

# GET ANGRY. GO VIRAL. CHANGE EVERYTHING!

By ALEXIS JETTER

GROPED ON THE STREET? CAN'T GET GOOD MEDICAL CARE FOR YOUR FAMILY? WANT TO TOPPLE A DICTATOR? COME TELL YOUR STORY ONLINE—AND START YOUR OWN REVOLUTION. THESE WOMEN DID

I DOZED AT MY SEAT ONLY TO WAKE UP AT SOME SOUNDS BY A MAN SITTING IN THE OPPOSITE SEAT. I KNEW HE DIDN'T HAVE A TICKET . . . HE WAS STARING AT MY CHEST. —IHOLLABACK.ORG

EVERY DAY WHEN I WALK BACK HOME I HAVE MEN STARING AND COMMENTING, SOME PASSING BY WHISPERING STUFF IN ARABIC OR EVEN IN ENGLISH SOMETIMES LIKE "WOW, SEXY" ETC.... —HARASSMAP.ORG

They yelled obscene things and made gestures. I was so young and I didn't really know what to do so I just stood there staring until they drove off. —iHollaback.org

#WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Due to the difficulty of finding parking in downtown, i walk every day from the Opera garage to my office in Mohamed Farid st. and every day i get harassed with stupid catcalls and comments and idiots ogling at specific body parts and i see it happens to every girl in the street also. Nothing changed after they forced the new harassment law. —HarassMap.org

#HARASSMENT

# #POLITICAL ACTION

@OfficialSGP SmartGirlPolitics  
Awesome! RT @AdrienneRoyer: A woman just took a pix of me in my @officialsgp tshirt so she would remember to look them up online :)

WOMEN UNDERSTAND THE STRUGGLES WE FACE TODAY, THEY JUST WANT TO KNOW WHAT THEY CAN DO TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE. —SGPACTION.COM

We asked our over a million MomsRising members to share their personal stories about how the Affordable Care Act is already helping their families . . . The response was overwhelming.

★★★★★  
#MomsRising Urgent! Call CT Sens & urge them 2 pass #paysickdays. Vote TOMORROW! Ur call now can make the difference!

WHEN WILL MEN LEARN THAT CALLING WOMEN WHOM THEY'VE JUST MET "SWEETHEART" IS NOT ACCEPTABLE? WHEN WE START CALLING THEM ON IT, EACH CLUELESS PERSON AT A TIME. AND THAT'S HOW CHANGE WORKS. —IHOLLABACK.ORG

In the first ten weeks of this year, we've missed 11 days of work due to school holidays or a sick kid. We're not even through the first quarter yet. If the rest of the year is like this quarter, we'll miss more than 40 days of work by the end of the year. —MomsRising.org

In 2008, I was diagnosed with breast cancer . . . Our family is now paying over \$26,000 a year for insurance and deductibles . . . If I miss a payment, I will be dropped and will have no insurance at all . . . This is a fear that keeps me up at night. How would I pay for an MRI on my own? What would happen to us financially without coverage? —MomsRising.org

I HAVE A DAUGHTER CURRENTLY GOING TO COLLEGE OUT OF STATE. THIS PAST SUMMER SHE LANDED IN THE EMERGENCY ROOM TWICE BECAUSE OF A PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN HEALTH CONDITION . . . I AM STILL PAYING OFF THE COSTS THAT WEREN'T COVERED. —MOMSRSISING.ORG

@SAFERCHEMICALS WE TOOK MORE THAN 73,000 PETITION SIGNATURES TO THE WHITE HOUSE DEMANDING AN END TO CANCER-CAUSING CHEMICALS!

# #HEALTH CARE

@OfficialSGP SmartGirl Politics Your daily outrage: AARP gets an Obamacare waiver. Yes, the same AARP that helped shove Obamacare down our . . .

We never expected that our healthy, active eleven-year-old son would be diagnosed with a potentially life-threatening condition. —MomsRising.org

Calling all my conservative chickadees! Just registered for the @OfficialSGP Summit in St. Louis. Check it out

Read on

MASAKEN AL ZOBAT STREET. 04:11 JAN 10, 2011

AN ASSHOLE TOUCHED MY PRIVATE PARTS WHILE PASSING BY ME. THE LOOK IN HIS EYES IS WHAT I REMEMBER THE MOST. THIS MAN RAPED ME INSIDE OF HIS HEAD.

ELKHALEEFA EL MA'MOUN STREET. 23:34 JUN 28, 2011

A car kept following me and forcing me to stop. I entered Heliopolis club to escape him and came out to find him waiting. I then stopped at the police near the presidential palace. He was waiting a few meters ahead. At the end I managed to escape from him. But I was scared he might hit my car or throw something on me . . . I knew today what fear exactly means.

TAHRIR STREET. 15:30 JAN 12, 2011



>> A man physically assaulted me, people were walking by and no one stopped him. I kept hitting the man and held him . . . [The police] treated me as a criminal and kept asking me to just forgive the man, trying to make me feel guilty that I would ruin his life.

FUTURE UNIVERSITY IN EGYPT. 19:00 DEC 10, 2010

Something horrible happened to me at the concert . . . I was sexually harassed by an officer! It was very crowded at the entrance . . . and one of those bastards put his hand on my private area and started scratching . . . I screamed and pushed his hands away.

**THERE'S SOMETHING TERRIBLY RAW** about the stories women post on HarassMap.org, a website started by four friends last year to confront Egypt's epidemic levels of sexual harassment. And that is precisely why the dispatches are so riveting. "Women write these reports when they're really angry, and the storytelling is quite powerful," says cofounder Rebecca Chiao, a U.S.-born women's rights advocate who has lived in Cairo for seven years. "It's very convincing."

And startling. Raised in a culture of female deference, Egyptian women are breaking their centuries-old code of silence, blowing the lid off sexual harassment with gritty, uncensored accounts that hold nothing back. That's triggering a sea change in Egypt, where an increasing number of men and women who follow HarassMap on Facebook and Twitter are taking to the streets to fight the scourge.

HarassMap is just one example of a phenomenon that's galvanizing women around the globe. From North Africa to Middle America, storytelling—once shared intimately around a campfire or across a fence, now uploaded to millions through social media—is helping women combat street harassment, topple brutal dictators and lobby for decent health care. Social media is the medium; women's personal stories are the message. Together they are igniting the world. "I truly believe that women online are the next wave of change," says PunditMom blogger Joanne Bamberger, author of the recently published *Mothers of Intention: How Women & Social*

*Media Are Revolutionizing Politics in America.* "So many women feel, 'I'm overwhelmed with my life. How can I make a dent?' But women have an ability to connect online through storytelling. They realize, 'Oh, there are people out there like me. They're part of a group called X, and this is what they're doing. Maybe I can reach out to them.' Social media has given people the tools to make that little dent."

Savvy organizers have long known that women are inspired to fight for change when they hear stories that outrage them or when they tell their own tales of social injustice. In the 1970s, consciousness raising was all about sharing stories, particularly those that felt humiliating when kept to oneself but were empowering, even exhilarating, when verbalized. Today Web activists are creating online communities that encourage women to voice their experiences—then pointing those women toward ways to take direct action, like running for office, meeting with a senator or writing a check. In other words, Web activism hasn't replaced face-to-face organizing; it's just the newest funnel into it. "Women tend to shut down once political rhetoric enters the conversation," says Deanna Zandt, author of *Share This! How You Will Change the World with Social Networking*. But storytelling can transcend politics. "It reflects our very primal need to be connected to one another: This is what it's like to be in my shoes," she says. "And it can inspire people to make large moves."

Seismic moves. After all, it was a 26-year-old Egyptian woman, Asmaa Mahfouz, whose videotaped calls to action went viral on Facebook and are credited with helping to draw the first large pro-democracy crowds to Cairo's Tahrir Square on January 25. "I, a girl, am going down to Tahrir Square, and I will stand alone," she said, looking directly into the camera from an armchair in her home, her childlike face framed by a headscarf. "Whoever says women shouldn't go to protests because they will get beaten, let him have some honor and

manhood and come with me on January 25.” On that day, hundreds of thousands of women—and men—poured into Tahrir Square; 17 days later, they dislodged a dictator.

“People’s wills are the sparks that can light fires,” says Beth Kanter, a Web pioneer who advises nonprofit groups on digital strategy, “and social media is pouring gasoline on it.” Certainly there were deep societal forces that led to President Hosni Mubarak’s downfall. And without the Egyptian addiction to Facebook—the country has 74 million users, making it the Middle East’s largest Facebook consumer—Mahfouz’s dare might have had little effect. But that’s just the point: Women’s influence online is growing dramatically, largely because of their affinity for social networks.

## GLOBALLY,

**WOMEN USE** the Internet nearly as frequently as men,

but they spend 22 percent more time than men on e-mail, instant messaging and social-networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Myspace, according to a recent study by the digital-marketing firm comScore. Although the under-24 crowd worldwide is still the heaviest user of social networks (in terms of time spent on the sites), women over 45 are driving the greatest growth. “Social networking is a new frontier that older women are embracing,” says Linda Boland Abraham, comScore’s chief marketing officer. “Men are doing so to a far lesser degree.”

In the U.S. and Canada, women spend 30 percent of their total time online in social networks, compared with 25 percent for men. North American women are more likely than men to share photos online (for example, on Flickr), swap information about health (Medpedia), collaborate with their children’s teachers (Parentella), get fashion advice (Fashionism), play social-networking games (FarmVille), grab coupons (Groupon) and find restaurant deals (Yelp). The trend continues for women in the developing world: Latin American women spend 52 percent of their time in social networks, compared with 45 percent for men.

In repressive cultures, social media may be even more transformative for women, says Mallika Dutt, president of Breakthrough, a global human rights group that uses social media and online games to address issues such as HIV/AIDS, immigration and abuse. “For women who have severe restrictions on their mobility, this allows them to step out into the world in a whole new way,” she says. “We can’t underestimate the profound power and engagement that social media allows women who have historically had to really fight to be heard.”

In India, women trying to escape domestic abuse are using their mobile phones and computers to post personal stories on Breakthrough’s website, BellBajao.org (Ring the Bell), and find advice, resources and encouragement. In Saudi Arabia, the only country where driving by women is restricted, women have launched a Twitter and Facebook campaign—Women2Drive—demanding that freedom. One of the charismatic organizers, Manal al-Sharif, a cybersecurity consultant and divorced mother of a four-year-old, posted a video of herself on YouTube in May. It showed her at the wheel, in black abaya and designer sunglasses, describing how the de facto ban makes her life impossible:

*When I came to El-Shargiya in 2002, I was on my own. And I had no choice. I had to have a driver. I bought a small car anyhow . . . I got a private driver who I had to give a monthly salary. The first week, he got into an accident with my car. He didn’t know how to drive . . . My driver used to harass me. He’d adjust the rearview mirror to see what I was wearing.*

Al-Sharif was quickly arrested and jailed for nine days. But the detainment backfired: The video went viral, fueling a protest on June 17 in which dozens of women defied authorities and drove through the streets, the largest such protest in 20 years. Dutt cautions that in any country, sharing stories online may have drawbacks; for instance, a battered wife could be traced by her abuser. And repressive governments are learning fast how to censor or delete whatever content they consider objectionable. “We’re in a time of transformation,” Dutt says. “We have to understand both the peril and the power of this moment.”

## BUT

**IF SHARING** personal stories can sometimes put women in danger, it can also push them

to take ingenious approaches to vexing issues. When Chiao, an international-development specialist trained at Harvard and Johns Hopkins, was working at the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights in Cairo, she noticed that her young volunteers often arrived at the office in tears. And she learned the reason: They’d been followed into the building, pushed up against the wall and groped. These stories drove Chiao to create HarassMap. “We had all experienced harassment, but it’s something else when you see a young, idealistic volunteer come inside crying because she’s been harassed at the entrance to the building,” says Chiao, a casually elegant young woman, who spoke via Skype from her Cairo apartment. “You can’t trust your doctor, you can’t go to school, you can’t go to the supermarket.” The stats bear her out: Eight in 10 Egyptian women say they’re harassed routinely, often daily—even if fully veiled, according to a report from the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights.

Chiao and her three cofounders had no money, no office space, not even a hotline. But they had heard about a new crowd-sourcing technology that could help women employ the only self-defense tool most Egyptians have at their fingertips: a cheap mobile phone. (In Egypt the so-called Facebook Revolution relied, for the most part, on the least expensive, least “smart” phones on the market.) With the help of NiJeL, a social justice-oriented digital-mapping firm in Arizona, Chiao and her partners launched their site in December.

Today, all across Egypt, from tiny oases in the western desert to the Red Sea in the



east, women and girls (and occasionally men) are pulling out their phones and texting the details of abuse to HarassMap. Some wait until they get to a safe place, then send dispatches via computer to the organization's website; still others use HarassMap's Facebook page or Twitter feed. Within seconds, the woman receives a phone number she can call for free support services for legal aid, counseling and self-defense classes. Once she gives her location and explains what happened, the information is fed into a system that uses an interactive Google map of Egypt to identify harassment hot spots, color-coded by categories such as "touching," "sexual invites" or "indecent exposure."

The real-time heat maps are striking, but it's the eye-popping stories that make revoltingly clear what it's like to be a woman on Egypt's streets. And they have convinced a small but growing number of Egyptians that sexual harassment is a national embarrassment. HarassMap now has more than 300 volunteers, half of them men, who regularly fan out into troubled neighborhoods and educate people on the street about the problem. In just a few months, support for the group has lit up the country's blogosphere and its television and radio stations. Last June one of the nation's most respected newspapers, *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, published a series of articles to "dissect the reasons" behind what it calls "this festering issue"—and gave HarassMap some high-end publicity. The site could have been organized without social media, Chiao says, but then would have needed years to develop its current size and influence. "With social media," says Chiao, "people can hear about a problem, learn about it and speak up about it all at the same time."

## HALF A

**WORLD AWAY**, in Seattle, MomsRising.org is fighting for change, not so much

in the streets but on Capitol Hill and in the halls of the country's legislatures. With one million members and a reach of three million people through blogs, Twitter and Facebook, the media-savvy mothers' advocacy group has made an art of collecting women's stories—lots of them, by turns wistful, plucky and livid—and packaging them to provoke legislative change. Sheryl, from Ohio, posts:

*The economy has certainly hurt our family. My husband is working (yeah), but he is still making the amount that he made on unemployment (which is barely enough to cover the bills for our family). I just had a stillbirth last March. Had it not been for Medicaid, I would not have been able to pay the medical bills incurred due to that loss.*

And this, from a graphic artist in Wisconsin:

*I have been told—to my face—no less than 3 times during my adult life that when a particular job I had applied for or wanted to advance to had come down to 2 candidates (me and a man), the man "had" to be selected because, after all, he has a family to support . . . The third time, I was the corporate art director . . . still married with 2 children and a 3rd on the way. A new male hire, 15 years my junior with NO relevant experience whom I had just 2 weeks to train to his new position, was suddenly and without explanation made the new art dept. head . . . I subsequently quit and filed a gender discrimination suit. Enough was enough!!!*

Written by users or by the 450 bloggers for the MomsRising website, the stories are bound together in customized, thematically arranged "storybooks" and delivered to legislators, in person, by a MomsRising committee. "Often what we think ourselves and hear from our members is, 'Oh my gosh, I'm the only one who this is happening to,'" says Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, the turbocharged Seattle-based author who cofounded the group in 2006. "Many women don't feel like experts on legislation [for health care or paid parental leave]. But when we ask them to tell their own stories, they do know what's going on in their own families—and then we deliver those stories to Congress."

Studies show that what works best on the Web, Rowe-Finkbeiner says, is a personal story backed by a few facts—"rather than full-fledged, fact-heavy wonkiness." MomsRising clearly has the mix just right: The group is widely credited with helping to pass the federal Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009, which makes it easier for women to sue employers who pay them less than they pay men for the same job. The strategy was a textbook example of social change via social media storytelling: First, the group solicited an arsenal of well-documented, guaranteed-to-tick-you-off stories of pay discrimination, which it posted on the website. Then MomsRising migrated the action to the offline world, meeting with the staff of 44 senators in their state offices. Members also sent nearly 85,000 constituent letters to both houses of Congress. When Senator John McCain dissed the legislation, saying women didn't need fair pay—just "more education and training"—MomsRising members descended on D.C. and happily blizzarded his office with thousands of members' résumés. *Guess what*, the women said as they hand-delivered the stacks. *We are educated. We are qualified. And we still need equal pay for equal work.*



**MOMSRISING** is the grande dame at the party, expertly working the crowd, SmartGirlPolitics is the ingenue turning heads at the top of the stairs: In 2010 its hashtag—#sgp—was the third-most-used

tag on Twitter. The site's founder, Stacy Mott, an energetic former human resources manager in rural New Jersey, is a Tea Party supporter whose mission is to get conservative



women more involved in politics and whose focus is on rolling back government involvement in education, health care and energy. “We want to tell women’s stories about how the administration’s energy policy is taking a toll on families in the U.S.,” she says. “That touches me personally, because I look at my home state of West Virginia and I keep hearing about friends being laid off.”

A key goal of SmartGirlPolitics is to inspire conservative women to run for office, and recruitment begins online. In 2010, SmartGirlPolitics trained 3,500 women in online activism—after which 100 ran for federal, state, local or party offices; 16 ran for the U.S. House of Representatives. “Our organization exploded in 2009 because of social media,” says Mott, who started SmartGirlPolitics during the 2008 election. “And it was all Twitter.”

In its online personal storytelling, SmartGirlPolitics has opted for a relatively old-fashioned format: spotlighting up-and-coming conservative stars in the group’s Web magazine, SmartGirlNation. A recent issue features Lisa Mei Norton, 48, an air force sergeant turned country singer who is cofounder of BigDawg Music Mafia, a social-networking site for conservative artists. In 2009, Norton wrote “Founding Sisters,” a song she dedicated to SmartGirlPolitics. In a video on Bigdawgmusicmafia.com she sings:

*We “man up” when we’re attacked  
We won’t be pushed around  
Strong American women, yeah  
We won’t be backing down.*

SmartGirlNation also features chatty, first-person essays from Mott and other contributors. In one, Molly Teichman, who writes what she calls “political mommentary,” tells a story about accidentally starting a brush fire one Fourth of July when she was a child. She then uses the fire as a metaphor for political action.

*Ask yourself . . . what would I be willing to do this Fourth of July? You don’t have to lay down your life. But you might lay down some distractions and help rekindle our Country. You might start a local interest group to follow city government. You might run a voter registration at the County Fair. You might start a brush fire of freedom in your own community.*

The spotlight on individuals continues offline at the yearly SmartGirl Summit, a star-studded gathering—it has featured the likes of Representative Michele Bachmann and Liz Cheney—that the group calls “the must-attend event for today’s conservative woman activist.” The offline events help build the grassroots, state-by-state membership, and they also communicate a message of real-world participation and action. Mott points to one standout Summit attendee: Liz Carter, a Georgia businesswoman who two years ago attended a SmartGirl Summit in Nashville. “Afterward she came up to me and said, ‘You know what? I never really thought about it before, but I think I’m going to run for office.’” Carter ran for Congress in a heavily Democratic district and lost. “But that to me is success,” says Mott. “That we got one woman who attended an SGP event to run for office when she never considered it before—that’s our success.”

## EACH OF THESE SITES

has found ways to move women into direct, on-the-ground involvement. But that kind of migration remains one of the biggest challenges for activists. A new study says it takes four to six direct tweets from trusted friends to capture anyone’s attention on a political issue, and that doesn’t mean the person will get off the couch and grab a protest sign or visit her congresswoman or join her school board—all real-world actions that are still crucial to making change happen. “No one knows how it works,” says Zandt. “But the campaigns that are the most successful are the ones that appeal to our emotional values. That’s what we saw in Egypt: People want dignity, and they want to be there.”

As technology grows more sophisticated, the sites will too. iHollaback.org, a U.S.-based precursor to HarassMap that takes advantage of the latest software, enables women to punch an icon on their smartphones, choose whether to take a photo of their harasser and later share the details of the abuse—information that is then uploaded to Hollaback’s website, along with blogs, tips and news. “Change has always been about telling our stories,” says the site’s founder, Emily May. “But now we can map our stories. We can photograph our stories. We can tell our stories on blogs.” And produce concrete results: In 2008, after months of pressure from Hollaback members, New York City’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority agreed to plaster antigroping signs in the subways, and now the city council is considering more aggressive action against harassers. “All of a sudden we’re not just talking to our friends online,” May says. “We can use our stories to talk to people in the community, talk to legislators and spread the word.”

Ultimately, though, what draws women to these sites is something deeper: a camaraderie of the pissed off and the passionate. As one woman posted on Hollaback: “Using your camera phone is a subtle way to take some kind of action when you feel powerless . . . [It] connects you to an entire community of people who collectively say this is awful, it shouldn’t have happened to you, and it wasn’t your fault. When people ask me, ‘What good does it do to post a picture on a blog?’ I say, ‘Are you kidding?! We’re building a movement!’”

ALEXIS JETTER’S last story for *More*, “Killer Sex,” investigated the hidden epidemic of HIV/AIDS in women over 40. She teaches journalism at Dartmouth.