

How the Women-Only Facebook Group Minbar-Shat Helped Overthrow the Sudanese Government

The women of Minbar-Shat just wanted to snoop on their boyfriends. They helped topple a dictator instead.

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OCT 4, 2019



It all started in 2015 with a frantic message from a woman in Sudan who was having cold feet ten days before her wedding. The woman had a nagging feeling her husband-to-be was cheating on her, and she was desperate to find out the truth before she went through with the marriage. She decided to reach out to her friend Rania Omer, who had won a lottery visa to become a U.S. citizen five years earlier. Now Omer was 24 and studying at a college in Nebraska, but she still fancied herself an anti-matchmaker among her close-knit community back home in Khartoum. The friend wanted Omer's help. Would she mind posting a photo of the potential husband to Facebook to see if other women could dig up information on him?



#بناتي كذرات النسيجه 🇸🇩

A few hours later, Omer had her answer: one commenter posted to say she was his wife. "His wife showed up and said please delete this picture and I was like, 'Oh my!'" said Omer in a phone interview with ELLE.com.

As more women began coming to Omer for information on men they knew, she decided to start a Facebook group called Minbar-Shat as a community of female "cheater detectives" who would work to

police men's behavior. Within a week, Omer said, the group's membership grew to more than 10,000. That's when she realized there was something more to Minbar-Shat than catching cheaters.

When Omer came to the U.S. from Sudan in 2010, her home country had been ruled by dictator Omar Al-Bashir for 21 years, more than the [average age](#) of the population. Most Sudanese citizens spent their lifetime under his rule, and many spent their youth protesting it. In July 2010, Bashir became the first head of state to receive an arrest [warrant](#) from the International Criminal Court, due to his involvement in [wiping out](#) non-Arab groups in Darfur. It was a momentous occasion that ultimately petered out without a prosecution, leaving newspapers constantly referring to him as the president "wanted for war crimes." 2010 was also the year that Sudan's National Security Act was [repealed](#) and replaced [with](#) a new one that [granted](#) the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) more power to arrest, detain, and torture protestors based on vague grounds. The government protected many NISS officers from prosecution after they were accused of sexual violence and [publicly flogging](#) women in the streets.

Sudanese families traditionally approve when and where an unmarried woman can meet with friends, so there was a notable lack of physical spaces where women could connect and vent their frustrations. Living under an authoritarian state, daily speech was also heavily policed. But with Minbar-Shat, Omer was able to provide a space for women to privately share information they might otherwise be too scared to divulge. "The men disagreed with what we were doing," Omer said. But at the time, she wasn't afraid of repercussions; she considered the resistance from men as just "talk."

Marine Alneel, a 26-year-old group member and activist, remembers once when a woman posted a picture of a guy she was dating who had invited her to meet his parents. The woman was hesitant to move the relationship forward, so she posted his picture to find out more intel on him and discovered that two other women in the group were dating him. The women decided that one would ask him to meet at a popular restaurant in Khartoum and then the other women would show up. "After that story, that's when everyone was like—this group, we need to beware," Alneel said laughing.



Sudanese activists raise a banner in celebration of the revolution in April 2019. The sign reads, "Girls be strong, this is the revolution of the girls."

Women have always played a key role in challenging regime rule in Sudan while fighting for female equality. The "[morality laws](#)," one of Bashir's most infamous pieces of legislation, allowed police to whip

anyone who did not adhere to [vague ideas](#) of public decency, including ways of dressing. The law inevitably ended up discriminating against women, as their bodies faced the most scrutiny in the context of "public morality." By 2015, in regime-ruled Sudan, women were desperately in need of platforms to help them hold men accountable. Minbar-Shat became one of those platforms.

The group grew into a support network for women around the country. Members would often help each other with advice and life problems; Omer said Minbar-Shat once collected around \$2,000SD in small donations for a woman who needed help paying for college. "We helped sick people, students, someone building a house," she said.

But not every female activist in Sudan was completely on board with the group at first. 30-year-old Rowa Kodi, a women's rights activist, joined the group for the first time in 2015. Dissatisfied with the lack of conversation on social issues, she left soon after. "I thought, 'If you girls had nothing to do in life and you just want to talk about men, then I'm so sorry,'" Kodi said. "But then, to some extent they were able to be the first advocates for topics like women's rights and rape victims." After 2018, she rejoined when she saw a transformation. Topics of conversation within the group had shifted alongside the political climate; soon the women were talking more about rallies and activist slogans than badly behaved men. As major protests started to spread across Sudan, the group became an important political tool in the fight for the country's future.

Kodi herself had been a part of many major protests in Sudan since she was in college. But when they erupted again in December of 2018 it felt different, she says. The protests [started](#) in Ad-Damazin, the capital of Sudan's Blue Nile state and one of the [most economically vulnerable regions](#). This small southeastern region had been devastated by high food prices due to economic policies that lead to [crippling inflation](#). Once Bashir announced that he was going to [end](#) wheat subsidies, the price of bread tripled. In Sudanese Arabic, Bread is "Aesh," which literally translates to "life:" people began putting their lives on the line in protest.

The protests bloomed across the country throughout December, but Bashir was undeterred. "Changing the government and changing the president will not be through WhatsApp nor Facebook, but will be through the ballot box," he told supporters in the provincial capital of Kassala.

The government responded to the mass of protesters in Khartoum by granting NISS officers free rein to terrorize them on the streets. They came to protest areas with pick-up trucks armed with AK-47 rifles and pistols; they used tear gas, batons or truncheons to disperse the crowds. Hundreds were critically injured, and women—who comprised up to 70% of the marchers—faced some of the worst retaliation.

Many popular women's Facebook groups turned into makeshift organizing headquarters during this time. The Forces of Freedom and Change, the coalition of Sudanese groups that organized the protests, made Facebook posts for groups to share. Popular beauty and hair care groups started spreading the word about protests, as did another chit-chat group that talked about women's crushes called El-Radmia. In Minbar-Shat, "after the second week of January, if you posted anything other than the revolution, you were really shamed about it," said Omer.

In January 2019, a woman messaged Omer privately on Facebook to tell her about a NISS officer who had harassed and followed her home. The girl managed to take a picture of the guard on her phone and sent it to Omer, asking if she could post it on Minbar-Shat so one of the hundreds of thousands of members could help find his address and tell his family what he had done. Omer complied; soon after, a woman commented with the guard's name and address.



Kodi next to a sign from the Sudanese resistance movement that she's a part of, "قرفنا," which translates to "we are fed up."

ROWA KODI

"He got really scared," Omer said. "After this incident [the NISS officers] all started to [cover their faces](#)" so they couldn't be identified by the women, who [had begun posting pictures of NISS guards](#) instead of crushes. That month, Minbar-Shat found its place in the revolution. Omer decided to officially turn the group into a place to shame NISS officers and organize protests. "There are people killing each other, fighting with the government, there is a lot of stuff going on in Sudan," Omer said. "That is not the right time for posting pictures or fun stuff and videos." Omer began approving all posts and deleting those that didn't revolve around the revolution.

Omer, now 29, is the oldest of nine siblings and hails from a poor family in Khartoum. She came to the U.S. so she could work to send money home while attending college. "Everything is expensive and there were no jobs," Omer said of her childhood in Khartoum. Now she lives in Nebraska with her two-month-old baby, while her husband, whom she is trying to help get U.S. citizenship, lives in Sudan. Though she wasn't able to physically be a part of the revolution, Minbar-Shat made her feel like she could take place in the historical protests from afar.

But the Sudanese government was watching the group carefully, and threatened them on many occasions, according to Omer. Most of the threats she received were over the phone, but she also heard that the government was asking for hackers to expose the group in exchange for money. As men started creating fake female accounts to sneak their way in, she began enforcing stricter background checks for new members. But since many Sudanese women are Muslim and value modesty, they don't always use a real picture of themselves as profile photos, which made it harder to figure out which profiles were fake. Omer admits there are men on the page, but she does her best to monitor and kick out members she assumes are men. "They say things, different and weird, not like us," Omer said on how she would detect a man.

Concerns about the group's safety came to a head in March 2019 when an administrator was imprisoned. Omer remembers receiving a call from the administrator's phone, but when she answered, a man was on the line. The man identified himself as a NISS officer and told her that the government had tracked the administrator down using her IP address. She was arrested on the street while riding in an Uber. "They said they would arrest her forever and said they would arrest my family" if she did not shut the group down, Omer said. After alerting Omer to her friend's arrest, the officer passed her the phone so she could speak with Omer. Scared, her administrator told her that the government would agree to let her out of jail if Omer gave them control of Minbar-Shat. Omer was undeterred. "All the women—they trust me. There are at least 300,000 members of the group. If we close it, it will be dangerous to them as well," she said. The administrator was freed from jail about a month later after the government's demands went un-met.

Minbar-Shat remains influential in Sudanese politics, even after Bashir was ousted from power in April 2019 and replaced with the Sudan Sovereign Council, which now runs the country's 3-year transition period. On August 19, a woman posted a photo to the group of a local pharmacist named Nasri Morgos the day after it was announced [he was nominated](#) as the eleventh member of Sudan's Sovereign Council. In the post, the woman said that Morgos, an endeared "uncle figure" and well-respected expert in the medical field, had asked her to go behind an aluminum curtain during a consultation at the pharmacy, where he rubbed her legs and lifted up her skirt. Frightened and confused, she ran away.

"I know that I am not alone," the woman began her post. Within moments, many other women commented with harrowing stories that chronicled years of alleged sexual harassment from the pharmacist. Within a day of the post's creation, the Sudan Sovereign Council [announced](#) their decision to let a female member take over the seat instead. There was no official announcement about why Morgos's nomination was revoked, but most activists say the answer is obvious. "Minbar-Shat admins are part of these resistant committees in local neighborhoods," Kodi said. "They have good connections with the Freedom of Change Forces. Two of the victims met with them."



An activist holds a Sudanese national flag during a 2019 protest in Khartoum.

EBRAHIM HAMID + GETTY IMAGES

In February, Omer went back to Khartoum for the first time in two years, and said she was greeted with screaming fans. “When I was in Sudan, I heard people talking about Rania Omer and the group like everywhere,” she said. “I was famous. I wasn’t used to this.” The group had become larger than life, and Omer anointed a revolutionary hero.

Kodi, who’d originally been skeptical of Minbar-Shat, is one of Omer’s fans. She believes the group has given a reason to “dominate” post-Bashir Sudan even now that members have gone back to posting pictures of cheating men. “Cheating on us, or abusing us—whatever you do it will be exposed,” she said.

“I think Sudanese men will think twice before they cheat now,” she added.