



DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

THE CURRENT FACES OF ARAB FEMINISMS

Micro-Rebels, Art Activists and Virtual Heroines

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A young generation of creative, cyber-active and outspoken feminists is shaping the current scene of Arab civil society. Their creative campaigns have exposed social taboos and raised awareness about gender-based violence and biased laws.



Despite their efficacy and several law-amendments passed in women's favour, the interests of rural, uneducated, poor or non-cis-hetero women are still underrepresented within their discourse.



Arab feminists must develop an intersectional critique of societies and states by prioritising neoliberalism, occupation, war and displacement.

INTRODUCTION

In a video published online in late 2019, Saudi Arabia's state security agency declared that feminism, homosexuality and atheism are »extremist«. That video, which was quickly removed with an apology, cannot be taken to represent general sentiment regarding feminist activism in the Arab world. Nonetheless, there is great hostility to feminism throughout the region. Arab feminists are often accused of promoting corrupt western agendas with the help of foreign funds – supposedly to destroy the highly »moral« Arab and Muslim society. This view was exemplified by a male Jordanian parliamentarian's response to a young woman who criticised gender-based violence. Disputing her patriotism and cultural background, he demanded to know if she was Jordanian. The same can be said about the statement »Respectable women do not protest!« directed at Sudanese activists demanding greater freedoms and their legitimate rights.

The hostility expressed by Islamists, tribal leaders and even some »modern« »liberal« male elites (intellectuals and statesmen) shows that Arab feminist movements are very well and active. They can even be said to be the most powerful element of Arab civil society today as they threaten state authoritarianism and aim to detraditionalize patriarchal society.

Yet declaring that Arab feminism is a democratic force is also an exaggeration. The cyber activity and outspoken and artistic critique of taboos by today's feminists represent only middle-class, educated, cis-hetero and urban women. Like their predecessors, they rarely include queer, rural, poor, refugee and working-class interests, and their agenda is seldom intersectional. They view women's issues as by-products of a patriarchal culture, the sum of norms, customs and traditions that privilege men over women. This despite the effects of war and conflict, occupation, authoritarianism, international interventions and the increasing adoption of neoliberal economic policies that influence women's lives and livelihoods so as to amplify patriarchy.

I begin by asking what drives Arab feminists, then examine feminist strategies and conclude with a critique of the movement and thoughts about a possible way forward.

WHAT DRIVES ARAB FEMINISTS?

It was young Arab women who mainly drove the events that led to the so-called Arab Spring. They demanded socio-economic justice and mobilised protesters. On the frontlines, they paid the highest price for their activism, risking rape, imprisonment and even death – by marching. They built cross-regional solidarities, graffitied, tweeted, blogged, facebooked and instagramed. Most of these women were cyber-activists unaffiliated with any prominent women's organisations. Their participation added an important dimension to demands for dignity, freedom and justice: No one is free when Arab women are treated as

second-class citizens. Young Arab feminists see women's rights first and foremost as human and citizenship rights. As the Spring passed, these activists continued their struggle and defined its future course. This generation learned, as others before them, that when men fight for liberation they only want it for themselves, not for women.

POST-ARAB-SPRING REALITIES

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Arab women had to cope with many different realities ranging from failed states torn by civil wars and conflict (Syria, Yemen and Libya) to states promoting state-feminist agendas in order to cloak their narcissistic and oppressive patriarchal authority with a veneer of modernity (Saudi Arabia) and states that shrink from serious and just reforms (Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco). Displacement, chaos and insecurity worsened the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and increased state repression that began to prevail almost everywhere. Different outcomes of the Arab Spring produced different feminist agendas. For the purpose of analysis, two features can be identified in post-Arab-Spring feminist waves: First, young, technologically savvy and cyber-active women combine technological skills with artistic forms of resistance. One example is Qahera, a digital comic by Deena Mohamed from Egypt in which a veiled young girl challenges traditional gender roles. Her activism gains further significance if we consider that Egyptian women are nine per cent less likely than men to own a mobile phone and 21 per cent less likely to use mobile internet, according to the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSMA). Second, the new wave vehemently protests the social taboos associated with women's bodies and sexuality – honour killings, rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment and child marriage. The issues protested may not necessarily be new to the regional feminist agenda but the fact that they are attacked almost simultaneously across the region is. The 5-kilometer line of 100,000 pieces of women's dirty laundry recently hung along the busiest street in Iraqi Kurdistan¹ to condemn violence against women is reminiscent of the bloody wedding dresses that appeared in Beirut's streets in 2016.

While the effects of the Arab Spring partially drive Arab feminists today, another important factor is gendered socioeconomic disparity.

LINGERING SOCIOECONOMIC DISPARITIES

Historically, development programmes in the Arab World have disproportionately affected women. Gender gaps are mainly present in the fields of education and employment. Although young women's enrolment and success rates in schools and institutions of higher education are higher

¹ Kurdistan, of course, has its own distinct (non-Arab) ethnic and cultural identity. Despite its autonomy, however, Kurdistan is still part of Iraq, which is regarded as part of the Arab world, in which »Arab« remains the hegemonic culture despite the region's great cultural and ethnic diversity.

than those of young men, women are far less likely to enter and remain in the job market. According to the World Bank, which describes this phenomenon as a gender paradox,² only one in five working-age women in the MENA region is employed or actively looking for a job. Moreover, women make up »only 21 per cent of the labour force and only contribute 18 per cent to MENA's overall GDP«. ³ One could, of course, ask what constitutes »labour«. If women's informal and unpaid labour were counted, their share of the GDP would be far higher. Nevertheless, women's limited economic participation confirms that they do not enjoy the same effects of development plans and programmes.

The World Bank and many activists in region rush to blame »culture« for this paradox. Missing from this cultural explanation is the effects of the economic restructuring plans imposed upon several Arab countries by the World Bank and IMF since the 1980s. Economic restructuring most affected women through shrinking welfare programmes and cuts to public education, health services and food subsidies. Women also bore the brunt of work opportunities that did not match their qualifications and jobs that disappeared as regional economies adopted neoliberal practices and emulated trends in the globalised free market. The neoliberal state also shifted the cost of women's economic participation to women and their families. Employed women were forced to carry the burden of increasing costs of childcare and transportation, as well as state reluctance to set a decent minimum wage.

Economic restructuring programmes in the region also amplified class disparities. According to a recent study,⁴ between 1990 and 2016, 64 per cent of total regional income went to the top 10 per cent of earners. Such class disparity is reflected in the sociodemographic profiles of feminist activists, most of whom are educated, middle-class and urban. Echoing World Bank logic, their agendas blame legal and social restrictions to women's economic engagement. The activists' class position also gives them access to national decision-making circles and international actors who can provide funding and/or pressure governments to change. The internet connects middle-class activists and helps them to reach international media and amplify their demands. Due to their class status, these women have the language skills, connectivity and access to circles of power that poor and rural women do not have.

2 Shalaby, Marwa. »The Paradox of Female Economic Participation in the Middle East and North Africa.« (3 Jul. 2014). Rice University's Baker Institute Issue Brief.

3 Further details and statistics can be found at: <https://blogs.world-bank.org/arabvoices/invest-women-boost-growth-mena>.

4 Alvarado, Facundo, Assouad, Lydia and Thomas Piketty, »Measuring Inequality in the Middle East 1990–2016: The World's Most Unequal Region?« (October 2017). CEPR Discussion Paper No. DP12405.

EFFECTS OF OCCUPATION, TERRORISM AND CIVIL CONFLICT

The Syrian refugee crisis is a vivid reminder of the 750,000 Palestinian refugees who were expelled from their homes more than 70 years ago, many of whom became refugees a second time when they had to flee their refugee camps in Syria. In the shadows of the Syrian refugee crisis, which was captured by regional and international media, stand thousands of Iraqi, Yemeni and Libyan refugees who have faced comparable struggles and fates. In the context of conflict, terrorism and occupation, women and girls in the region are subjected to slavery, trafficking, sexual violence and child marriage – on top of limited access to food, shelter and other basic resources. Despite the long history of conflicts and displacement, and the severity of their effects on women, Arab feminists remain in reactive modes regarding the effects of war and conflict. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA),⁵ the League of Arab States only recently (in 2015) adopted a regional strategy and an action plan on Women, Peace and Security in response to UN Security Council Resolution 1325. The strategy and action plan were endorsed by Member States and helped guide the development of national plans across the region. Central points in the action plans were political participation; addressing violence against women; protecting women from conflict and post-conflict violence; and providing recovery and relief support.

Among the 22 member countries of the Arab League, only Palestine and Iraq have adopted national plans. According to the ESCWA report, Jordan, Somalia and Sudan are in the process of designing their policy responses, while other states, such as Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates, are still considering their responses to the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Because they are framed at the level of the Arab League, these efforts are dependent on states and state feminist agencies. State feminisms (national women's mechanisms, ministries and commissions) across the region struggle with autonomy, limited mandates and shrinking budgets. Non-governmental organisations' attention to peace and security is still very limited, also because of their restricted mandates and budgets. One example of a campaign that included the plight of refugee women is the »March of Anger« led by the Lebanese organisation, ABAAD – the Resource Centre for Gender Equality. Syrian and Palestinian refugee women marched along with migrant domestic workers and Lebanese women demanding justice.

Another challenge associated with addressing the issue of peace and security is that the strategies and national plans generally treat women as primarily victims of political vio-

5 ESCWA. Women, Peace and Security: The Role of Institutions in Times of Peace and War in the Arab Region. (Beirut: 2017). <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/women-peace-security-institutions-war-arab>. (accessed on 17 Nov. 2020).

lence and not as perpetrators. The guiding action plan and strategy do not mention the women who joined the ranks of the Islamic State and committed war crimes and atrocities against other women. Many of these IS women were young and educated.

INSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL MISOGYNY

Legal misogyny may be the most visible item on Arab feminists' agendas. In the past few years, Arab women have fought against discrimination in family/personal status and nationality laws that treat women as second-class citizens. They seek to transform the distorted relationship that Arab women have with the state, which treats women less as citizens than as wards of husbands and fathers. The top priorities for women in Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, Palestine and Morocco have been legal protection from domestic violence and sexual harassment. In Morocco, Jordan and Lebanon, activists demanded the elimination of a legal provision that protected rapists from prosecution in exchange for marrying their victims. Relentless campaigns against Articles 277 of the Moroccan penal code, Article 308 of the Jordanian penal code and Article 522 of the Lebanese penal code succeeded in getting them eliminated. Arab feminists have also forced the state to acknowledge the existence of domestic violence, criminalise a wider range of acts and recognise extended family members as potential offenders. One example of progress is Tunisia's Article 58 on protection from domestic violence, adopted in 2017. The recent debate and potential adoption of recommendations from the Commission on Individual Liberties and Equality (Colibe) with regard to equal inheritance rights could well create ripple effects in other countries.

KEY FORMS OF ACTIVISM

Three different modes of activism can be identified in today's Arab feminism. These include protesting social injustice by using dramatic spectacles and artistic displays, as well as social media campaigns and individual protests termed »micro-rebellions«.

DRAMATIC SPECTACLES

»I was jogging but my feet froze when I saw her.«⁶ This was the reaction of someone who saw a little girl in a wedding dress being photographed next to a man several decades older who was posing as the groom. The wedding was staged as part of a campaign by the Lebanese organisation Kafa (»enough«). The public photo shoot was intended to draw attention to child marriage. The scene that led to the repeal of Article 522 of the Lebanese penal code was equally dramatic. In its 2016 campaign, »A White Dress Doesn't Cover the Rape«, ABAAD activists displayed

torn and blood-stained wedding dresses throughout Beirut. The shocking spectacle highlighted the fact that in Lebanon, rape is not only not penalised, but rapists are rewarded by being allowed (at times begged) to marry their victims to help cleanse their family's honour. In early 2018, a large number of activists occupied the balconies of the Jordanian Parliament on the eve of the lower house's vote to repeal Article 308 of the penal code, which also exonerates a rapist who agrees to marry his victim. For hours, activists waited for Parliament to vote. They haunted the session. With the MPs feeling watched and held accountable, they finally repealed the odious article. The efficacy of shock was also used in November 2020 by Tara Abdulla from Kurdistan Iraq, who created a 5-kilometer line of women's laundry – the undergarments of women who were victims of domestic violence and rape. Feminists use dramatic spectacle to protest, shame and demand change. They expose the hypocrisy of societies that pretend to be moral and righteous but allow women to be raped, murdered and subjected to domestic violence.

CYBERFEMINISM AND RAGE-FILLED SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

The gruesome videos of Palestinian Israa Abu-Ghreib and Jordanian Ahlam went viral, triggering outrage on social media across the Arab region and around the world: Israa's cries of pain revealed that her family had attempted to hide the fact that they'd beaten her to death by saying she'd fallen and was mentally ill. Ahlam's father smashed her head with a cement block and then proceeded to calmly drink tea and smoke a cigarette. But these women's cries captured on video shattered the indifference that had cloaked them in life, allowing them to be murdered. Online outrage sparked larger campaigns.

Tala'at (»stepping out«), a group of young women, responded to the cries of Israa and Ahlam yelling, »There is no free homeland without free women« as they marched through cities and villages in Palestine. Tala'at quickly became regional, with a group in Jordan protesting first Ahlam's murder and then the case of a woman whose eyes were gouged out by her husband. Palestinian Tala'at highlighted women's double jeopardy of occupation and patriarchy. Their rage, marches and social media campaigns received worldwide solidarity with marches held in Jerusalem, Ramallah, Gaza, Haifa, Beirut and Berlin. Although this was a perfect moment to link occupation and patriarchy, the two oppressions were named – but treated as parallel and separate: Their intersectionality was ignored.

MICRO-REBELLIONS AND PERSONAL REVOLUTIONS

Young Arab feminists clearly do not shy away from controversy. Since 2011, a new trend of activism focusing on women's bodies and sexuality has emerged. Decades after Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi's pioneering texts on Arab women's sexuality, young Arab feminists go even further: Not only does their activism critique the treatment of the

⁶ Ma, Alexandra. Staged Wedding Shoot Highlights Heartbreaking Reality About Child Brides In Lebanon. Huffington Post, 10 Dec. 2015. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/kafa-video-child-marriage-lebanon_n_5668a13ae4b0f290e521de48. [accessed 31 Oct. 2020].

body, but it also represents the naked female body as a political body. »Micro-rebellions« seem to have begun during the Arab Spring with Alia Magda-Elmahdi from Egypt, whose nude photos in Facebook ignited weeks of debate about the place of the female body in Arab public space. Other uses of nudity as a political strategy soon followed, with Tunisian Amina Sbuoi also posing nude online in 2012. On her bare chest she wrote the words: »My body is my own«. She soon announced her affiliation with FEMEN,⁷ but left the group in 2013, accusing them of Islamophobia. A comparable, yet different, micro-rebellion centring around the body was Saudi Lujain al-Hathoul's veilles pose on Keek: »Cover up, you woman!« [they say]. »But I won't cover up, and your trashy way of offering religious advice won't work with me.« After that, she drove a car to protest restrictions on women driving. For that violation – and for refusing to sign a statement that she had suffered no abuse in jail – she remains behind bars.

CHALLENGES, LIMITATIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

The various Arab feminisms presented here are far from comprehensive. My intention was to identify recent trends in activism, discourses and agendas – and address their potential limitations and challenges.

These trends indicate certain limits of representation and echo a critique of previous generations of Arab feminists. Like them, today's Arab feminists are largely urban, middle-class and educated; unlike their predecessors, they are technologically savvy. Feminist agendas continue to reflect urban middle-class and educated women's views of law, society and women's rights. Rural, poor and disenfranchised women, whose immigration or refugee status puts them at the margins of Arab societies and politics, are still not represented. In certain cases, the agenda has even adopted an extreme form of individual salvation: New forms of feminist activism embody neoliberal ideals as shown in individual struggles and singular heroines.

Besides limits on forms of representation and agendas, virtual activism and physical protests have legal and political challenges. At the level of cyber activism, by largely going online, Arab feminists have become vulnerable to laws hampering digital freedom of expression. Anti-terrorism and cybercrime laws across the region contain vague prohibitions of free speech that not only threaten to prosecute but also terrorise activists. At the level of physical resistance and struggle, restrictions on public assembly and anti-protest laws born of the neoliberal transformations that are stifling human and labour rights drastically affect activists' ability to demand change. Female activists in the re-

gion now have a central demand: Public spaces and the internet must remain free.

Activism in the Arab world also appears to subscribe to the unwritten theory that cultural patriarchy is Arab women's sole oppressive structure – which prevents proper critique of the region's neoliberalism. Arab feminists are activists who have no nuanced theory to examine neoliberal capitalism, war and conflict, international intervention and occupation along with neopatriarchy. None of these interlocking systems of oppression can be addressed singularly nor ignored. This lack of nuanced theory can be attributed to two main factors: 1) the weakness of women's and feminist studies in the region and 2) the weakness of political parties and the limited nature of the dominant political ideologies, namely Islamism and neoliberalism. Attempting to avoid conservative Islamist political agendas, Arab feminists generally gravitate toward neoliberal elites. Yet these elites respond to women's demands only when they help to propel neoliberal transformations.

Arab feminists thus have to fight on two fronts. First, they must join forces with other civil and human rights activists in the region to protect the critical cyberspace they have carved out since the Arab Spring. Their agenda must prioritise combatting growing authoritarianism in Arab states. They also need to develop an intersectional feminist critique of Arab societies and states to include neoliberalism, occupation, war and displacement along with cultural patriarchy as key Arab feminist issues. Such a critique will help them avoid accusations of elitism and being handmaidens to neoliberal transformations.

⁷ In their words: »FEMEN is an international women's movement of brave topless female activists painted with the slogans and crowned with flowers.« <https://femen.org/about-us/> (accessed November 11, 2020). The connection between FEMEN and the Arab World was established when both Alia Magda-Elmahdi (in 2011), and Amina Sbuoi (in 2012) joined the group.

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The current generation of Arab feminists is young, cyber-active and artistic, and vocally attacks social taboos. Their agendas are headed by issues of public and private gender-based violence, legal discrimination and human rights violations.



Despite their creative, visible and effective resistance, feminists today, like previous generations, still come from middle-class, educated, hetero-cis-normative and urban backgrounds. They rarely include rural, poor, refugee, working-class or queer women.



Their agenda is also seldom intersectional. It privileges patriarchal culture as the sole source of women's oppression – despite the evident impact of war and conflict, occupation, authoritarianism, international intervention and the increasing adoption of neoliberal economics that amplifies the effects of patriarchy. To move forward, I argue, Arab feminists need to expand their solidarities beyond gender and patriarchy and devise a critique of the neoliberal state and economy.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

www.fes-mena.org