private matter and does not feel ashamed discussing it in

public if this is a way to respond to attackers and intimidate them, just as they try to intimidate women.

In **Ebtihal**'s case, attackers mocked her figure in three incidents of *el-hafla*. She described having discomfort with her body growing up, and elaborated that while she responded to the attackers, mocking them back, she felt deeply hurt and exposed. She felt ashamed of her body following these attacks and this depressed her, especially in the cases where had been talking about sexual harassment and trying to shame harassers. Instead of shaming the harassers, the attacks were focused on her and how "ugly" she is.

By observing certain Twitter accounts[16] that initiated *el-hafla* against feminists, we found that the content was mainly about the physique of feminists. Thus the targets were insulted without a specific context to the tweet, and labeled as undesirable women who call themselves feminists because they cannot find a husband.

Meanwhile for **Mayar**, one *hafla* went as far as mentioning her workplace and her manager, as well as disclosing many details about her personal life. The mob who started and led the *hafla* accused her of being an "attention-seeking slut." This particular *hafla* also dragged in two of her friends through the use of a photo of them along with the caption, "The feminist police." Indeed, both **Zeena** and **Nerges** described being dragged into a *hafla* that had been attacking their feminist friends or colleagues, themselves targeted in turn because they were linked to the target and also feminist.

In some cases, online attacks had reverberations offline. **Sandra** was the target of a *halfa* when she wrote a Facebook post about the harassment of Christian women during Ramadan, the holy month of fasting for Muslims. The *hafla* included the mocking of her Christian beliefs and the sharing of abusive incidents that had taken place inside churches. When she went to university the following day, she felt everyone was watching her, pointing at her or whispering as she moved past them, "That's the girl who criticized Islam." A female colleague whom she had known since elementary school confronted her saying, "What did you do, Sandra? Why did you do it?" Sandra felt violated.

Another time, **Sandra** criticized a patriarchal comment of another woman. Both of them received around one thousand critical or mocking comments and at one point she was not sure if she was primarily defending her right and the right of the other woman to self-expression, or if she was simply fighting back against harsh comments from people who had joined the *hafla*. That was not the end of it, however. Her profile was widely shared in an all men's closed group, and for a week she received almost non-stop messages threatening rape or a beating. She was terrified and stayed home rather than go to university.

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16. See the Quantitative Data Outline, Section C of Annex.

Nerges described being stopped in the street by a man with his female friend and cursed for her support of the "Khaled Bilal incident."[17] She stopped going to the neighborhood where this took place for several days, despite usually spending a lot of time there.

E. Response tactics and online organizing

A few of the participants said that they try to turn a *hafla* back on the perpetrators when they are targeted and to express some feminist ideas as they do so. This was the case with **Nerges** and **Zeena**. But as a *hafla* is exhausting for the person targeted, it can push active women and feminists to stop or limit how they express themselves online. Being targeted by *haflas* leads many feminists to refrain from engaging online, to practice self-censorship and limit what they express in order to avoid destructive and aggressive responses.

This was the case with **Sandra**, **Ebtihal** and **Mayar**. Similarly, **Linda** explained that she now shares on Facebook the least controversial topics and does not engage with ongoing conversations. **Amouna**, who used to write primarily about emotions and mental health and was often mocked for this, said that she got tired of engaging with discussions.

Ebtihal explained that if she writes a post that will stir conversation, she inserts a zero-tolerance disclaimer of aggressive comments and if there are any, she blocks that person. She gets upset and greatly disturbed when attacks shame her body and she is aware that for some such body shaming can lead to suicide.

Ebtihal thinks that a successful strategy might be having a hashtag through which feminists can unite and engage with one another. She also suggests reversing *el-hafla* back, collectively not as individuals, could work to cut down the practice and help build solidarity and organize against misogynists.

Najat is of the view that as long as the offline is not safe then the online will not be either — each feeds off the other. Based on this, she stressed the need to have content in Arabic that is accessible online to analyze our context and practices such as *el-hafla*, rather than having to read about similar issues in another language.

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17. The Khaled Bilal incident refers to a case that began when an anonymous email was sent to a number of feminist activists and human rights defenders by a woman who worked for several years at a local Egyptian human rights organization. In her email she describes being raped by a fellow colleague and describes another encounter that entailed a violation of power on the part of the organization's director. The email was leaked in January 2018 leading to wide discussion on social media and ultimately the departure of her former colleague and the organization's director stepping down as head of a political party.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Conclusion

When the research team at Ikhtyar discussed the main question of how *el-hafla* enables online violence against outspoken women, a statement made by one member seemed to summarize several ongoing discussions: "I stopped engaging online, just as I stopped walking down dark alleys." Her statement offers a glimpse into women's lives in Egypt, online and offline. The increase of violence against women in public space caused by a number of intersecting factors, has led many women to retreat from engaging publicly and to limit their physical mobility, in other words making a decision to list certain places they can or can't access.

For some, this is to a great extent reflected in the online sphere. The participating women mostly come to the online space hoping for it to be a safe one, where they might be supported by friends and comrades. They expect that safe social circles will support them. Lived experience shows them otherwise; neither is the online space safe nor are their social circles necessarily supportive.

As the findings show, *el-hafla* might be carried out by comrades and random users — either women or men — as well as by Facebook groups and pages in which case the *hafla* tends to be more systematic. *El-hafla* makes use of various techniques to discredit women's discourse online, such as circulating old posts or photos, violating privacy, attempts at blackmail, outing a person's beliefs or sexual orientation, all of which derive their power from social norms that harm women. Experiences of *el-hafla* led many of the participants to limit their online engagement and to refrain from sharing their positions in detail as they had done in the past. Most of them now seek to protect themselves, for example by creating restricted lists on Facebook. Such disengagement is not unlike a woman's decision to limit her physical mobility and not walk down a dark alley.

El-hafla discredits women, undermines their positions, isolates them and challenges their organizing online. The targeted woman at the center of a *hafla* often feels alone, especially as other feminists hold back from expressing support or otherwise engaging out of fear of being dragged in, and perhaps themselves being targeted.

Based on the the experiences of the participants, the only way to turn a *hafla* back on its perpetrators, is to stand firm, holding tight to the values of respecting freedom of choice, bodily integrity and other feminist values, deconstructing their mockery and stating the violence in the attack. Some of the women explained that their offline personal and feminist battles prepared them to make it through the practice of *el-hafla* but it still scarred and hurt them.

For the research team, the findings were surprising, in particular the unpredictability of the attacks and the dedication of the attackers. At the same time informative for a feminist collective thinking about future endeavors to address and focus on feministing the internet. We, as a group, conclude that though *el-hafla* is harmful, there are opportunities to resist it.

B. Recommendations

The impression of Ikhtyar's research team is that it is too soon to draft recommendations. The participating women and we, as researchers, acknowledge this harmful practice and its lasting impact on outspoken women online. A key strategy to consider in fighting *el-hafla* is online feminist organizing, and we need to imagine the ways this would be enacted. One idea might be uniting around the same hashtag, as suggested by one of the participants.

Women and feminists online should plan for their safety and security making use of online space to strengthen our discourses and strategies. Standing shoulder to shoulder, feminists need to create online alternative paths online collectively.

As recommended by one of the participants, it is importing to produce and build local knowledge of the online space in Arabic, as well as other local languages. As feminists, we should not shy away from using so-called inappropriate language in the interest of protecting ourselves from potential attacks. Attackers might use the same language to shame us and the rights that we defend. Reclaiming the terms and the mockery might be another way to have our *hafla* where different realities are celebrated.

ANNEX

A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell us about *el-hafla*, how to define it?

2. Tell us about your feelings when you were the center of a *hafla*. What did you do after?

3. How violent was the *hafla(s)* you experienced. Were there any direct threats of violent acts?

4. What do you think of this "I stopped engaging online, just as I stopped walking down dark alleys"?

5. Do you practice *el-hafla* yourself? How do your online practices fit with your ideology?

6. Is it possible to stop a *hafla*?

B. GLOSSARY

Social norms

Social norms refer to the values, beliefs and attitudes performed by a group of people in a society. They are usually perceived as normal and appropriate but this does not prevent the possibility that they may be harmful and oppressive. Harmful social norms against women might be executed through shaming, sexual harassment and sexism.[18]

Social norms are thus rules for individual behavior at the level of culture and society. They are produced, reinforced and resourced by power holders, and societal approval often rests on adherence to them.[19] Social norms uphold oppressive social structures that are sexist, racist and ableist. Social norms are patriarchal in principle and by nature, singling out individuals and groups who do not adhere to the norms or try to reshape them. Harmful social norms are often defended as culturally specific, in order to resist attempts by feminists and women's rights groups to end socially accepted violence in both the public and private spheres.[20]

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18. "Social Norms," Veto Violence, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/violence-prevention-basics-social-norms-change

19. Cislaghi, B., Manji, K. and Heise, L. "Social norms and gender-related harmful practices: what assistance from the theory to the practice?" 2017, https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4646973/

20. van Veen, S., Cansfield, B., Muir-Bouchard, S. '*Let's Stop Thinking It's Normal': Identifying patterns in social norms contributing to violence against women and girls across Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Pacific,* Oxfam Research Report, 2018 https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/lets-stop-thinking-it-normal

Cybermisogyny

Cybermisogny refers to specifically gendered online abuse targeted at women, girls and gender non-conforming persons. It incorporates sexism, racism, religious prejudice, homophobia and transphobia. Incidents of harassment vary but usually include wanting to embarrass, humiliate, scare, threaten, silence or extort and, in some instances, may include the incitement of mob attacks.

Online abuse includes a diversity of tactics and malicious behaviors ranging from sharing embarrassing or cruel content about a person to impersonation, broadcasting private or identifying information (doxing), stalking and electronic surveillance to the nonconsensual use of photography and violent threats.[21]

Trolling

Trolling refers to targeting people by creating inflammatory messages on online platforms such as memes, websites, fake Twitter accounts or Facebook pages with the main purpose of provoking internet users to act in a specific way against the targets.

Sextortion

Sextortion refers to extortion or blackmail, carried out over a computer network, involving some threat — generally but not always a threat to release sexually-explicit images of the victim — if the victim does not engage in some form of sexual activity.[22]

C. QUANTITATIVE DATA ANNEX

The research is based on qualitative data. Here, we share the data that helped us draw the research questions both for this piece of research and for activists, researchers and academics working on internet, sexuality, gender and feminism. The team scraped data from Arabic-language Twitter accounts practicing *el-hafla* in order to identify the trends of violence and the forms of attacks.

Sample Description

The developed code to scrape data online from Twitter covered the period from January 2017 to December 2017. The scraping focused on Twitter as an open platform. The scraping resulted in (11,246) tweets in Arabic from profiles representing many Arab-speaking countries apart from Egypt, including Saudi

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21. "Online Abuse 101," Women's Media Center, http://www.womensmediacenter.com/speech-project/on-line-abuse-101#crossPlatformHarassment
22. The Atlas of Online Harassment, GenderSec, https://gendersec.tacticaltech.org/wiki/index.php/The_Atlas_of_Online_Harass-ment#cite_note-20

Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Tunisia and Libya. These tweets were cleaned by Ikhtyar's data analyst using country criteria (Egypt) and resulted in 4,930 tweets from Egyptian profiles (44% of scraped tweets).

The keywords used to scrape the tweets were in Arabic. They were:

• Feminist /feminism[23] #نسوية

• I will fuck you #هانيكك

• We will fuck you #هاننيكك

• Fuck feminism #كسم_النسوية

• Homosexuality is not a crime #المثلية_ليست_جريمة

The following table shows the top accounts associated with the keyword "feminist/feminism."

	Name	No. of Tweets	Link of Twitter Profile
1	jemygaz	25	https://twitter.com/jemygaz
2	al_hakeem1989	21	https://twitter.com/al_hakeem1989
3	hewedy_mohamed	21	https://twitter.com/hewedy_mohamed
4	Moriedix	14	https://twitter.com/Moriedix
5	pop_10001	13	https://twitter.com/pop_10001
6	_Engine__	12	https://twitter.com/_Engine__
7	moe_l_	12	https://twitter.com/moe_l_
8	7meeza	10	https://twitter.com/7meeza
9	AymanGamal56	10	https://twitter.com/AymanGamal56
10	Domico_	10	https://twitter.com/Domico_
11	meryfoad	10	https://twitter.com/meryfoad
12	El3delabdallah	9	https://twitter.com/El3delabdallah

23. In Arabic there is one word for "feminist" and "feminism." Whether the word is used as an adjective (feminist) or noun (feminism) is understood from the context.

The following table shows the top accounts associated with the keyword "I will fuck you."

	Name	No. of Tweets	Link of Twitter Profile
1	Ramy796	27	https://twitter.com/Ramy796
2	AkxXmrDaJ4Dj0XL	19	https://twitter.com/AkxXmrDaJ4Dj0XL
3	Eslamx19	15	https://twitter.com/Eslamx19
4	pxmV1XIcQJjclMr	11	https://twitter.com/pxmV1XIcQJjclMr
5	Up1sTK4y3JAS7BY	11	https://twitter.com/Up1sTK4y3JAS-7BY
6	Yahiya24835310	11	https://twitter.com/Yahiya24835310
7	ctDT300uja6nEM9	10	https://twitter.com/ctDT300uja6nEM9
8	The_Avatorian	10	https://twitter.com/The_Avatorian

The number of tweets that contains "fuck feminism" is 2,448, which is the most frequently recurring of our keywords.

Feminism (*nasawiya*) as a keyword generated 17 tweets. 10 out of the 17 (58.8%) came from the account "W liha wogooh okhra" (She has other faces), which is an online feminist magazine focusing on popular culture.

The second most common keyword in the tweets generated from the Egyptian context was "Fuck you." In most cases, it was used in a violent sense in the context of violent punishment or violent physical action. In some tweets, it was used in humor. In other tweets it was used in the sense of "I will make you upset," pointing to a mainstreaming and normalization of the term "fuck" in daily slang language use. This was very clear with the accounts owned by young people.

Most of the tweets containing "Homosexuality is not a crime" are associated with the account of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (39 out 46). The account has 34,000 followers, and the maximum number of retweets for a tweet sent by the account is 7 and is usually done by members of the organization, indicating limited success in trying to normalize the term "homosexuality" (*mithliya*) rather than the more common "faggot" (*shaz* or *khawal*). Most of the tweets that mention homosexuality reinforce the use of slang terms that belittle those of queer sexual orientation.

Analysis of the scraped tweets showed that when the term "feminist" is used by some users, it refers to "women exaggerating and using the word only to express their hatred of men." There are also users who criticize feminism, claiming it is

an exclusionary ideology as it excludes men. The diversity of feminism and of women who are feminists is not recognized. Feminists are frequently subjected to body shaming and often attacked as attention-seekers with loud voices shouting about women's rights.

"صبـاح الخيـر يـا جماعـة. أسـمها شـواذ، مثليـين دي تقولوهـا فـي هاسـيندا وأنـت بتـأكل جريـن برجـر. أسـمها شـواذ! شـواذ أو لوطيـين."

"Good morning people, they are called faggots, you can use the term homosexuals while in Hacienda[24] eating a green burger. They are called faggots or Lottians."[25]

"يـارب كل النسـوان الفيمنسـت تمـوت عشـان نخلـص مـن خراهـم المرضـي ده بقـى، وكل الرجالـة اللـي بتعرصلهـم."

"May all feminist women die so we can get rid of their sick shit and the ass-kissing men who support them."

"يلا يا وسخة أنتي وهي، قال فيمنست قال! كسمكم!"

"Piss off you filthy bitches, feminist my ass, fuck you."

"يا جماعـة مينفعـش تبقـي فـلات فتطلعـي عقدك عليـا وتقولـي فيمنسـت وحقـوق المـرأة وبتـاع، طـب بذمـت لو سـايز البـرا بتاعـك زاد هتطلعـي ديننـا بحقـوق المـرأة"

"If you gals are flat[26] and have a complex about it, don't bring it on me and say you are a feminist and a supporter of women's rights and all that. Are you telling me that if your bra size increases you will still claim to be feminist?"

ما فيش أي مبرر انك تكون ذكر فمنست غير انك لسه فيرجين.

"There is no justification to being a male feminist except being a virgin."

Some of the scraped tweets emphasized the link between feminism and unacceptable social norms.

اشمعنا الشمال بس اللي بيقلبو فمنست.

"Why is it that are all the loose women are always feminists."

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24. This is an upper-class beach compound in the North Coast.
25. This is a reference to the Quranic story of Sodom and Gomorrah, both destroyed by God's wrath when the people ignored the teachings of the prophet Lot, and engaged in same-sex practices. The term is often used as a pejorative and demeaning way to refer to homosexuality, with its clear assertion that homosexuality is against God.
26. Flat here refers to being flat-chested, and is used as a form of mockery referring to the physical undesirability of feminists.