

MUSLIM WOMEN ON-LINE

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Abstract

On-line communication is a new way for building and maintaining human relationships. Geographically dispersed individuals are able to communicate at a speed and cost superior to telephone, mail, and face-to-face meetings. It is important to study the impact of the development of this new mode of communication on human relationships. This paper examines the pattern of on-line interaction among Muslim women and the kinds of support they provide and sustain on-line. Both participant observation and interviews indicate that members who are socially and geographically isolated and live away from Muslim communities attempt to gain more information and support on-line. These women are among the “active” members and look for more face-to-face and off-line interaction to reduce their feeling of isolation. Other type of support which these Muslim women provide on-line are also explored.

Introduction

On-line Communication¹

During the past decade, as people have become more interested in and dependent on electronic media, social scientists have investigated the effects of technological changes on communal structure. The development of electronic media has provided easier ways for people to extend and to keep their ties. Computer-mediated communication is a new way for building and maintaining human relationships. Geographically dispersed individuals are able to communicate at a speed and cost superior to telephone, mail, and face-to-face meetings. Computer-mediated communication has created “on-line” communities where people share similar interests and practices (Baym, 1995; Jones, 1995), and where people move across the geographic borders and live far from their place of origin (Mitra, 1997). Computer-mediated communication is an excellent way of uniting people from different parts of the globe that can offer companionship and support to those who participate.

What is the effect of computer-based community on “off-line” community? Some critics state that involvement in “on-line” communities will move people away from involvement in “off-line” communities (Berry, 1993; Barlow, et al., 1995; Fox, 1995). They see “on-line” relations as different from “off-line” relations. Other scholars believe that on-line community can be seen as a part of “off-line” community (Wellman, 1997; Jones, 1998). These scholars point out that computer networks provide allow people to contact with many others and facilitate the creation of new connections among people. In fact, social relations can be developed on-line, and these relations can affect people’s off-line lives. Individuals can use their “on-line” relations as a way to find others who share their interests. They can also form a support system with people who share their “off-line” problems.

The second area that deserves study is the possibility of transformation of an on-line relation to an off-line relation. Wellman & Gulia (1999: 349), for example, state that “just as community ties that began in-person can be sustained through email, on-line ties can be reinforced and

broadened through in-person meetings” (also see Bruckman, 1992; Rheingold, 1993; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Baym, 1998). Are there any differences between those who participate in active “off-line” communities and those who are isolated? Some of the previous research indicates that people who are isolated off-line remain so on-line, whereas individuals who are active on-line are also sociable off-line (Cody et al., 1997; Joe, 1997). Other studies suggest that the development of on-line relationships offers new opportunities to individuals who are isolated (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Weise, 1996). On-line relationships can give them a sense of belonging and can be a source of support. “Isolated” individuals may be more eager to meet with people that they have met on-line.

The pattern of interaction on-line is another area that deserves study. Most of the existing studies compare off-line and on-line communication. These studies indicate that in off-line communication, people may be judged by their social status, by attributes such as race, class, or gender. In contrast, on-line communication reduces the importance of social status. There is no pre-judgments, participants first get to know each other through their ideas and thoughts. However, most people do construct an imaginary picture of those with whom they interact. Names and email addresses allow participants to imagine each other’s identities. Previous research has also examined the effects of the loss of verbal nuances and physical gesture on on-line interaction. Most studies have explored the ways that computer communication can be adapted to convey many of the same emotions and gestures that are visible in face-to-face interaction (Rice & Love, 1987; Walther et al., 1994). Symbols and icons can make on-line interaction more like off-line interaction. They are also useful when people want to prevent their messages from being misinterpreted.

Although on-line communication allows people who have never met before to communicate with one another, it may not help them completely to trust and understand one another. People can show their best side online; what someone actually knows about another person is only what the other person has chosen to reveal. Even those who are honest reveal only a few facets of their personalities. Yet in spite of the potential problems involved in on-line relation, participants can develop meaningful relations, and these relations can affect their off-line lives.

¹ I wish to thank Janet Salaff, Barry Wellman, and Nancy Howell of the University of Toronto for their advice.

Themes

This study presents an ethnographic account of the e-mail-based Muslim Women Network (MWN). MWN has been established to provide a forum to engage in an intellectual discourse on significant contemporary issues that impact on Islam, especially those pertaining to, or affecting, women. It has also provided a medium for Muslim women to discuss any pertinent issues as long as the discussion remains within the bounds of *Shar'iah* [religious law].

The main goal is to understand what MWN's members, ordinary users of electronic mail, are producing in it, socially and culturally. I investigate the social characteristics of participants (e.g., age, education, marital status), the interplay between ongoing on-line and off-line relationships, and the possibility of transforming virtual community into real-life community. I examine community from a network analytic perspective because network analysis focuses on social relations and not on locality (Jones, 1998; Wellman, 1999). I try to answer the following questions:

- What kinds of social relationships develop among the members who may never meet in person and to what extent are they able to develop and sustain supportive relationships on-line?
- What kinds of problems exist in on-line relations?

Methods

Participant observation is often used to study a community where interactions are of face-to-face. In face-to-face studies the researcher should take part and observe others in order to generate understanding. In computer networks the researcher encounters invisible others. All she/he has are the information that the community members give about themselves. Conversations take place through the medium of written language, and terms such as posting, reading, and lurking are used to describe the community.

Both observation and direct participation were used in this study. The period of observation began in December 1997 and continued until the end of September 1998. I subscribed to the group and saved all the messages over the period of my observation.

Since it was not possible to analyze all of the hundreds of e-mails that were posted, I analyzed randomly selected ones. I also used e-mail to interview some members of the group about their reactions to on-line communication.

During the first period of observation I did not send any e-mails to the group, so I remained a non-participant observer. Everything that happened in MWN was untainted by my actions. After a few months of on going activity on MWN, I contacted some of the members to get feedback from them. I wanted to know what members thought about the group and their on-line activities.

I chose a sample based on the members' demographic characteristics. First, I prepared a list of the members who have posted messages to MWN during the period of my observation. This list included the names and addresses of 57 posters being 53% of all participants. I then chose 16 members from the list according to their age, marital status, place of residence and level of activities and sent my questions to them. I asked these members about the following topics:

- The amount of time they spent to communicate via the computer.
- The kind of support they got.
- The way on-line relations were transformed into off-line relations.
- The kind of problems they experienced on-line.
- How on-line relationships compared to off-line relationships.

When I asked these questions, I knew that some of them would accept my request, but I was not sure about their reaction to the questions. In off-line field studies, researchers are normally able to get some reactions from their respondents. However, ignoring requests for answers or discussions is easier to do in email since members are not confronted directly. Half of the members whom I chose for the sample responded to my questions. These members had all involved in the group for several months and four had been in the MWN since its inception. As they were drawn from the respondents whose e-mail addresses I have, they were not necessarily representative of the group membership as a whole, for I did not have the addresses

of those lurkers who never posted messages. The interviews provided a more comprehensive overview of the on-line relation than I would have been able to get simply by observing (reading) the posted messages.

The Muslim Women Network

Structure

The Muslim Women Network, a pseudonym, has an administration that consists of a committee of five volunteers: administrator, moderator, membership administrator, public relations, and secretary. The main tasks of the administration are handling all technical matters, subscribing and unsubscribing members to MWN, and archiving all membership application requests and forms.

On-line networks vary in their agenda, some are information-oriented, others are interested in a specific issue, and yet there are others that are more general. MWN's agenda is more general. According to the group's charter, members are allowed to discuss any pertinent issues. Members are asked to respect others' time and electronic space:

Many of the members on the list pay per-minute access to the Internet. This does not mean that you should not post to the list. However, if you have a large set of messages that you want to share (like a book), you can send perhaps a few parts of the book to the list. Then, if other members are interested in receiving more information, they can send you personal email. Similarly, if another mailing list is supplying information, send a short message to the discussion group and tell other members how they can have access to the information.

A post that I received on MWN's first anniversary shows that it was formed in 1996 and has more than 100 members. On MWN's anniversary, "Sahra,"² the administrator, posted:

In all my busy schedule I forgot that MWN's first anniversary came and went! It was in this month last year that we first launched this discussion group and now there are almost a hundred members and we are growing. The Executive Committee wanted to prepare something special for this occasion but as it is a busy time for all – the end of the university terms – it started but never got finished... Well, I hope it has been a fruitful year for all of you. I, for one, have learned a lot from this group and hope to continue to do so!

² The names are all anonymous to protect the identity of the participants.

Who are the MWN members? My information is restricted to the biographical descriptions that new members sent to the group when they joined. Members of the MWN come from around the world. Most are Muslims who live in Canada or the United States; some live in the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. “I live near the South Coast of England. I am in my 2nd year of college where I am taking 4 A Levels. I hope to go to university next year and study economics.” The partial e-mail addresses, which appear whenever a member posts a message, usually indicate the country in which the user lives.

The Membership

The members are limited to the Muslim women³. For membership, each woman fills out e-mail subscription form that contains name, e-mail address and a short description of the member’s background. The information is kept confidential to the administration. However, new members are requested to post their backgrounds to the discussion list so others will know with whom they are discussing things. Members heard about the group from different sources. Some of them heard from their relatives, friends or acquaintances, while others read about the group in other Islamic discussion lists.

The data indicate that age, marital status, where people are from (i.e., country, province, or city), are personal characteristics that most frequently revealed. Ages generally fell between 19 and early 30’s. The oldest member of the group was 49 years old. I found this when one of the members, who was 27 years old, asked others if there is anybody older than her: “I am 27 yrs old. Is *anyone* out there older than me???” In response to this message “Zarrin” posted:

Well, sister Mansurah! I have beaten you: I wonder what *I* am supposed to feel — a great, GREAT GREAT GRANDMOTHER? Seriously, I am 49 years old and will hit the BIG *50* a year from this December! Do not feel badly now. There is someone older than you after all, sister! As you can tell, I am not bashful about my age. I wonder if anyone will beat ME. I doubt it very much!! As far as I am concerned, age is how one feels – I have never measured my life in years, just experience and taking one day at a time.

³ One of the messages that posted by group’s moderator showed that there are members who are not Muslim: “I am doing research on converts. I am aware that some of you have not converted yet but may, and some may not want to convert. For those who are thinking of converting to Islam or have done so, please contact me; I am interested in examining the conversion experience.”

Members also reveal their occupations to other members when they introduce themselves to the group.

I am a convert to Islam. I am living outside of [city], where I work as a multimedia designer. I look forward to meeting all of you on this net and am looking forward to having wonderful discussions with you all.

Most of the members who introduced themselves were students. It should be emphasized that while age, marital status, and city of residence are commonly exchanged characteristics, members vary in terms of the kinds of personal information they reveal to the group. Some members posted more details of their lives:

I'm 19 and in my second year at university, studying Business Management (Computerized Business Systems). I moved to Canada about three years ago from the [country]. I have two brothers -- 25 & 13. My hobbies include surfing the net and maintaining my web page (I welcome you all to visit it- its URL is on my signature below), reading, astronomy, and skiing.

Another member introduced herself as follow:

I am 27 years old. Married, with 3 children. My daughter is 9 yrs old and the other two are 3 yrs (boy and girl). I am currently a part time distance education student. My hobbies include, of course surfing the net, sewing, reading and most of all enjoying my kids!!

Since the practice of posting social characteristics is quite common, it must serve some purpose. It appears to give members a frame of reference, and it serves as an icebreaker. It gives women who have never interacted before a common point of interest. It also helps them to understand one another and increases their sense of belonging to the community.

Relations on-line

Communication via E-mail

The technology of electronic mail permits connections between people who would otherwise never meet. In real life, it is uncommon for individuals to initiate discussions with strangers, yet in the world of electronic mail users are constantly doing this. It appears that the distance, which is created by technology, reduces the fear of rejection and lowers people's inhibitions. The

Muslim Women Network is particularly successful in connecting people from around the world. Members frequently express their enthusiasm about the group. For example, one member posted:

I am pretty sure that this relationship with women from all over the world is going to be very beneficial for me. I look forward to hearing from all my sisters in Islam, and I hope I can contribute to this network, as I am sure I will benefit from it.

And another member:

I joined MWN not too long ago. I am glad to be a part of such a wonderful group. It shows that we are using modern technology to our advantage.

The “postings” are in the form of a typical email message with a header, giving a subject line, and the sender’s name and address, the receiver’s name and address, and the email addresses. I observed three women who used their husbands or their brothers’ e-mail accounts to participate. Members can “post” messages under different subject headings. For example, in MWN a subject heading reads “hijab and discrimination” and a series of responses refers to this title by displaying “Re: hijab and discrimination.” The first message posted does not have any signs (>) at the beginning of each line. Each response to an e-mail adds another series of (>) signs to the previous emails and includes the poster’s comments. The number of (>) signs in a message indicates the number of responds it received. The subject of e-mail is important because it is the first element to be viewed by the members. It helps members to decide what to read and what to pass over. For instance, a subject heading “gender equity“ is likely to be read and reacted to by several members.

Every interaction starts with a message to the whole group. There are two types of responses to the posted message: general and directed. A general interaction is when a member posts a message for all members to read and perhaps respond to. A directed interaction is when a member sends her message to another specific member and posts a copy to the whole group. The ability to send the same message to more than one person is a useful feature in e-mail-based interaction, “cc:” feature, everyone on the list is able to recognize who is the main

receiver. The pattern of interaction among members may be traced with statistics showing “who-to-whom” exchanges.

On some occasions a member asked for help or needed some information, I wondered why other members did not respond. I found the answer when I posted a message and asked for information. I received two personal responses. The posters did not send a copy to the whole group. In MWN when a member pushes “r” for reply, her reply goes only to the poster who asked for the help; other members do not receive the response. It may be that members send a copy to the whole group only when the information sought can be helpful to others.

Most of the members spent an hour a day on average communicating on-line. The time they spend depends on the availability of computer at home. “I probably spend only a few minutes communicating since I do not have the luxury of e-mail at home.” It also depends on the time that their server allows them: “I spend 2 hours a day maximum because that is a limited time allowed with my server.” Some members stated that their “real-life” duties limited their participation: “I would like to send out more e-mails, and read more information on the Web, but I’m limited by my responsibilities to my family. I do have to be careful to keep my priorities in order.” The number of postings also changed from time to time, decreasing dramatically for instance, during the holidays, when universities were not in session.

The Role of “Actives”

MWN has three types of members: “actives,” who are in the center of the group and contribute frequently; “passives,” who post less frequently; “lurkers,” those who read but do not post. Discussion is dominated by a small minority of “active” participants. This is consistent with findings elsewhere. McCormick and McCormick (1992) in their study of electronic mail exchanges between undergraduates on a local network, report that 5% of the undergraduates used the network “a great deal,” were “responsible for generating most of the electronic mail.” In MWN, only 7% are active. They feel their responsibility to contribute to the community and to keep it alive. For example, when she has been away for a while, “Sahra” one of the active members in the group posted: “Why is “MWN” so quiet these days? Nobody home??? Let’s find something to talk about.” Another active member posted: “I know what you mean sister!

☺ And to think that men think we women always have something to talk about!! Hehehehehe...”. When actives encourage others to participate in discussions, some members sent their excuses:

As for me, I have no excuse, except that I’m lazy, and just read instead of replying =). Actually, I do have a good one.... my husband is out of town for six weeks. Leaving me in charge of my job, his “stuff,” three kids, two cows and 25 chickens! =-P.

Actives have the main role in MWN. They contribute to MWN based on their knowledge, expertise, or experience from the outside world. When members are unable to answer a request for help or information, actives attempt to get the answer from other sources and forward it to the group. Based on my observation, actives are the center of the MWN’s identity and culture. They help to maintain the nature of what the network really is.

Passives

Having an active discussion group appears to be important for all the members. After a period of silence on MWN, most of the members—including the “passives” reacted. For example:

There has been a period of “silence” on this group for a while now (I’m guilty of not writing at all!) – may be now that summer’s over and most members are back to the usual routine, there will be more topics discussed? I have thoroughly enjoyed the postings so far but admit I *should* take an active part in the future – Inshaallah [God willing]!

“Fahima” also posted her excuses:

This week I’m finishing off my few days in my Job, getting prepared to set up my own business and start working freelance. And next week I’m getting married !!☺ .. So please excuse my absence from the discussion.

As Wellman et al. notes “...CSSNs (computer supported social networks) provide social exemplars to large numbers of passive observers as well as to active participants. Individual acts can aggregate to sustain a large community because each act is seen by the entire group and perpetuates a norm of mutual aid” (1996: 223).

It seems that these members get their social needs met elsewhere, specially if they live in active Muslim communities. Also, commitment to other activities can mean that there is less time available to spend in on-line. According to one of the “active” members: “[t]hose with families may easily see it as a luxury of time they cannot afford and stick to their family and local activities.” Another active member said that:

Boredom maybe. Not much is talked about on the women’s discussion group, which saddens me. I would like the women’s discussion group to be a place where us girls talk about anything and everything... and instead it seems conserved and stuffy...a complete turnoff for me.

“Passive” members gave these reasons:

What is being discussed may not be of interest to them or our life get so busy at times that we are able to ignore this group because there is no obligation upon them to post.

And another:

Real life intrudes. Also, there is just so much available on the Internet, and people can only devote so much time- sending and reading emails from a variety of mailing lists, newsgroups, web pages, on-line chat, personal web page design.

Lurking

Lurkers are those who read but do not post. While it is hard to know how many lurkers exist on the network, most members are aware of their presence. They make reference to lurkers and active members try to encourage lurkers to participate in discussions.

Comparing the number of people who subscribe to the group with the number of members who post some messages to MWN shows that almost 40% of the members are lurkers. “Members mark the virtual space by logging on. However, only the active members mark the space of the group by posting messages. The lurkers mark the space only in their locality” (Lotfalian, 1996: 121).

Physical Gestures and Verbal Nuances

Critics of on-line communities have argued that the effects of losing verbal nuances and physical gestures will be detrimental for on-line social interactions. The findings of this study suggest that individuals have been able to bring real life gestures into the electronic mail. Members frequently add a description of their physical gestures and tone to their messages. By doing so, they attempt to reduce the possibility of confusion or misunderstandings and to show their agreement or disagreement. For instance, instead of nodding the head, they send a message, "I agree with you."

Many members express physical gestures in their messages. They try to show their feelings by using words such as smile, grin, love, hug and tears. The way in which this is done is to use the symbol * when expressing a physical gesture. The most common physical gesture used is *smile* which reveals that members want to appear as friendly people so that discussion can run as smoothly as possible. The following is some samples of physical gestures that I have observed:

- It seems that topics have dwindled in the past week. No one thirsty for knowledge anymore? *smile*
- Salaamun Alaikum [Islamic greeting] Dear Sister "Rebecca"!! Glad to see you come out in the open after all your "lurking" (*grin*).
- hmm.... It's been pretty quiet around here lately. Maybe everyone is on vacation?? =)

Members also use different icons for showing their feelings. The icons that were used more than others are: ☺ [smile], and ☹ [frown]. Using these icons led one of the members to send a list of other existing icons to the group. Members may feel that they need to use physical gestures to express themselves. Perhaps physical gestures are used to make computer interaction more like face-to-face interaction. Physical gestures are also used when members do not want their messages to be misinterpreted.

The Importance of Name

In MWN, women are known by their names and their addresses. It is the only way members can clearly identify a speaker. My observations suggest that members attempt to form

imaginary pictures of the people they interact with (see Bechar, 1995). Both first and last names are important sources because where members have Islamic or similar names, last names can help to identify their nationalities or ethnic identities. For example, when I posted my background description to the group, one of the members sent the following message:

Welcome on board! Your husband is Irani? Just curious, your last name sounds Iranian (Bastani = Ice Cream) to me. Are you a convert to Islam? I ask because I know that Susan is also an Iranian name....

After this message, I posted an explanatory message about my first and last name:

Yes, I am Irani. Bastani is my own last name and it means ancient, old. In Iran women do not change their last names after marriage. My name is also an Iranian name (Susan = Lily of the Valley).

During the period of observation, names helped me to identify the group's members. It also helped me to identify the percentage of converts among the members (6%). Almost all the converts used Islamic names to sign their messages that were different from their official names. This may be because they want "to pass" as other members. Using Islamic names also allows them to express their new identities.

Group Discussions

The members of the Muslim Women Network have come together because they share a belief in Islam and they have formed relationships based on other aspects of their lives. Discussions are varied and cover many topics from hobbies to religion. Events and issues that face muslim women living in the West were among the main topics. During the period of observation, topics of discussion included: "gender equity," "hijab⁴ and Discrimination," "hand shaking," "mixing of genders," "child care," "helping others," etc. "Gender equity" and "hijab and Discrimination" were two subjects that had over ten postings each. Members also exchange poems, recipes, prayers, jokes and congratulatory messages. Sending congratulatory messages

⁴ Hijab refers to the clothing that covers and conceals the body from head to ankles, with the exception of the face, hands and feet. According to the Islamic law, women should cover their hair and body when they are in the presence of men who do not belong to the specified category of close relatives.

is especially common. People also tell each other about important events in the lives of fellow members:

This is just to inform you that Sr. "Mahbooba," one of our newer (and shy!) members gave birth to her first child.... The sister can be reached at <her mailing address> for greetings, extra safety pins and cleaner nappies!

After this message others started to send the congratulatory messages to her. Members not only share their happiness with others; also share their sorrows and ask for prayer.

My grandmother passed away yesterday. She breathed her last in Tanga, Tanzania, after an asthma attack. She was in her 70's. I request you all to remember her in your prayers and to recite namaaz-e-wahshat [special prayer for the deceased person] for her tonight.

The kind of discussions changes from time to time. The group was more active during the first period of my observation. They contributed mostly to discussions of issues, followed by sharing information, and food recipes. After a few months this trend has changed. Members contributed most to personal discussions, followed by queries soliciting advice or information from others, and, least frequently discussions about issues. During the period of silence, the administrator attempted to keep MWN alive by sending a "Thought of the Day," a thought expressed by the Prophet or by famous writers both Muslim and non-Muslim.

Gender Equity

Gender equity was one of the subjects that attracted attention and the group discussed it for several days. It started with the following message:

I feel that men and women will never be equal and many of the women may disagree with me on this matter and right now they probably want to hit me or something!! But really do feel this way because if you look at this in an Islamic point of view the men in our religion have more freedom and have more of the rights to do what they want. We say that men and women are equal and are the same but we all know inside that it's not true.

After this e-mail members attempted to explain the situation of men and women in Islam. One posted:

Islam gives men and women different roles and equity between the two is laid down in the Quran and the example of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Islam sees a woman, whether single or married, as an individual in her own right, with the right to own and dispose of her property and earnings. Violence of any kind towards women and forcing them against their will for anything is not allowed.

Some members emphasized the differences between men and women's duties: "Allah has created everyone equal NOT THE SAME... At the physical level, men and women in Islam have a different build or physical makeup as they are to serve different purposes in society." The reference here is to the Islamic belief that a man has the duty of providing financially for his household while a woman does not have that duty. In Islam a woman has the right to choose whether or not to work and whether or not to spend her money on her family or other things, but a man is required to work and spend his money on his family. The same members also concentrated on the importance of women's role as mother. One of them stated:

I think a woman should understand that her family needs to come first before any career, and that more money is generally not as important as a mother who is readily available to her children.

Most of the converts were among the members who supported the idea of difference between men's and women's roles. They were critical of members who interpreted gender equality in a western way. One, for example, posted:

As an American woman who converted to Islam and who has been raised in a western society, I feel many Muslim women do not fully understand all the faults in western society and look at it as something fully wonderful, so they rush to be like western woman in manners, dress, lifestyle, responsibility, etc. and jump on the bandwagon to become a "liberated" woman.

These members encouraged others to keep their rights and identities as a Muslim women. The rest of the members tried to show the difference between the true Islam and what is happening in Muslim communities. According to these members, Islam has been very clear on the rights of women.

Think about this logically -- how can a religion claiming to be just and rational claim the superiority of one gender over another? It makes no sense -- Islam makes no such claims. We must, must shed these constraints of culture and tradition.

Another member wrote:

Let us be very cautious not to be of those who add new additions to the Islam of Muhammad. How irresponsible it is of us to follow blindly cultural norms without questioning them. ... The beauty of Islam is that it gives one choice. If you can ask to be compensated for breast feeding your child, and if you can refuse to do house work and ask for servants, it doesn't mean that it is a duty. Many Muslim women do not take these measures in their humble lifestyles. But you see, the door is open for you.

It seems that the observed differences among the members were related to their life experiences. Women who converted to Islam have not faced prejudice and discrimination they emphasized the importance of being a good Muslim or a good wife and mother. Women who belonged to other ethnic backgrounds, on the other hand, wanted to draw a realistic picture of Islam and to counter the stereotypes which exist in the West. It is important to note that despite their differences, members never insulted each other and the discussion was friendly. This kind of interaction had positive effects on members' later discussions.

MWN's members discussed the rights of woman not only in the household but also with respect to the whole community. They believed that women's status should change in both

inside and outside the household. In their discussions they expressed angers over women's low status in some Muslim communities:

You are lucky that you had to find out about these communities, instead of living in one. Of course there are still those who keep their wives in the dark and the poor creatures who believe that in avoiding social activities and staying locked in their houses, that they are being good Muslims. With examples of outspoken and "in-charge" women that we have in our history, Khadija [Prophet's wife], how can we let this happen? We must use these fine personalities as our examples, and not let anyone take our rights.

Some of the members encouraged others to act against these communities:

We cannot talk about how Muslim women are regarded as equal, powerful members of society until we can make an effort to put a stop to these ignorant, oppressive, and evil patriarchal, misogynist practices.

Most of the members attempted to show that what is happening in the name of Islam in some communities is not Islam's fault. "If Muslims are abusing the power given to them by the religion, then it is their problem not the religion's."

To sum up what was said, the challenges for Muslim women who live in Western societies are many and complex. They should challenge with existing stereotypes in Western society and at the same time they should fight for women's rights within Muslim communities. Although education and exposure are changing attitudes both in the West and in Muslim-majority nations, change is slow.

Support On-line

Information

Are members able to develop supportive relationships on-line? My observations suggest that members of this on-line group gain both information and social support. First, the list is used to obtain and share information. Members can easily post a question or comment and receive information in return. For example, one of the members posted:

I'm considering employment possibilities in both Ottawa and Toronto these days and I would like some information about the facilities available; i.e., masjids and community centers and general information on what it's like to live in these cities; i.e., cost of living, rent for a one room apartment in a decent area and lifestyle in these cities.

A number of people responded to her. For example, one of the members who lives in Toronto posted complete information about this city. Although she did not have much information about living conditions in Ottawa, she offered the following help: "If you want, I have a cousin who lives there and could get you more information. Do let me know about that."

Members also use the network for finding jobs:

Let me be the first to start an official "plea" for employment by stating that I am seeking employment in the area of finance, preferably near [city].

Another member posted:

I would like to help out in my limited ways to those who seek employment in USA, also, if an American wanted to work in Canada, what sort of papers, forms, etc. would be needed to do something like that? I hope we can get something started and help those who need it.

Motivated by shared interests and professed emotional attachment, members provide much information to each other, some of them spending long periods of time transferring data onto the list for the benefit of others. Forwarded messages indicate that some members, especially actives, have relations with other e-mail lists or chat groups. "Linda" is one of the members who transfers data and messages from other newsgroups. The messages are mostly requests for help from individuals who have questions about Islam or want to do research on Islamic issues, especially about the situation of women. The following is a message that she forwarded to the group:

Anyone on the group who can read Italian please respond to the following message: I am an Italian activist for Human Rights. It is about a woman that is persecuted and arrested for being a member of an Islamic movement. I have read a lot to write it but, since I am not Muslim, I will be glad if someone (a woman) of your faith could read it and give me some suggestions.

In sum, requests for help are a frequent occurrence. Members give useful information freely, and their requests for information are met more swiftly, in greater detail, than they would be elsewhere. In sociological words, we might say that their perceived helpfulness increases their pool of social capital (Rheingold, 1993). I can increase another's knowledge capital and my social capital at the same time by telling her something that she needs to know. The person I help might never be able to help me, but someone else might. "Faiza," for example, encouraged members to help whoever who may need help, inside or outside MWN:

The people who need help should not have to beg for it, we should offer it before they must go to such extremes. Truthfully, any help we do, any money or time or whatever we lose in helping others, Allah [God] repays much greater!

Advice

Information is only one of the many social resources exchanged in MWN. Despite the text-only nature of e-mail message, people find social support, companionship, and a sense of belonging in on-line networks even when these networks are composed of persons they hardly know (McCormick & McCormick 1992, Wellman & Gulia 1999). Members of MWN have frequently receive emotional support, companionship and advice. They give each other advice about different matters such as psyches, families, or computers. One of the features of electronic mail is the prevalence of technical support offered by individuals. The following is an example of a basic question asked by a member:

Since my life is stored on a few 3.25" diskettes, I cannot do any of my work – Islamic and academic- and none of my disks are being read. If anyone knows what I should do, please reply me ASAP [e-mail and general acronym for "as soon as possible"]. It is very important that I get to those disks fast.

Others readily responded and provided support. After a while, she posted:

Thanks to all who promptly answered to my questions. By divine providence MY DISK DRIVE IS NOW UP AND HEALTHY ☺ - I never knew we had so many computer wizards on this mailing list.

The willingness of people to provide technical support may partially be explained by personality factors. In this regard Wellman suggests: "One explanation is that the process of providing support and information on the Net is a means of expressing one's identity,

particularly if technical expertise or supportive behavior is perceived as an integral part of one's self-identity. Helping others can increase self-esteem, respect from others and status attainment" (Wellman, 1997: 343).

Members sometimes have similar problems. For example, Islam a Muslim prohibits women from shaking hands with men, it is difficult to share this experience with somebody outside the community because most people in the West will not understand. "Asma," for example, asked for advice about hand shaking. Other members attempted to help her by sending their experiences. One respond:

I think writing to the people and informing them about the situation well in advance is a good idea. For at the moment in question, even I find it very awkward, especially for the other person, but I try to excuse myself by merely saying "I am sorry, but my religion does not allow it." It is embarrassing for the male then to retract his hand as subtly as possible and making light of the situation. Sometimes I think I should carry around a banner with me "I Do Not Shake Hands With The Opposite Sex"! That would increase the already negative images people have about us Muslims!!!

MWN is not restricted to religious discussions. Members often bring up an issue or topic on something of personal interest. Some even ask for advice about their personal relations. They discuss their personal problems with others (problems with parents, children, or husbands), in a way they would never do in public face-to-face meetings. "Sana", for instance, asked for advice about a problem with her daughter. In response to this mail, others who had experienced similar problems in their lives attempted to explain their experiences and give advice. For me as an observer, it is not possible to know how helpful this advice is. However, it is obvious that these interactions give participants a sense of belonging. They know that there are people with whom they can share their problems and their loneliness. "Azima", one of the converts, posted the following message on the Eid holiday, Fitr⁵:

My Eid was nothing since I took a job to work 40 hours on the weekends. Along with my 15 hours of credits and a 40 hour job I had no time really to celebrate Eid. I did go out to a restaurant when I got home from work that night and wished Eid Mubarak [happy]. At least it was something to commemorate the day. Now that it's all over I feel a bit strange.

⁵ The festival at the end of the fasting month (Ramadan).

In response to this message, others showed that they had similar experiences and admitted that this is the way in the West.

I know how hard celebrating our religious holidays can be in the Western world! I used to live in the Middle East before I came to the West and I always took the religious holidays for granted -- we would always have the day off. However after coming here, I have had to struggle student life with religious celebrations. Sometimes there are exams and stuff that demands time, and when these religious occasions come up, I cannot always fully enjoy and participate in them. But we have to live with them.

MWN resembles “real life” communities in the sense that different kind of support is available. Because members are self-selecting and they have a lot in common, close ties are quickly and easily formed with other members. Consequently, MWN's members are deeply committed to each other and to the community as a whole. In the absence of social and physical cues, members have the opportunity to meet and get to know one another on-line and then decide whether to broaden the relationship through in-person meetings.

Friendship

Informality and mutual support are characteristic of MWN. Members sign their e-mails by first name and address others by their first names as well. They refer to one another as “sisters” or “friends.” A majority of interactions in MWN can be characterized as friendship-oriented. For most new members, these interactions begin with an exchange of social characteristics (age, gender, marital status, place of residence). The posting of these characteristics and the welcoming messages are starting points for interactions. For a few members, interactions did not go beyond posting of a background description. But for most, an exchange of social characteristics is a pathway to other topics of discussion, like shared interests.

Members openly express friendliness and enthusiasm; they often encourage others to respond to them in order to have more contact with fellow members. In some instances, members posted their addresses and telephone numbers.

After one month, we are finally settled. At least as settled as we're likely to get. Anyway, now that I have an ISP, I can hardly wait to get back on the list! I have missed everyone so much! <Email, address, phone, fax>.

Some members sent their phone numbers to the group when they did not have access to e-mail for a short period: "If anyone needs to get a hold of me, they can call me at <phone number> home".

It should be noted that finding friends on-line is different from finding friends in off-line communities. In the off-line community people search their pool of neighbors, colleagues, and acquaintances, to find people who share their values and interests. Then, they exchange information about one another, disclose and discuss their mutual interests, and sometimes they become friends (Rheingold, 1993). Members choose MWN because of their interests, and then get acquainted with others who share their interests.

Overview of On-Line Support

My observation indicates that members got different kinds of support on-line. For converts who live in isolation from others of the same faith, the network is a source of religious support. It can offer isolated individuals the knowledge and companionship needed to remain strong in the religion and can give them a sense of belonging.

Shortly after I converted to Islam I found myself alone, not knowing another Muslim in the area. It was a great struggle to learn anything at all and I felt very alone. Finding the Internet group I no longer felt so alone and had instant support in gaining information and having a feeling of belonging.

It is also important for such women to know that there is someone who will respond to their needs. For women who have been born Muslim, MWN serves as a source for the kind of information and help discussed above. Some of them used it to get help in their academic or professional work:

When I have projects to do, if I circulate a question or an appeal for assistance I am usually pleasantly surprised by the help I get.

And another:

Once when I was still working full-time, I was considering cutting back my working hours. Through discussing the pros and cons via computer, I was able to make a more educated decision and feel more confident about it.

In answer to those who fear that the computer networks will isolate people in their houses, MWN has made its members feel less isolated. Muslim women who live in the West find it difficult to meet like-minded people in “real-life,” yet it is easy on-line. Even if they do not have anyone in their “real” community who likes the things they do or shares their religious beliefs, they can find and communicate with such people on-line.

Off-Line Relations

Most MWN members are unlikely to meet face-to-face. They live in different cities and know each other only by name and e-mail address. What brings them together is a willingness to talk with others and to share interests. As Howard Rheingold (1993) notes, “in traditional kinds of communities, we are accustomed to meeting people, then getting to know them; in virtual communities, you can get to know people and then choose to meet them.”

Yet off-line relations do get established. There are two kinds of off-line relations among the members. First, women who live in the same city arrange similar activities. One e-mail that referred to people living in Toronto. There was a skating program and the poster invited members to participate in it:

This announcement/message directed to all the women in the Toronto area!
Anyone who wants to come with us, you are very welcome!! If you need more information please call me at <Telephone number> I hope to meet some new sisters there!

Second, the list connects people who live away from others and are geographically isolated. MWN formed a directory of the addresses of those who are physically isolated and those who were converts to Islam. This project was started by the following message that one of the converts:

As you may know I am a convert to Islam, but I do not live around other Muslims. In time, I have come to realize that there are many like me who have embraced Islam but may be struggling to continue learning due to lack of a community in our area. How do you learn Islam, without a masjid, a school, a

scholar, or even a Muslim friend you can meet face to face? Well, I am fine, but I have been meeting many people on the Internet who are desperate to have contact with Muslims to aid in their learning and to lessen their feeling of isolation.

After this e-mail, others showed their interest in the idea. One member started to collect the addresses and asked those were interested to send their addresses to her. Someone posted the following e-mail in response:

Well, I guess I'd fit on either of the lists... there are only a very few Muslims here, and I am also willing to do some visiting (always looking for more friends! =-)

After one week the directory was ready and it included the addresses of isolated members of the group open to visitors from the group and of people willing to host/visit. The member who agreed to make the directory sent the following message to the group:

I pray that you are well. ... The following are the entries I have received to date. I have decided not to put phone numbers as all members of the list have e-mail. Some of the addresses are P.O. boxes or subject to change, so e-mail first. New entries to the list are welcome. Please advise me of revisions. Before you travel, please check the list: there may be a sister there eager to meet others!

I also observed other messages that indicate the existence of off-line relations among some of the members:

This message is for Sr. "Rosa." But peace be on whoever sees it. And anyone who can get to, is welcomed☺. Dear "Rosa," I will have a sisters' gathering. This Sunday around 2:00. Please call, and perhaps we could get together earlier in the day, to cook, chat, etc. before the gathering. I thought it would be good for you to meet some of my beloved sisters.

Another post showed that how some members are eager to visit others off-line. The following message posted by one of the members who planned to attend a conference in the United States:

I will be attending, [.....], with my two daughters and son. I'd like to meet any of you who may be going. We are planning to write [.....] on our name tags to identify us Please let me know if you are comming.

These findings indicate that MWN's members are eager to move their on-line relationships to their off-line life. "Just like people who meet in other locales, those who meet in cyberspace [on-line] frequently move their relationships into setting beyond the one in which they met originally. They do not appear to draw a sharp boundary between relationships in cyberspace [on-line] and those in real life" (Parks & Floyd, 1996: 94, see also Baym, 1998).

Most of the interactions on-line take place between individuals who are unlikely to meet off-line. Some members stated that they found some new friends on-line but they had not the opportunity to meet them off-line.

I would welcome the chance to meet people from this list, although I guess it must be a shock when people meet in real life after already forming an opinion about what the other person must be like, or look like.

There are exceptions to this. Several members indicated that they had met other members or knew them off-line as well, mostly people who lived in the same city (same university, Islamic schools, Islamic programs) and who had met while on trips.

I do not remember meeting someone I have kept a relation with and then meeting her off-line. Some people I know from mosque that are regulars on the line but I do not have a relation to them on or off line I just know that this person is the one who is always contributing to the on line discussion.

Others experienced the transformation of a few on-line relations to off-line relations. For some this was a positive experience:

I was apprehensive, my parents were terrified thinking horror stories about meeting people on the net. But it was fantastic. We had already become "friends" on the net and knew a lot about each other spiritually, it was interesting to put a face to that.

Others had different experiences and were critical of on-line participants who attempted to give a false picture of themselves. Although the nature of the friendships on-line is real, there is sometimes a shock when relationships built up on-line have to deal with the complication of face-to-face interaction:

I have met someone online and then met her/him off-line. It turned into a complete disaster but I learned much. I didn't know this person as well as I had thought and I should have been more careful. But at least I learned from it.

This indicates that the communication patterns are different-that people who have interacted very well together on-line may be completely ineffective face-to-face.

On-Line Relation vs. Real-Life Relation

Although MWN's members believe that on-line relation should be encouraged and explored to benefit the community, most of them see it different from "real-life" relations. According to these members, the support that they gain on-line is not the same as a hug or visit from a sister in real-life. "[t]hey are in between letter-writing and real-life relations. I believe that nothing can sufficiently compensate for real-life relations." And another:

One can fantasize or expect something through a computer since she cannot see the other person and how they look, act, etc. In real life one gets the whole scenario and doesn't have to expect or fantasize.

Participants who see on-line relations as different from off-line relations mostly express their fears of misinterpretation, false information, etc. Some, on the other hand, see anonymity as a positive point for on-line relation.

In a way it is good, because the prejudgments that happen based on appearance, race, dress, etc., do not happen and you get to know people by their ideas and thoughts and piety first.

People who do not do well in spontaneous spoken interaction find on-line communication more authentic than the face-to-face kind:

I feel safer online- I can "speak" freely without having to read the other person's body language of facial expression and seeing that they disapprove or disagree with me. Probably I am more genuine online.

This member expressed her dependence on her on-line network and added: "I do not even know how I would begin to build such a network of personal contacts in the 'real world'." Despite the theory that on-line relation is an isolated social phenomenon, it seems that interactions on-line accord with other aspects of participants' lives.

Problems

Many of those interviewed saw misinterpretation and violation of trust as the existing problems on-line.

There is always a risk for misunderstanding greater than that in face-to-face communication. Individuals know clearly what they mean when they write, but what they write does not always clearly what they mean, and a reader brings her own interpretations in to it and may reach incorrect conclusions.

Another stated that:

As it is rare for one to really know who is on the other side of the communicating medium, people could make up lies and the other one would not be able to differentiate between the truth and false.

Some of the respondents to my e-mail misunderstood my question and instead of speaking about the problems that they had experienced on-line, commented on possible problems in on-line relations.

I think it is easy to forget that not everyone is honest and some people are faking online- they might not be everything they seem. We can all put our best face forward online. We should remember that what we actually “know” about a person online is only what they have chosen to reveal, even if honest it is only a few facets of their personality.

Members who were aware of the trends of on-line communities, expressed more satisfaction in their on-line relations. Despite their negative experiences, they have positive views toward these kinds of communities. For example, the member who was shocked by her off-line meeting said: “I think they are beneficial learning and healing communities.” Some expressed the fear that on-line community may increase the chances of people’s getting harmed, upset, or hurt, of their forming false expectations, receiving incorrect information, or being misled but at the same time they were aware of benefits. “I think that this kind of communication is the way of the future, I am simply impressed with the speed and I tend to believe that “real-life” relations can be accomplished.” According to these members this new technology that has made communication so easy is like many other technologies: it could be used to improve one’s life as well as destroy it. “Smart use of this technology is tricky.”

Conclusion

The Muslim Women Network (MWN) is an on-line community that has been established to provide a forum for discussing issues within Islam, especially those pertaining to, or affecting, women. Its members, who are dispersed across the globe and are spatially distanced from each other, have come together because they share a belief in Islam and have formed relationship based on other aspects of their lives.

My concern was the social relationships Muslim women were creating via the computer network. In particular, I wanted to examine the interplay between ongoing on-line and off-line relationships and to explore the possibility of transforming virtual community to real-life community. My observations over eight months have led me to conclude that there is a clear interplay between members' "off-line" and "on-line" communities. MWN is only one of many places that in which Muslim women interact. The members' on-line relationships are only one part of their lives and their off-line relations have affected the way they use their on-line relationships.

Muslim women, like other people, are gaining access to computer networks and are using the new technology to build on-line communities. MWN is one of these on-line communities that helps Muslim women, who are physically dispersed, come together and build a socially integrated community. MWN's members use computer networks to discuss issues that have effects on their daily lives. They do most of the things that they do in off-line community. However, at the same time, they see it different from off-line relations. The support that they gain on-line is not the same as what they gain off-line (e.g., a hug or visit from a sister in real-life, and/or learning Islam via face-to-face meeting). This is the reason that they are eager to move their on-line relationships to their off-line life.

The women on this network want simultaneously to challenge existing stereotypes in the host societies and to work for women's rights within the Muslim communities. MWN provides a place where they are sure to find others who understand their interests, their ideas, and the challenges they encounter in their personal and social lives. It also serves as a source of support, providing information and allowing participants to learn from other members' experiences.

Members are different in regard to the kinds of support they gain on-line. For converts who live in isolation from others of the same faith, on-line communication is mainly a source of religious support. For members who are born Muslim, it mostly serves as a source of information and help.

Both participant observation and interviews indicate that members who are socially and physically isolated and live away from Muslim communities attempt to gain more support on-line. These women are among “active” members and look for more face-to-face and off-line interaction to reduce their feeling of isolation.

Who are we when we are on-line? Jones states that: “perhaps the issue is not, in fact, identity but anonymity, a state difficult, in most ways, to achieve off-line” (1998:xvi). My observation indicates that it depends on our situation in larger society. It seems that for isolated people, the main issue is identity and not anonymity. MWN’s members use the network to express themselves and to reveal their national origins and their identities as Muslim women. Members take advantage of the increase in networked technology to strengthen their ties. In this way they consider themselves less isolated and more connected to the rest of the Muslim community.

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