

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2015

Sexual rights and the internet



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch 2015

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LEBANON

STRIPPING FOR JACKIE



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Introduction

Although Lebanon is arguably the most liberal Arab country, sexuality and nudity are still taboo subjects in the mainstream media. When Mia Khalifa, a Lebanese woman living in the United States, was ranked by Pornhub¹ as their number one porn star,² most of the country reacted with consternation. She received death threats and her own family publicly disowned her and said she did not reflect their Lebanese values.

So when nude pictures of Lebanese Olympic skier Jackie Chamoun were leaked to the media, one might expect Lebanese society to react in a similar way.

But this did not happen.

Lebanese citizens and the naked body

The sight of the naked body is not new to Lebanese citizens. Lebanese law does not censor nudity or online pornography. Pornhub and many other adult websites are among the top 50 most-visited websites in the country.

As far back as 1971, the Ministry of Tourism used public funds to pay for an advertisement of a scantily clad Lebanese woman in *Playboy* magazine to attract tourists. Excerpts from that advertisement included: “Meet an Arabian Nights fantasy of unspoiled, unexpected ancient and modern delights” and “Meet your own Emeera... Like all the beautiful Lebanese you’ll find her warm, welcoming, worldly.”

Similar advertisements are still being published by the Ministry of Tourism. As recently as 2011, it ran a campaign titled “Lebanon Blues” featuring a white male tourist struggling to shake off images of Lebanese women in bikinis he encountered during his trip.³

As the story below shows, the hypocrisy of the government’s response to the pictures of Chamoun has, for many, been too much to stomach. Many activists, defending the skier, pointed out how women’s bodies were being used in “sex sells” strategies in the media, by the private sector, and even by the government. Yet when one woman wanted to participate in a photography project, these same sectors were trying to stifle any expression of female sexuality.

Jackie Chamoun goes viral

Jackie Chamoun was a relatively unknown Lebanese professional downhill skier. In the winter of 2012, she along with another Lebanese skier posed for pictures for an annual sports calendar promoting the Olympic games. She had the freedom to do it and was doing it for a good cause.

She was wearing very little clothing, with strategically placed ski gear to cover her breasts. The shoot took place on the slopes of Lebanon’s most famous ski resort, Faraya-Mzaar. There were other photos taken in which a breast was exposed, but Chamoun never saw these pictures and did not know that they existed.

Two years later, during the Sochi Winter Olympics of 2014, the “scandalous” topless pictures were leaked to the media. On its homepage, Al-Jadeed,⁴ one of the nine official media outlets in Lebanon, published an article titled “Scandal – Lebanese skiing champions are stars of nudity”.

Few Lebanese even knew Chamoun’s name or that Lebanon had skiers competing at the Olympics. But that suddenly changed and her name and pictures were making headlines. The Lebanese sports minister barred her from speaking to the media and immediately launched an investigation. He threatened to ban Jackie from participating in future competitions to “preserve the country’s reputation.”

The ministry did not react with this kind of outrage when Lebanese men’s basketball and football teams were embroiled in cheating, game-fixing and political meddling scandals. Nor would Chamoun’s pictures have caused any controversy in other

1 www.pornhub.com

2 Taylor, A. (2015, 6 January). The Miami porn star getting death threats from Lebanon. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/01/06/the-miami-porn-star-getting-death-threats-from-lebanon>

3 Galey, P. (2011, 15 March). Tourism Ministry advertising campaign criticized as sexist. *The Daily Star*. www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2011/Mar-15/134535-tourism-ministry-advertising-campaign-criticized-as-sexist.ashx

4 www.aljadeed.tv

countries. Sports magazines like *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN* regularly publish photos of nude athletes with impressive bodies.

Jackie Chamoun immediately apologised on her personal Facebook account. But she remained professional, asking people to stop sharing the photos so that she could focus on the Olympic competition.

But she did not need to apologise. The Lebanese online community quickly leapt to her side. And it was not just the feminists and activists. Chamoun's Facebook post went viral with 17,000 likes and thousands of comments supporting her. A Facebook page was created exclusively to support her, and the Twitter hashtag #stripforjackie became popular among Lebanese and other Arabs. A campaign using photos and video spread across the internet; normal people posed semi-nude with placards saying "Stripping for Jackie". One professional photography studio in Beirut offered to take pictures for free to promote the campaign. Some of the most powerful images were stating something quite simple: that the naked body was normal. The images used nudity as a way to empower and fight back shame that had been cast on Chamoun.

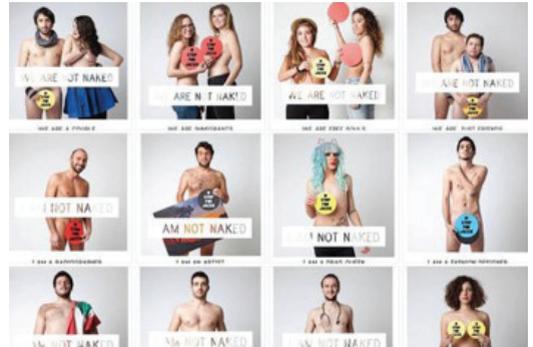
Chamoun's story had gone mainstream organically through social media. Soon the whole world was watching with intrigue. Stories appeared in the *Huffington Post*, *Washington Post*, *Guardian*, and *Time* magazine, and on CNN.

The Lebanese establishment changed their stance. The sports minister backtracked. Several Lebanese politicians came out defending her right to have taken the pictures and wishing her good luck at the games. Chamoun had become somewhat of a Lebanese celebrity.

The story did not end there. It became a larger vehicle for activism, and triggered a conversation on women's rights and sexuality. Jumping on the



Jackie Chamoun posing for Hubertus von Hohenlohe.



Pictures from the "Strip for Jackie" campaign.



Screenshot of Jackie Chamoun's Facebook status.



Examples of pictures inspired by the Strip for Jackie campaign voicing social issues.

#stripforjackie campaign, activists shared pictures of semi-nude, beaten women, asking: “What shocks you more?” Others used similar images to challenge the government on electoral reforms, civil violence, refugees and corruption. Even marginalised communities found their voice through Jackie’s experience. One simple viral story became a catalyst and a common frame of reference for trying to explain bigger social issues, like the government’s role in policing nudity and women’s bodies, for a mainstream audience that had otherwise been disengaged or uninterested.

The story ends with Chamoun fully embracing the photos. “People can sometimes see these pictures directly when surfing the web... but I don’t care,” she said. “I really enjoyed [the photo shoot] and I don’t regret it. I like these photos.”

Conclusion

No one could have seen this coming. A social-media campaign involving “shocking” levels of nudity – people posing naked. It sent signals to activists, as well as established political and religious leaders, that there was a substantial segment of the young Lebanese population that was comfortable displaying sexuality and nudity to the world. This has given activists more breathing room to push more controversial subjects in public debate, knowing that so many Lebanese could discuss sexuality so openly. Lebanese officials were also clearly out of touch with the younger internet generation, given the way they initially reacted to the photos.

Lebanese politicians were also out of touch with the majority of the population. In a TV poll conducted by LBC,⁵ 81.6% of the Lebanese public ended up believing that Jackie did not damage Lebanon’s image or reputation, as the sports minister had claimed.

The mainstream media realised that they could no longer use random nude photos as easily to create scandals or to shame or bully public figures. *Al-Jadeed* ended up taking down its own article (it is still available on the internet archives).

Another striking fact about this story is how it subverts the usual male gaze. People were not supporting Jackie because she was an athlete who fell victim to gawkers of nude photos. They were instead supporting sexual freedom and a woman’s right to control her body. Both men and women were enacting that freedom in their campaign for her support.

This story also shows how fed-up Lebanese citizens have become with a government that fails to perform basic government duties while focusing

on petty and private matters – and this public sentiment creates a space for activists to advance human rights agendas. Whenever the government oversteps on private matters, activists can channel the public’s frustration with government ineptitude, telling politicians to mind their own business and focus on solving more pressing issues.

Action steps

When it comes to sexual rights and nudity, a lot remains to be done in Lebanon. But here are some of the suggested action steps that are specific to this story:

- Use sports to encourage a positive body image and as a conversation opener on deeper topics like public nudity and sexuality. Athletes tend to be younger and can speak to their young peer group in an engaging way they can relate to. Many athletes are role models for young teenagers. According to the United Nations, “A small but growing body of evidence has also begun to establish sport as a viable tool for addressing gender equity on a broader scale. Research on sport, gender, and development indicates that sport can benefit girls and women by:
 - Enhancing health and well-being;
 - Fostering self-esteem and empowerment;
 - Facilitating social inclusion and integration;
 - Challenging gender norms;
 - Providing opportunities for leadership and achievement.”⁶
- Raise issues of sexual rights through existing social debates and avoid using or invoking academic literature. To break the activist bubble and avoid preaching to the choir, viral campaigns need to be easily understandable, visual, and enacted by those who support them. Even the most simple campaigns can spur a feeling of public indignation and encourage participation.

5 www.lbcgroup.tv

6 Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group. (2008). *Harnessing the Power of Sport and Development and Peace*. www.un.org/wcm/webdav/site/sport/shared/sport/SDP%20IWG/Chapter4_SportandGender.pdf

Sexual rights and the internet

The theme for this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) is sexual rights and the online world. The eight thematic reports introduce the theme from different perspectives, including the global policy landscape for sexual rights and the internet, the privatisation of spaces for free expression and engagement, the need to create a feminist internet, how to think about children and their vulnerabilities online, and consent and pornography online.

These thematic reports frame the 57 country reports that follow. The topics of the country reports are diverse, ranging from the challenges and possibilities that the internet offers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities, to the active role of religious, cultural and patriarchal establishments in suppressing sexual rights, such as same-sex marriage and the right to legal abortion, to the rights of sex workers, violence against women online, and sex education in schools. Each country report includes a list of action steps for future advocacy.

The timing of this publication is critical: many across the globe are denied their sexual rights, some facing direct persecution for their sexuality (in several countries, homosexuality is a crime). While these reports seem to indicate that the internet does help in the expression and defence of sexual rights, they also show that in some contexts this potential is under threat – whether through the active use of the internet by conservative and reactionary groups, or through threats of harassment and violence.

The reports suggest that a radical revisiting of policy, legislation and practice is needed in many contexts to protect and promote the possibilities of the internet for ensuring that sexual rights are realised all over the world.

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2015 Report

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