

# FROM HISTORIES TO FUTURES

A Mapping of Feminist Movements in the  
MENA Region

**The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship**  
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Feminist movements in the MENA region face critical challenges and limited resources, leaving the rights of women and marginalized minorities on the sidelines.



The current feminist movements in the region are influenced by significant historical, demographic, and political factors.



The 2011 uprisings led to the emergence of more intersectional and critical feminist movements, while the COVID-19 pandemic and rising conflicts have empowered on-line feminist activism.

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A Mapping of Feminist Movements in the MENA Region

in collaboration with



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## Preface

With the aim of building solidarity and consensus in a diverse and multicultural environment, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Regional Political Feminism and Gender Office and The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship partnered in developing this publication.

The publication seeks to strengthen the feminist movement, build broader and more inclusive communities, and reinforce a transnational intersectional coalition in the Southwest Asia and North Africa (MENA) region.

Amidst great social, political, and economic tensions, activists, scholars, and organizations from 12 countries in the region worked together to analyze and comprehend conflicting emotions such as outrage, despair, confusion, breakdown, hope, and perhaps even feelings of hopelessness in the face of harsh realities that many may be reluctant to confront.

A total of 48 feminists from diverse backgrounds voiced their demands and claims, shared their fears and reflections, and challenged deeply entrenched societal norms and a patriarchal status quo. Their insights and experiences are reflected in this publication.

## 1

## INTRODUCTION

The MENA region is currently facing a host of severe issues: financial insecurity, gender-based and racialized violence, class disparities, hate speech, victim blaming, armed conflicts, homophobia, and transphobia, as well as limited access to sexual and reproductive health services. In addition, socio-economic and political conditions have increasingly deteriorated for all marginalized groups, particularly women, amid ongoing political instability, economic crises, and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it would be incorrect to attribute these challenges solely to the pandemic and recent political upheavals, as they are the result of complex and deeply ingrained systemic issues.

Decades prior to the global pandemic and the Arab Spring, women have been significantly underrepresented in senior positions in both the public and private sectors, and were largely excluded from judicial institutions. This created a reality in which women were relegated to informal networks where they were underpaid, overworked, and subjected to hazardous conditions. Additionally, despite the crucial role that care work plays in society, it is still undervalued and unrecognized due to the societal expectation that it is a woman's "duty" and "responsibility" to provide care to her family.

Despite variations in context across countries in the MENA region, personal status laws remain one of the most visible forms of gender inequality and gender-based violence, as they perpetuate women's subordinate status by regulating critical areas such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Additionally, many countries in the region have laws that prevent women from passing on their citizenship to their children and spouses. Moreover, laws in most of the region declare the husband as the head of the household and the legal guardian of his wife, thereby granting him control over her basic rights, such as her right to financial independence and autonomy.

As for women's sexual and reproductive rights, as well as access to basic health services, these remain limited in the region. Many women resort to clandestine and illegal abortions due to the lack of access to safe and legal options, while access to contraceptives is also restricted in most countries, and early and forced marriages continue to be prevalent. Marital rape is often unacknowledged, and crimes of honor and femicide are frequently excused by

law. Perhaps more importantly, the delivery of essential health services is not uniform, and is often dependent on an individual's wealth, personal connections, or place of residence, resulting in precarious situations for women and marginalized communities in rural areas.

Ongoing socioeconomic and political turmoil is exacerbating inequalities and limiting resources, resulting in a shortage of data collection and research on the status of women and marginalized minorities in the region. Furthermore, the absence of democratic institutions or an independent judiciary, along with restrictive rules on the formation of civil society organizations, have further complicated advocacy movements, lobbying, and mobilization efforts. This is evident in the dwindling civic space in the region, with increasing cases of prosecution and surveillance of journalists and civil society activists.

Despite the risks and limitations, local activists in the MENA region have been leading numerous initiatives, gradually building the multifaceted movements that we have been witnessing for decades. However, as Moghadam (2008) highlights, "the gap between formal equality (as written in-laws) and substantive equality (as enjoyed in practice and expressed in participation and representation) has been large for certain segments of the population, and especially large for women". This raises concerns about whether the progress made through these initiatives, which have led to the passage of laws and amendments over the years, will translate into genuine equal rights or remain mere "ink on paper."

In the process of democratization, most if not all authoritarian regimes in the region adopted common strategies such as the "institutionalization" of gender policy and the introduction of "State Feminism".

However, this co-option of the feminist movement raises questions about how it has affected the context in which women's movements operate, the demands of these movements, and the collective efforts of activists. Has it weakened or strengthened the movement, and has it provided more resources or created limitations? (Zaki, 2015; Geha & Karam, 2021). Moreover, after decades of activism, where do we stand now, and where do we

want to be? What are our plans to get there? These are critical questions that require reflection and action.

These concerns highlight the pressing need for collective movements to confront the structural and deeply entrenched capitalist patriarchy and conservative traditions. After being sidelined for ages, people are finally joining the fight: rain or shine, funded or not.

Despite the presence of international funds that have been shaping the discourse for quite some time, the MENA region was the last to establish its own feminist fund (Abou-Habib, 2021). This raises questions about why it took so long to create a fund that supports local feminist initiatives in the region. Moreover, where do these activists stand in relation to the phenomenon of NGO-ization<sup>1</sup> (Islah, 2004), and are we seeing a shift towards a different approach to empowerment (Islah, 2007)? Could this explain the emergence of indigenous forms of civil society? Additionally, what is the role of marginalized minorities in the feminist movement, and how have alternative media platforms changed our perception of feminism and feminist activism?

This publication seeks to provide clarity amidst the complexities of feminist activism. It examines feminist movements in 12 countries within the region including Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. It presents the claims, demands, tactics, and values of relevant actors, as well as their opinions, reflections, and concerns. Moreover, the publication acknowledges the tensions, challenges, and struggles that have impeded progress over the years.

This publication also covers some emerging trends and major developments in the feminist movements in the MENA region and relates them to the historical contexts in an attempt to start a conversation about the movement and ways to nurture and strengthen it.

Finally, this publication aims to build an inclusive, intersectional, and transnational alliance. In concluding their interventions, the 48 feminists from diverse political, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds shared their aspirations, recommendations, and dreams for a feminist movement that would enable them to realize their visions and create the societies in which they want to thrive, rather than merely survive.

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<sup>1</sup> “NGOization leads to the transformation of a cause for social change into a project with a plan, a timetable, and a limited budget, which is ‘owned’ for reporting and used for accountability vis-à-vis the funders” (Jad 2007, 627-628). Social movements, including women’s movements (Ferguson & Apsani, 2013), have been replaced with institutionalized, development-focused interventions that are ineffective in fostering systemic change. Similarly, the professionalization of these organizations “produce upward rather than downward accountability, exclusion rather than inclusion; and ‘scaling up’ brings with it bureaucratization” (Friedman 1992, 142 as cited in Jad 2007).

## 2

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: FINDINGS BY COUNTRY

To offer insights into the present feminist landscape in the MENA region, this section presents a summary of significant political events that have laid the groundwork for current feminist movements in 12 countries. This literature review only covers major developments, complemented by select perspectives from interviews conducted with feminist activists from the region.

### ALGERIA

For over 132 years, the lives of Algerian women have been affected by entrenched colonial and patriarchal structures. The Family Code, a product of Shari'a customary law and French law, serves as a prime example. It enshrines the concept of a nuclear agnatic family structure that is dominated by patriarchal figures, leaving women subordinate to male guardians within the family and failing to recognize their autonomy as individuals (Moghadam, 2004).

Between the years 1954 and 1962, the war for independence took priority over addressing discrimination and women's rights. It wasn't until 1981 that the first grassroots feminist movement emerged, specifically in opposition to the Family Code. Women from diverse professions, including university professors, schoolteachers, medical doctors, and laborers, joined together to sign petitions and stage protests against the proposed legislation, which ultimately led to its withdrawal by the government due to the mounting pressure. However, a similar code was eventually passed in 1984.

The housing crisis that emerged in the early 1990s posed a significant obstacle to women's emancipation, particularly those who were divorced or single. Housing was scarce, and rent prices were rising despite poor infrastructure, as well as corruption in rental transactions. Algerian society has long been structured around competing networks of power, such as political parties and religious authorities, who show interest in women's rights only when it serves their agendas. This clientelist nature of social relationships means that women were effectively marginalized (Kelly, 2010).

During the Black Decade, from 1992 to 2002, extremist Islamist groups posed a threat to women's safety. As a re-

sult, gender-based violence increased, and the country witnessed approximately 100,000 femicides. In response, many organizations emerged to protect women from all forms of violence, raise awareness, and advocate for equal rights, starting with the abolition of discriminatory Personal Status Laws, also known as the Family Code. These lobbying efforts led to a few amendments to the Family Code in 2005 (Fadaee, 2016) which granted women more power and autonomy within their families. However, the changes were minimal and disappointing, as many judges were hesitant to implement them, and numerous administrative agents refused to abide by the amendments. For example, women were still required to obtain their husband's permission to travel abroad with their children (Kelly, 2010). The Nationality Law was also enacted in 2005, allowing women to transfer their citizenship to their foreign husbands and children.

In 2006, the Algerian government signed the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation granting all participatory parties of the Black Decade impunity. As a result, women who had been subject to rape, abuse, and even murder by extremist groups were denied justice. The feminist movement shifted its focus towards seeking justice for the victims, who were predominantly women, as well as for all citizens who suffered during that period.

Despite the progress made by the feminist movement, there were still setbacks. The quota law introduced in 2012, which required the parliament to include 30% women, did not resolve the underrepresentation of women in politics. Women were at an initial disadvantage compared to men, as they had not received political training or support networks to gain experience and grow within the political sphere. Moreover, although Algeria ratified the Penal Code in 2015 to protect women from all forms of violence, the Family Code persisted, and the concept of a "legal male guardian" in the family continued to undermine the importance of the 2016 amendment encouraging women's participation in the workforce.

On the 22nd of February 2019, widespread demonstrations sparked demanding the fall of the authoritarian regime and the Islamist Fundamentalist groups. This "Hirak" of 2019 was a pivotal point in the emancipation of women

in civil society organizations and the growth of the feminist movement in Algeria. Women organized weekly feminist square mass protests and raised their claims on a bigger scale, thus leading to constitutional and legal reforms that allowed for greater representation in political and judicial spheres.

Although the Hirk presented Algerian feminists with an opportunity to implement change, it posed new challenges (Lassel, 2020). Despite successfully overthrowing the president and drafting a new constitution in 2020, repression, the discriminatory Family Code, and numerous societal, political, legislative, and financial limitations persisted, and the movement struggled to maintain a unified front (El Kadi, 2020).

The Hirk paved the way for a new form of feminist activism, which moved beyond mass protests and demonstrations and embraced the use of digital platforms such as hotlines, social media, podcasts, and online debates. By utilizing technology, the movement was able to reach a wider audience beyond the reach of government control and so-called “conventional” media. This allowed for regional and international networking, as well as communication with the diaspora, which has been critical to the movement’s growth despite propaganda and misinformation.

## LIBYA

The 1951 constitution post-independence granted Libyan women civil and political rights. However, after Muammar Gaddafi’s coup and under his authoritarian regime (1969-2011), numerous discriminatory laws were introduced relating to family, education, and labor. Women had little to no autonomy or financial security as men were typically the breadwinners, resulting in women being dependent on male guardians in different aspects of life (Fadaee, 2016). This division of labor remains dominant in most countries in the region to this day.

Additionally, women-led organizations and feminist movements were severely limited due to the lack of awareness among many Libyans about their limited rights. Gaddafi’s political philosophy defined women’s rights according to the “natural abilities of women” under a unique political system called “the Jamahiriya,” also known as the “State of the Masses.” While some laws in the constitution developed during Gaddafi’s rule aimed to promote liberty and equality between men and women, such as Basic Law 20 of 1991, many articles in this law were not enforced, particularly those that enhanced freedom of expression, thought, and creativity (Gebriel, 2015).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the United States and United Nations imposed sanctions on the Libyan government in response to its involvement in a series of “terrorist” bombings. This state of isolation worsened the living conditions of women and marginalized minorities. It wasn’t until 1999 that the Libyan government began restructuring its relations with the international community, and in 2003, the

regime announced that it would abandon its nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons program, leading to the lifting of the remaining sanctions in 2004. Since then, the government has worked on modernizing and upgrading its national structure on all fronts, including political, economic, and social levels. However, Gaddafi initiatives to reduce discrimination and promote equality had little practical impact despite their challenging of the conservative Libyan society. Despite some diplomatic achievements, Libya still lagged behind in implementing much-needed political and economic reforms on the domestic front (Kelly, 2010).

The creation of a structured, independent feminist movement was hindered by the reality that under law No. 71 of 1972, membership in any group or organization not authorized by the state was punishable by death. As a result, most of the “independent organizations” that emerged and the initiatives that were arranged by different actors were closely linked to the government. This situation left women at a disadvantage due to cultural traditions as well as remaining discriminatory laws and practices.

Despite being at the frontlines of most of the revolts, particularly during the uprising of February 2011, women’s efforts were often overlooked. As a matter of fact, women were sidelined once again during the democratic transitional process toward the new “reconstructed” Libya which remained to be dominated by patriarchal and traditional values (Johansson-Nogués, 2013; Moghadam V. M., 2014).

Violence and conflict in post-2011 Libya worsened after the 2014 civil war, which led to growing limitations being introduced to the organizations that emerged during the transitional process and the actors involved. The situation became more alarming when the Libyan human rights lawyer Salwa Boughaighis was assassinated by a group of unidentified men in her home in Benghazi on 26 June 2014. Boughaighis was a role model to many Libyan women as she played an active role in the 2011 uprising. Her death was a major political incident and posed significant complications for women’s security.

During this period, Libya saw a decrease in women’s representation in parliament. The country also witnessed the rise of Islamist extremism and violence, with no accountability for perpetrators. Women faced increased restrictions, often requiring a male guardian to access public spaces. Forced marriages became prevalent, especially in a context where there was little to no safety for young girls, women, and minorities. Migrant workers were also at risk of rape, sexual exploitation, and forced prostitution. The civil war took a toll on families, leaving many women forced to join the workforce despite the sexual and/or verbal harassment they would invariably face.

Despite numerous challenges and risks, many feminist projects and initiatives emerged starting in 2018, including “The Libyan National Conference”, “Women’s Initiative for



Gender Justice”, and “Women, Peace, and Security” in 2019. Libyan feminists began using new alternative media platforms as a means of connecting and organizing. Advanced technologies and social media have made the movement more effective, although activists continue to face significant levels of hate and conspiracies.

## EGYPT

In so-called Third World countries, emerging trends are generally deeply linked to anticolonial and national movements, given that the goals and characteristics of women’s movements are largely shaped by their specific socio-cultural contexts.

During the reign of Mohammed Ali (1805-1848), Egypt was at the forefront of attempting to introduce a systematic plan for industrialization and social restructuring among others in the region. Modern education was introduced to enhance the skills of the labor force, which brought the issue of girls’ education into the spotlight. While upper-class girls had always been educated at home, there was a debate, originally initiated by male reformers, on whether changes in women’s roles were essential for systematic plans and expected development. Two opposing views emerged.

On one hand, conservatives, including religious leaders and western-educated secular nationalists argued that women were naturally caregivers. They believed that women are the mothers of future generations, and that any change in their education was a colonial strategy to alter and destroy Egyptian identity and culture. On the other hand, advocates of reform who were both religious and secular nationalist argued that education and the improvement of women’s intellectual abilities were essential in women’s emancipation and the nation’s progress.

This debate was pivotal in the history of the feminist movement in Egypt. This is because feminism, like other social movements, arises from socio-economic changes that affect women and marginalized minorities (Hoodfar, 1992).

Gabriel Baer (1969), writing about nineteenth-century Egypt, claimed that, “Evidently, the traditional structure of the family and the status of women did not undergo any change at all”. However, from a more nuanced perspective, Judith Tucker (1979) argued that under British colonial rule, with the high rate of population growth, rise of state capitalism, and increased production of cotton as a cash crop, social structures began to shift which in turn led to changes in the status of women. Tucker notes that all of these factors were linked to a woman’s social class, with lower-class women losing both their status and their security in family disputes such as in matters of inheritance. State capitalism also affected middle-class women by restricting them to household management, leading to their seclusion from the early stages of the feminist movement. This contributed to the movement’s class divisions, with a high-class minority dominating its leadership (Cole, 1981).

Hence, the early feminist movement in Egypt was predominantly led by women from the urban upper class. Many of the most visible feminists were the wives of prominent politicians, and their primary concerns centered around personal freedoms and nationalist causes which were also shared by their male counterparts. However, efforts to help less privileged women were often considered charitable work rather than an attempt to bring about systemic change (Graham-Brown, 1981).

Furthermore, early feminist writers such as Malak Hifni Nassif (1886-1918) argued that the influx of European ideas, people, and technologies in the early twentieth century had a significant impact on the local embryonic feminist movement in Egypt (Yousef, 2011). Nonetheless, as Margot Badran (1995) noted, “Egyptian feminism was not a subtext of colonialism or ‘Western discourse,’ but an independent discourse that simultaneously engaged indigenous patriarchy and patriarchal colonial domination.” This explains the rise of an independent strand of feminist thought despite the numerous acts of aggression and human rights violations that occurred over the years.

Many protests were led by students, civil servants, associations, minorities, and syndicates to promote change. Among their academic accomplishments, they conducted continuous research and published data on sexual assault and human rights violations since the 1990s, analyzed the political landscape from a gender-sensitive lens, and provided evidence-based solutions for long-term policy shifts. These organizations, alongside lawyers and activists, addressed discriminatory personal-status laws and, after 15 years of lobbying, amendments were passed in 2000 that were favorable to women. They also provided emotional support to victims of torture by state actors, and offered medical, psychological, and legal aid to survivors of rape and all forms of gender-based violence. Additionally, the nationality law was amended in 2004, allowing Egyptian women to transfer their citizenship to their children and foreign husbands, with the exception of Palestinian husbands.

Before the amendment of Article 76 of the constitution in 2005, Egyptian citizens were limited to voting for or against a single nominee in a referendum. The amendment introduced the option of alternative candidates, which represented a step forward for democratic competition in Egypt. However, this improvement was accompanied by further adjustments that hindered the ability of political parties to challenge the ruling party’s hegemony. As a result, any improvement or revision, whether related to the electoral framework or not, could be nullified by the government’s authoritarian tactics. Protests erupted in response to the amendment (Kelly, 2010).

Egyptian women played a prominent role in organizing and leading protests, yet they faced violent attacks and the riot police did little to protect them. The government used sexual harassment and other forms of violence as tactics to

punish and intimidate women activists and deter their participation in ongoing protests (Arenfeldt, 2012).

As a response to the pervasive sexual harassment and violence against women, organizations and groups such as HarassMap, Nazra, and El Nadim Center emerged. These initiatives were crucial to the development of the feminist movement before the Arab Spring protests that began in January 2011 (Rizzo & Meyer, 2012).

In 2008, a law was passed to ban female genital mutilation, and during the same period, women started taking on more roles in the public sphere. As a result, a gender-based quota system was adopted for the lower house of parliament in 2009 to increase women's participation in the legislature, with its implementation scheduled in 2010 (Moghadam, 2014).

In 2010, a young man named Khaled Said was dragged out of a café and beaten to death by police officers in Alexandria. The incident sparked outrage and prompted Wael Ghoneim, an Egyptian Google executive living in Dubai, to create a Facebook group called "We Are All Khaled Said." Within days, the group gained a large following and Ghoneim became a leading and prominent youth activist during the uprising. Other online initiatives and public forums were also created in response to Said's death, and played a significant role in the series of protests that erupted. Ghoneim's Facebook page was where the announcement for the 25th of January protests – on National Police Day – was first posted (Halverson et al., 2013).

Laborers, youth activists, feminists, and a diverse range of protesters mobilized to demand political change in Egypt after decades of corruption, police brutality, media censorship, unemployment, inflation, and a host of other issues. They employed various forms of protest, such as occupying downtown Cairo's Tahrir Square, labor strikes, acts of civil disobedience, and clashes with armed forces. They demanded the fall of Hosni Mubarak's regime, which has been in power since 1981. On the 11th of February 2011, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) dissolved the Egyptian parliament and suspended the constitution along with the nation's emergency laws. Mubarak was sentenced to life in prison in June 2012 following the high death toll of protesters. However, he was released in August 2013 under the military government that took power after a coup (Arafat, 2011).

Women played a crucial role in the protests, advocating for change and hoping that the fall of the regime would bring greater attention to issues of gender justice that had taken backseat for so long in Egypt. However, during the transitional period led by the SCAF, it became evident that women's issues had been neglected. The consequences of Muhammad Morsi's relatively short term in the presidency were also precarious and risky for women's safety and basic rights, with rumors circulating government-orchestrated sexual violence against women protesters by paid "thugs." As a result, the women continued to organize

and lead protests against the SCAF and Morsi's government (Al-Natour, 2014).

After the series of protests against the Mubarak and Morsi regimes, numerous groups, movements, and organizations emerged to challenge the status quo and raise awareness about issues such as police brutality, state violence, sexual harassment, and human rights violations, as well as the tactics and tools employed by patriarchal and authoritarian governments (Naber & El-Hameed, 2016).

In addition, feminist organizations and groups currently operating such as Basma, OpAntish, Tahrir Bodyguard, and Didd al-Taharrush, have benefited from modern technologies and social media platforms. This has allowed them to have a greater reach, develop new mobilization strategies to influence policy-making, and gain access to more information. Since 2011, feminist activists have been providing support, safe spaces, and platforms where survivors of violence can share their stories and demand accountability.

The Arab Spring paved the way for new waves of feminist movements with "hands-on" practical and immediate approaches that extend beyond legal reforms and academic research. These movements utilized a variety of tactics such as social media campaigns and podcasts, with the aim of spreading awareness and addressing taboo subjects. Despite progress made, these new groups were met with heightened levels of oppression, and were under constant fear of arrest. This situation has limited their ability to operate freely under the rule of President Abd Al-Fattah Al-Sisi, who succeeded Mohamed Morsi.

Under Sisi's regime, the feminist movements were targeted with propaganda that depicted them as tools of Western imperialism and "anti-culture", and as a threat to the stability of the country since they are funded by foreign powers with hidden agendas. Egyptian authorities went further in arresting members and directors of NGOs, enacted laws to restrict their work, their funding, and their access to public space. Moreover, the regime's crackdown on dissenting voices extended to the LGBTQ+ community with the arrest of many gay men and trans women, while attacks on feminist organizations became rampant during this period as well (Zakarria, 2019).

Furthermore, it should be noted that, even before the Arab Spring, several established and internationally recognized organizations in Egypt were already gathering and analyze data, and conducting studies related to human rights. However, the emergence of new technologies enabled these organizations to publish their research findings online, thus making them more accessible and quantifying the extent of these violations.

Before the Arab Spring, previous generations of feminists believed that only the "educated elite" could engage in activism. However, following the uprising in 2011, new feminist groups emerged and resisted state-backed propaganda through solidarity, collective movements, and social

awareness campaigns aimed at empowering all women and marginalized groups to demand their rights. These groups also highlighted that harassment is deeply rooted in a patriarchal system that promotes normative forms of masculinity, and they demonstrated how this can be addressed through defense methods, legal procedures, and through awareness-raising efforts (Langohr, 2015). The new movement feminist movement is characterized by a more informed, inclusive, and interconnected use of different platforms, and a “grassroots” approach to addressing violations (Skalli, 2014).

## SUDAN

In Sudan, women were kept on the sidelines and faced exclusion, due to continuous conflicts, economic crises, political upheaval, post-colonial struggles, multi-ethnic conflicts, sectarian strife, forced neo-liberal policies, security issues, and lack of safe spaces (Kelly, 2010).

As a result, women’s rights were not the primary focus of activists for an alarmingly long period of time. The initial phase of women’s activism, referred to as the consolidation and establishment period, took place between 1947 and 1949. This demonstrates the deep-seated connection between Sudanese feminism and the nationalist movement for independence, with women’s activism facing challenges not only from colonial forces but also from nationalist groups (Ahmed, 2014).

During the colonial period in Sudan, British colonialism relied on a system of “native administration”, which introduced more struggles for Sudanese women. This system involved empowering traditional leaders, who were mostly heterosexual educated men, as mediators with the colonized. As a result, power has always been concentrated in the hands of the dominant social and racial group in Sudan. Colonial administrators reinforced Shari’a Law in marriage and family affairs, and education for young girls was overlooked in the agreement between colonial rulers and their allies in the religious establishment (Fadaee, 2016).

The anti-colonial and nationalist movements of the 1950s and 1960s sparked significant social and political changes, and were also instrumental in the feminist movements that began with the formation of the Sudanese Women’s Union (SWU). These organizations worked on a range of initiatives including women’s suffrage, equal pay, legal reform, advocacy for peace, and economic empowerment, as well as educating women on their democratic rights and their role in the public sector and political arena. Due to the lack of safe spaces for women, these activities were often conducted through church networks where women could gather without fear.

Early feminist movements in Sudan were concerned with addressing the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM) which was a widespread practice in the region. However, some of these movements had a western perspective, and could be seen as attempting to impose Western, colonial

values and ideas on African societies. In response, African women came together to take control of the narrative and address the issue in a way that was more in line with their own experiences and perspectives. One significant development in this regard was the establishment of the Babiker Badri Scientific Association for Women’s Studies in 1979 which aimed to educate and spread awareness about FGM and other issues affecting African societies, and to amplify the voices of oppressed peoples in Africa (Gruenbaum, 2005).

After the 1989 military coup led by Omar Al-Bashir, which overthrew the democratically elected government of PM Sadiq Al-Mahdi, Sudan faced six years of civil war in the South, which had a population practicing animism or Christianity, while the North had a Muslim majority. The Southern policy during colonialism was to leave the South to the missionaries with the aim of creating an “East African belt,” which widened the gap between North and South Sudan and delayed the development of national consciousness. In a context of rebellion, war, and the suspension of political activity, many feminist organizations emerged with a shared agenda of revolution, negotiations, inclusion in the decision-making processes, and peace (Sherwood, 2012).

The military coup and rebellion in the South concentrated most, if not all, of the power in the hands of the male-dominated military, while feminist movements remained mostly undocumented or did not receive enough attention or recognition. These movements were also mainly led by educated women in Khartoum, which excluded uneducated women and those living in rural areas.

The period following the Arab Spring was marked by the rise of youth activism in Sudan. University students and recent graduates began using social media as a means of mobilizing and organizing protests. Despite limited internet access, different groups with varying religious, ethnic, and ideological backgrounds found common ground on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Social media also served as a means of documenting events through photos, videos, and live tweeting, as traditional media often avoided covering such events. Women formed all-female groups and used social media campaigns and alternative news channels to push for change. The youth’s presence on social media helped maintain momentum during protests despite persecution and police and military crackdowns. Notably, young Sudanese activists harnessed the power of Sudanese women and their innovative ideas for change, and connected with the diaspora through tools like Skype, Facebook, YouTube, and online forums like Sudanese Online (El Kadi, 2020; Kadoda, 2015).

The role of women in exile was crucial in the movement. Numerous women’s organizations, including those based in Cairo and Kenya, as well as organizations formed by the Sudanese diaspora, had affiliations with various “New Sudan” movements. Together, they adopted a decentralized transnational approach to protest against the govern-

ment's gender-related policies and to address the everyday challenges faced by all women, particularly refugees (Ali, 2015).

The new emerging transnational feminist movements are working towards a vision of a just and equitable society, challenging the concentration of power in Sudan. They aim to create a "New Sudan" that transforms the old gendered stereotypical socioeconomic and political structures, as well as the neopatriarchal institutions of the so-called "Old Sudan". This "New Sudan" movement rejects the internal colonialism that persisted in post-colonial Sudan, calling for a free and democratic society with economic and social justice.

## TUNISIA

Tunisian society, like most of the societies in the region, has long been characterized by patriarchal gender roles that are sanctified in religious texts and beliefs.

Unlike other countries in the region, feminism emerged in Tunisia during the 1920s and 1930s. However, the movement required shaping and substantial support since women were marginalized and relegated to the "private" sphere whereas men occupied the public sphere. Women's economic activity was limited to the household, the wearing of the veil was compulsory, arranged marriages were common, and women were expected to occupy subservient positions within their families (Arfaoui, 2007).

The feminist movement in Tunisia was initially dominated by the privileged minority who had access to education since only one out of ten women were literate at the time. (Kelly, 2010).

As the struggle for independence intensified, women's voices became louder, and they began to work with nationalist groups to gain independence. This helped to integrate women into the public sphere and shift them from being seen as second-class citizens to active participants in civil society. As a result, the first women's organization, The Tunisian Women's Islamic Union, was formed in 1936.

As Tunisia approached independence in 1954, the feminist movement continued to progress and modernize its ideas despite opposition from French authorities that viewed any organized movement as a threat. After gaining independence in 1956, Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba established the foundations of "state feminism" by promulgating personal status laws and amending them numerous times later, abolishing polygamy and introducing initiatives such as granting women the right to vote in 1957 and the right to run for office starting in 1959. State feminism became well-established, leading to a drastic decrease in feminist organizations under Bourguiba's rule. However, the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) marked the emergence of a more autonomous feminist movement in Tunisia, with the rise of major

feminist organizations (Arenfeldt, 2012). Since then, the principle of equality has been incorporated into legal texts such as the electoral code, the labor code, and the code of nationality.

Moreover, it was not until Tunisia gained its independence in 1956 that a comprehensive educational system was established. This led to an increase in the literacy rate, and made education a significant factor in driving social change post-independence which, in turn, made the feminist movement more accessible to "less privileged women" i.e. those previously marginalized due to their socioeconomic status (Kelly, 2010).

On the 17th of December 2010, a street vendor named Mohammad Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest after the police confiscated his vegetable cart in Sidi Bouzid. His self-immolation sparked protests in rural areas, addressing issues such as police brutality, corruption, social marginalization, unemployment, and regional disparities under the authoritarian rule of former President Zein El Abidine Ben Ali (Fadaee, 2016). During Ben Ali's regime, both public "mass culture" and private media outlets were aligned with the government and used as tools for propaganda and state hegemony. Censorship (including self-censorship), repressive policies, and police brutality also persisted, affecting all forms of activism and mobilization (Chomiak, 2012). Consequently, in the years leading up to the revolution, criticism became more controversial, vocal, direct and adventurous, especially on social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, as well as through alternative music, hip hop, and rap videos and recordings that circulated online (Fadaee, 2016).

Bouazizi's tragedy was one of the catalysts of the Arab Uprisings (Al-Sumait, 2014) which included the "Jasmine Revolution" in Tunisia. The revolution in Tunisia had a positive impact on the feminist movement in the country, despite facing repression. Women participated in the protests against unemployment, inflation, corruption, and lack of political freedoms and freedom of speech, and also demanded legislative elections.

After the Arab Spring, feminist organizations began targeting younger generations and encouraging their participation in addressing gender-related issues. This new wave of feminism differed from previous movements in four key ways: It sought to minimize or abolish state feminism, incorporated decolonization, embraced intersectionality, and had a nuanced understanding of gender. This new political generation of the revolution (PGR) championed a decolonized and intersectional style of feminism that recognized the spectrum of gender and emphasizes bottom-up activism (Johansson-Nogués, 2013).

The majority of these organizations operated independently and focused on increasing women's presence in both public and political spheres by implementing an inclusive gender approach in public policies. They also worked to address all forms of gender-based discrimina-

tion, promote an egalitarian culture, enhance women's leadership skills, and advocate for the integration of gender into public policy.

Social media played a sizable role in the development of PGR-feminism, as seen in the #EnaZeda movement against sexual harassment and assault which emerged as an adaptation of the #MeToo movement in October 2019. PGR-feminist organizations provided safe digital spaces where women could share their posted testimonies publicly or anonymously, in order to support survivors and break the silence. In less than two months, more than 500 stories of sexual abuse were posted, highlighting urgent need for action.

In 2021, Tunisia was confronted with several political and socio-economic crises, including the worst economic crisis since its independence in 1956, according to the IMF. These crises were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, organizations and activists organized many demonstrations across the country, which were met with extreme police brutality and violence. The youth, particularly those from marginalized neighborhoods, who were participating and leading these demonstrations, were subject to the worst forms of oppression. This illustrates that, despite the democratic achievements made during the Jasmine Revolution, repressive and restrictive measures against civil society and its actors remain pervasive in post-Ben Ali Tunisia. Fundamental democratic values such as individual freedoms, civil liberties, and the right to assemble are yet to be realized. Such realities continue to impede progress within the different waves of feminist movements, and numerous initiatives to achieve equality remain ineffective in such circumstances (Daher, 2021).

## MOROCCO

The first wave of feminism in Morocco began during the colonial period, when nationalist political parties began to show interest in women's issues, despite their primary focus being the country's independence. The "Sisters of Purity Association" was the first feminist organization in Morocco, and they mainly addressed illiteracy among women. They were also the first to publicly issue a set of demands which included the abolition of polygamy, and they advocated for full and equal political rights and increased visibility of women in the public sphere.

During the colonial period in Morocco, feminist movements had little impact and were largely unrecognized and undocumented, which kept them on the margins. Women were also underrepresented during this period and excluded from the independence manifesto, despite their crucial contributions to the fight for independence such as faking pregnancies to transport weapons (Kelly, 2010).

Discrimination against women persisted in Morocco post-independence as patriarchy was reinstated. Many scholarship programs for female students were terminated, and women's roles were limited to domestic responsi-

bilities and care work. Gender-based violence also increased. Nevertheless, there were major accomplishments made during that period, such as the reform of the "Moudawana" which began in 1993 despite the opposition of the political elites in the Islamist party. The "Moudawana" is the personal status code that had been enacted in 1957, and its reform touched an "untouchable" symbol of the Muslim identity after years of regulating all matters related to family life in conformity with Shari'a Law. This effort took 11 years, and two kings, until a reformed Moudawana was finalized and announced in Parliament in October 2003. Its development followed the terrorist attacks in Casablanca in May 2003 which fueled a common anti-fundamentalist sentiment. Both this reform and a prevalent anti-conservatism attitude paved the way for subsequent waves of feminism with different and progressive ideologies (Fadaee, 2016).

In chorus with the political upheaval in Tunisia in late 2010, a "feminist spring" advocating for equitable democratic reforms started in Morocco. However, this movement was met with opposition from the newly-elected Islamist party, which appointed only one woman to the newly formed parliament and opposed several reforms, including the CEDAW. Since its inception, the feminist movement in Morocco has been grappling with an Islamist countermovement. This Islamist feminist countermovement believed that the international vision of gender equality is to be rejected, as it contradicts the Islamic principles of conduct and gender roles (Mir-Hosseini, 2006).

Before the uprisings, each feminist organization was linked to a political party, be it democratic, progressive, or socialist, which provided funding and support to launch bigger projects. However, the scope of issues they tackled was limited and their impact was minimal.

In contrast, feminist organizations that emerged after the Arab Spring focused on issues such as sexual harassment, body shaming, rape culture, and gender and sexuality advocacy (such as L'Union Féministe Libre, 2016). These new organizations were bolder and more inclusive, and addressed not only misogyny but homophobia and transphobia. They also challenged existing laws such as attempting to abolish Article 489 of the Penal Code that criminalizes "lewd or unnatural" sexual acts with an individual of the same sex, and Article 490 that criminalizes extramarital sexual relations. Importantly, these organizations used alternative media platforms to reach a wider audience, especially younger generations, leading to and the rise of transnational feminism in the region (Pittman, 2009).

As of 2021, Morocco is no longer governed by an Islamist political party. This helps to explain why the mere creation of feminist organizations, whether backed by a political party with little to no impact or daring, inclusive, and transnational, was in itself an achievement prior to that year.



## SYRIA

Women in Syria have been involved in politics since the country's struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire. However, the oppressive political climate hindered their participation and restricted their effectiveness. In 1949, women were granted the right to vote, which increased their involvement in politics. They were appointed as government spokespersons, made up around 12% of the parliament, and participated in state-building, development, and modernization projects. Nevertheless, the women's movement was highly centralized, and political rights were granted to women in exchange for their political obedience under the umbrella of "state feminism." This approach represented an authoritarian bargain (Kelly, 2010).

After seizing power through a coup in 1963, the Ba'ath regime, a nationalist group, enforced a state of emergency that suspended many legal provisions and protections, including freedoms of expression and association. Consequently, any political opposition was immediately suppressed, and the levels of discrimination and oppression increased. It became illegal to establish any organization without government authorization, with the exception of the General Union of Syrian Women, a government auxiliary, and any program sponsored by the First Lady. This resulted in several feminist organizations operating without a license, despite the significant risks of government retaliation and a host of possible repercussions (Arenfeldt, 2012).

Beyond "state feminism" initiatives, women's participation in other aspects of life was limited to the private sphere, and discriminatory laws and practices persisted. Among these were personal status laws that impeded women's rights in marriage, divorce, and child custody, as well as the lack of legal protection for women who experienced domestic abuse and gender-based violence in all its forms. Additionally, the nationality law still prohibits women from passing on their citizenship to their children. There is also a gender-based disparity in the evidence required to prove adultery, and women are subject to higher sentences under the penal code.

During the Arab Uprisings, gender inequalities and gender-based violence were intensified by the conflict, resulting in women experiencing multilayered violence that caused both short-term and long-term psychological and physical harm. Amidst the chaos, women were subject to all forms of violence by their families and intimate partners. They were also exposed to health risks and the danger of being kidnapped or abused by armed groups and militias and thus, in order to protect their "honor," women were kept at home and denied access to schools, universities, and public spaces. Additionally, marital rape remains excluded as a punishable offense under the legal definition of rape in Syria, as is the case in other countries in the region. In response to these realities, approximately 35 women's organizations emerged to develop income-generating

activities for women, offer psychological support for survivors, and engage in lobbying and grassroots peace work in conflict zones (Fadaee, 2016).

Despite efforts to reform discriminatory legislation and promulgate new laws, little has been achieved in practice in the years that followed. Marginalized minorities and women still face limited access to justice. Honor killings and human trafficking continue to occur. The personal status and family issues of religious communities are governed by their mostly discriminatory sectarian laws. Furthermore, children with a Syrian mother and a foreign father are still deprived of basic rights of a Syrian citizen.

Women's organizations that emerged in Syria after the series of revolts questioned and criticized the previous movements. They argued that the older organizations focused primarily on addressing day-to-day issues and emergencies and providing basic needs, as well as being bogged down by excessive administrative duties, rather than focusing on the long-term sustainability and development of a coherent and effective feminist movement. The new movement addressed the issues that had limited the work of the older generations, such as fragmentation, a lack of funds, and sustainability (Al Taweel, 2020). They also created a more inclusive movement that was not solely in the hands of elites and self-proclaimed "experienced" feminists.

Additionally, the new generation of feminists is more interested in addressing specific issues rather than highlighting diverse yet generalized causes. Unlike their predecessors, who focused primarily on relief projects and humanitarian work, the new generation is focusing on female sexuality, representation, and participation in both the public and private spheres.

Unfortunately, despite their determination, many of the new generation of feminists were - and still are - subject to violence, which has made it difficult for them to be active. During this period, female activists were forced to either flee the country or cease operating altogether. Many of them relocated abroad while still operating small offices locally, often in difficult circumstances and closed and monitored spaces (Asad, 2020).

The government often imposes international travel restrictions on political and human rights activists to suppress their voices. Nonetheless, social media and alternative media platforms have emerged as valuable tools for digital activism, advocacy, and mobilization (Esposito, 2021).

## LEBANON

Historical, geographic, demographic, and political factors, including sectarianism, the traditional party structure, and cultural norms, have had a significant impact on the status of women in Lebanon.

The roots of the Lebanese feminist movement can be traced back to the late 19th century when many influential

women migrated with their families to Egypt for various reasons, including political and economic ones. It was in Egypt, where a community of writers, journalists, scholars, and activists flourished, that these women launched magazines focused on women's issues and their demands for equal rights, freedom, and education (El-Hage, 2015).

During the early 20th century, there was a rise in the number of women who became philanthropists, writers, educators, political activists, and owners of feminist publications. Women-led organizations during this era provided access to education, health services, and various training programs for women, while also working with male counterparts to gain independence from the Ottoman Empire. These collective efforts led to demands for greater civil and political rights for women, which were included in the 1926 Lebanese constitution through an agreement between the French mandate authorities and the Lebanese government. However, women were still not given the right to vote under the election law, leading to further protests by activists. Despite this, the campaign for women's suffrage lost momentum among the public as the fight for independence from the French mandate took center stage (Daou, 2015).

Moreover, since Lebanon gained independence from France in 1943, the country's façade democracy and its sectarian laws hindered the feminist movement's progress until 1956 when women gained the right to vote and run for elections. However, it took over 30 years for women to be represented in parliament, with the exception of one woman in 1963.

Furthermore, the outbreak of the civil war in 1975 diverted the feminist movement's attention towards social, humanitarian, and relief services. Although the war ended in 1989 with a peace agreement, Syria maintained a military presence that influenced policies and domestic politics until its troops' withdrawal in 2005. In this context, the feminist movement was revived, and newly created women's networks began addressing discriminatory laws in an unprecedented manner.

Additionally, other factors, such as the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005, the anti-Syria protest movements, and the 2006 war, have hindered the progress of the movement. Women's rights became a secondary priority compared to immediate crises, including humanitarian, economic, and political issues, despite the pivotal role of women in ongoing protests.

After the 2006 war and the defeat of Israel by the armed forces of Hezbollah, the aforementioned armed groups became a stronger and more consolidated force locally. This new reality, coupled with the critical situation in Iraq following more than two years of US invasion, highlighted how forms of structural violence, such as classicism, sectarianism, militarism, and racism, can impact family, gender, sexualities, and women's status. Consequently, numerous organizations emerged to argue that the Israeli invasion

and its repercussions on homes, communities, and the country's infrastructure, as well as the mass murder and numerous human rights violations, are all a feminist and queer cause. The invasion consolidated the heteronormative and patriarchal structures, as well as the crucial role of sectarianism, patriotism, and nationalism in shaping the existing discriminatory policies and practices. For instance, sexual violence was frequently used as "a symbolic process enacted by the enemy on women," going beyond harassing them to shaming and dishonoring their male relatives, families, and societies as a whole (Holt, 2013).

This invasion serves as an example of the imperial impulse, a tendency to dominate others that reinforces the global status quo, particularly in the MENA region. This pervasive imperialism has also strengthened uneven power dynamics based on a binary explanation of gender and predetermined roles that conform to an "authentically Lebanese" representation of men and women (El-Hage, 2015).

As a result of this constant turmoil and upheaval, a series of concurrent protests emerged. An excellent example of this is the 2015 cycle of protests that shook the streets of Beirut, with grassroots movements and collectives such as the "Feminist Bloc" emerging. These movements were careful not to repeat the mistakes of their predecessors, avoiding a single-issue approach and showing solidarity with migrant workers and other minorities. They also made intersectional declarations on issues such as racism, classism, sectarianism, homophobia, and transphobia that were still prevalent in Lebanese society and rooted in the constitution (Salameh, 2014).

Additionally, the loyalty of older generations to the government was highly questionable, decreasing their credibility among emerging movements. The demonstrations that began in October 2019 (Abi Yaghi, 2020), led and organized by Lebanese women, emerging organizations, and marginalized communities, demonstrated the firm stance of the new generation against the state for what it has done and continues to do to women and segregated minorities. Women took the lead in the October protests that continued during the multidimensional crisis that peaked post-lockdowns, and most importantly, after the devastating explosion that occurred on August 4th, 2020 (Haidar, 2022).

Some literature suggests that women's organizations in Lebanon have struggled to align their discourse with the values they defend, as their discourse continues to be structured around a sectarian system. Following a trend seen in many other countries in the region, these organizations have become institutionalized, a process known as "NGO-ization" (Gianni, 2021). This has affected not only their structure but also the content of their discourse, which has become more global and aligned with the priorities of international organizations and donors. As a result, these organizations have become increasingly dependent on external funding to shape their priorities and set their agendas (Mitri, 2015).

The political landscape in Lebanon is also a significant challenge for feminist organizations (Al Hindy, 2018). The effectiveness of these movements is not solely dependent on the use of advocacy tools and techniques, public awareness campaigns, or the creation of safe spaces for civil society to flourish. Instead, political realities in Lebanon dictate that the demands and policies put forward by these organizations must not pose a threat to major political interests, whether on a local or regional level, or to religious institutions, given the country's power dynamics that are shaped by sectarian, religious, and regional contexts. Therefore, feminist organizations in Lebanon face significant difficulties in breaking free from the hegemonic structures that have traditionally defined the country's political and social landscape.

To this day, institutionalized religion continues to reinforce a socio-political imbalance that borders on de facto gender segregation and contravenes the objectives of the CEDAW, which Lebanon ratified in 1996. For instance, sectarianism restricts women's citizenship, personal status laws undermine women's rights as citizens and control even the smallest details of their family lives, and articles related to rape in the Penal Code exempt rapists from penalty if they simply declare their intention to marry the victim. Marital rape is also completely absent from Articles 503 and 504 of the penal code, which defines the crime of rape as "the coercion by violence, threats, deception or abuse of a mental or physical impairment, of any person other than one's spouse into sexual intercourse"(El-Hage, 2015).

## PALESTINE

Palestinian women have a long history of social activism dating back to the early 20th century (1921-1939). However, the focus of the movement at the time was on addressing national struggles rather than gender equality in political, social, and economic contexts. During this period, the country was facing colonial aggressions, brutal attacks, battles, wars, and massive revolts, which led organizations to prioritize humanitarian aid, education, and community welfare (Kelly, 2010).

The nature of the movement shifted in the late 1970s when politically-oriented young women began actively resisting the Israeli occupation. They formed committees with members from diverse backgrounds and established alliances with international feminist organizations. Palestinian women played a crucial role in the first "Intifada" in 1987 against the occupier, 39 years after the "Nakbah" and 20 years after the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. During this time, most of the active organizations were led by women, which elevated their societal status even further. The women's movements became more politicized, and began pushing against discriminatory laws and societal norms, leading to the rise of new women's empowerment strategies. After the beginning of peace negotiations in 1991, which led to the Oslo Accord in 1993, organizations shifted from being charitable and serving as caregivers to advocating for a future Palestinian

community that mainstreams gender in all aspects of life and prioritizes human rights. Palestinian women developed a politically aware movement that aimed to address the discriminatory aspects of both law and society (Arenfeldt, 2012).

The establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994 marked a critical moment for the Palestinian people living in the occupied territories of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. While there was a surge in lobbying for equal rights and public demonstrations against discriminatory legislation and regulations, political unrest put the movement on hold. The movement faced significant challenges, both from within the Palestinian community (including traditions, religion, and culture) and those imposed by the occupation. These challenges created limitations and influenced how authorities conduct the daily affairs that affect Palestinians' lives and security. Some of the restrictions included personal status laws that were restrictive, domestic abuse, gender-based violence, and lack of employment opportunities for women. Women's financial dependency increased, and their autonomy decreased, making them more vulnerable to poverty than men. In addition, the occupation imposed numerous checkpoints and roadblocks that restricted freedom of movement, and a half-completed separation wall worsened the social and economic conditions of women by separating them from their families, farmlands, water resources, schools, hospitals, and other essential services.

The victory of the Islamist group Hamas over the Palestinian Authorities and its president Mahmoud Abbas, representing the opposing group Fatah, caused a significant deterioration in humanitarian conditions, particularly regarding the basic rights and needs of women and marginalized minorities. Hamas has imposed a new and more conservative social order, which has further restricted women's rights, such as mandating the wearing of veils in courts and schools in areas under their control. Moreover, women's rights activists have been targeted, and international aid has been frozen in opposition to Hamas's takeover. For decades, ongoing tensions between Fatah and Hamas, coupled with the occupation, have diverted attention away from the fight for equal rights and have prevented revisions or parliamentary discussions of discriminatory laws, including personal status laws, labor law, citizenship law, and articles within the penal code. In a male-dominated and discriminatory law enforcement structure, informal justice through customary laws is more common, resulting in biased outcomes such as exonerating so-called honor killings and referring to Shari'a Law in family disputes such as inheritance, divorce, and child custody (Kelly, 2010).

It is important to note that certain areas of Palestine are subject to Jordanian and Egyptian laws. For instance, the legal age for marriage in the West Bank is 15 for girls and 16 for boys according to the 1976 Jordanian personal status law, while in Gaza, it is 17 for girls and 18 for boys based on Egyptian law and relevant judicial rulings. Despite



neighboring countries like Jordan and Egypt amending their laws, those applied in Palestine remain unaltered.

Aside from Shari'a Law, Palestinian Christian women are governed by the laws established by their respective churches, whether Catholic or Orthodox. For instance, the Orthodox Church permits divorce if a woman is found to be unfaithful or not a virgin upon marriage or if she refuses to obey her husband

Despite some recent movements towards progress, Palestinian society remains largely conservative and traditional, with deeply entrenched values that continue to impact women's lives. For example, in Gaza, divorced mothers lose their custody rights when their boys reach the age of seven and their girls reach the age of nine, while in the West Bank, custody rights are lost when children reach the age of fifteen. Tragically, some mothers and children have even been subject to violence and murder when attempting to visit each other. In addition to these challenges, Palestinian women still face gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and discrimination. These issues have motivated women to form groups, organize campaigns, and engage in various forms of advocacy, such as media campaigns, protests, and petitions demanding justice and equal rights.

The emergence of new organizations that focus on introducing feminism in Arabic is an important development, especially since many terms commonly used to refer to violations against women and their basic rights, as well as gender-related terminology, are not common in the Arabic language. Moreover, in recent protests and social media campaigns, it became common to cite verses from the Holy Quran and Hadiths that addressed regulations within families after divorce. This was done to emphasize the idea that feminism is not inherently against Islam.

Social media and alternative media platforms have played a significant role in these recent movements, allowing Palestinians around the world to show their support and raise awareness about the challenges faced by women in Palestine. Non-Palestinians have also shown solidarity with the movement, as seen in the #SaveSheikhJarrah social media campaign, which went viral and shed light on events that previously went undocumented before the advent of social media (Esposito, 2021).

## JORDAN

The women's rights movement in Jordan began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with voluntary social and charitable activities, and in 1945, the Jordanian Women's Union was established. After gaining independence from Britain in May 1946, the movement became more active, and women began demanding greater political, social, legal, and economic rights.

In 1955, educated women were granted the right to vote, and in 1974, all women were granted suffrage and the

right to run as candidates in parliamentary elections. However, it wasn't until 1993 that the first woman was elected to the lower house of parliament and the first woman was simultaneously appointed to the upper house. As a result, women started occupying more leadership positions and became more involved in both the political and social spheres.

In 1989, civil society organizations began to emerge in Jordan. However, it was not until 1990 that Jordan transitioned into a "façade democracy," where the democratization process was still controlled by the King's political agenda, and the ultimate power remained in the hands of the monarchy. This populist authoritarianism hindered the work of women's organizations and prevented the changing of laws that would elevate women's political and social status (Kelly, 2010).

During this period of "façade democracy" or "defensive democratization" under the Hashemite regime, women's organizations were depoliticized, which undermined their collective agendas and eliminated any political opposition. The movement was limited to modest attempts initiated by the regime and lacked any pressure from the social movement, which created a culture of fear regarding political engagement or radical social change.

Between 2004 and 2009, the women's rights movement in Jordan achieved many significant accomplishments, but gender-based violence remained a serious issue. Women were still at risk of severe physical violence, and even murder, if they disobeyed male family members or committed actions considered "dishonorable" by society (Tufaro, 2021). The Jordanian government ratified the CEDAW and published it in the official gazette, and adopted measures to address the issue of domestic abuse. There was also increased representation of women in high-level governmental positions, and a gender-based quota system was introduced. In 2007, the country's first major women's shelter was opened, providing a safe haven for women escaping domestic abuse. The following year, in 2008, the Family Protection Law was promulgated to regulate the handling of domestic abuse cases by medical workers and law enforcement bodies. These efforts signaled progress in the fight against gender-based violence and discrimination against women in Jordan.

The relationship between the state, the monarchy, and civil society organizations continues to hinder the development of the feminist movement in Jordan, even after the Arab Spring. Officially registered organizations in Jordan fall into one of three categories: non-governmental organizations that are established independently but are still subject to state control, semi or quasi-governmental organizations that are established by the government, or Royal organizations that are established and headed by members of the royal family (Ferguson, 2013).

Despite the different categories and levels of independence, all organizations are severely controlled and restrict-

ed by the government, leading to a high level of social control through surveillance and administration. Moreover, women's organizations are limited by the Law of Public Meetings, the Law of Societies and Social Organizations, and the Political Party Law, which restrict them to offering only social services and prohibit any political activities (Ragotlie, 2021).

The feminist movement in Jordan faces further challenges due to its reliance on funding from international donors, which results in organizations being dependent on aligning their programs with donors' agendas to receive funding. Moreover, civil society organizations tend to employ highly educated and English-speaking women who do not represent the low-income, poor, and middle-class women that they advocate for, leading to a disconnection between the organizations and the women they aim to help. The literature highlights a need for more grassroots movements that mobilize poor and marginalized women, rather than institutionalized civil society organizations that face constraints and restrictions. Additionally, some researchers cite a failure of leadership within the movement, as many activists have ties to the regime, and they are not representative of the general population (Ferguson, 2017).

## YEMEN

In May 1990, the Yemen Arab Republic in the north and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south merged to form the "Modern Republic of Yemen." However, this unification resulted in setbacks for women who previously enjoyed some degree of equality in family affairs, as they had to deal with a new family law post-unification (Durac, 2012).

Under the new political system, established by President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the General People's Congress (GPC), Yemen was presented as a multiparty democracy. However, political instability persisted, and clashes intensified near Sanaa in 1994. A brief civil war ensued between the former North and South, which ended with Saleh and the former North's victory.

After the civil war ended, the family law was revised to include more conservative and gender-based provisions. Women's rights activists faced increasing harassment by security forces as the political situation deteriorated. In 1994, President Saleh amended the unification constitution to eliminate any institution of joint rule, giving himself the power to rule by decree. This resulted in a shift of focus for organizations, as immediate political needs took priority over addressing socio-economic issues and improving the status of women (Kelly, 2010).

During Saleh's rule, women were marginalized and excluded from decision-making processes, with their roles restricted to household duties and care work. The autocratic, corrupt, and closed political regime lacked an effective opposition, leaving women without access to basic judicial and legal rights, with no legal reforms or amendments to

personal status laws, citizenship law, penal code, or labor law. The prevailing patriarchal structures, religious extremism, and Islamic fundamentalism maintained the lower status of women compared to men in both public and private spheres. Women faced numerous violations of basic human rights, including gender-based violence, lack of education, forced marriage, domestic abuse, marital rape, female genital mutilation (FGM), and limited access to health services. Poor food security, hunger, and extreme poverty worsened the situation for women and marginalized minorities, particularly those who were poor and uneducated. Public spaces were considered inappropriate for "respected women," leading to threats for any woman present in a public space. These factors hindered the feminist movement's progress and led to hesitation among activists to organize protests and demonstrations (Durac, 2012).

During the Arab Spring, following the fall of Zein El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, protests demanding political reform, transparency, corruption accountability, and decentralization began in Sanaa and soon spread to various regions of Yemen. As a result, Abdu Rabbu Mansur Al Hadi assumed power until 2015, when violent clashes erupted between the regime and rebels from the Houthi movement (Ansar Allah) that emerged in 2004. The resulting political unrest in Yemen, which led to military intervention by Saudi Arabia, pushed the feminist movement further to the "backseat".

Despite severe instability, women continued to lead protests demanding their basic rights in solidarity with the ongoing uprisings in 2011. From 2011 to 2014, the feminist movement achieved many milestones such as the appointment of four women to the cabinet in 2014, the launch of the first feminist Yemeni online platform in 2013, and the involvement of women in drafting progressive laws. However, 2015 was a critical year for the movement as a military coup shook the core of Yemen and its civil society, forcing Yemeni feminist activists to cease working despite the promising progress made in the previous few years. Women's rights were once again relegated to a luxury rather than a necessity (Fadaee, 2016).

The Yemeni feminist movement continues to face significant challenges, with activists working in secret and under increased pressure and surveillance. Unfortunately, Yemeni society still experiences widespread issues such as forced child marriage, limited access to healthcare and education for girls, poverty and hunger, and domestic and sexual abuse.

This situation was further exacerbated by the breakdown of peace talks and negotiations between Houthi forces and the regime, including the Stockholm Agreement of 2018, leaving Yemen in a critical situation and keeping the feminist movement on the backseat.

## IRAQ

In 1923, the first women's organization in Iraq was founded by a group of upper and middle-class women who were secular, Muslim, and educated. Many of them were married to male political leaders and intellectuals. While male reformers and traditionalists were debating the issue of the veil, Iraqi women were inspired by Egyptian activists and focused on broader issues such as women's education, seclusion, voting rights, entry into the labor force, and forced marriages (Kelly, 2010).

During the British occupation and mandate, Iraqi women played an active role in the nationalist independence movement of the 1920s and 1930s. Even after gaining independence in 1932, British interference persisted until the revolution in 1958. The country transitioned from a monarchy to a republic after the revolution. Like feminist movements in other colonized neighboring countries, Iraqi women took advantage of political and social opportunities to fight for their independence. Organizations focused on providing humanitarian aid to combat poverty, illiteracy, and disease, as the state was unable to offer any help. Student movements for national independence became extremely active within women's organizations later. Although some of these organizations were not officially licensed by the government (especially those led by communists), their membership continued to grow despite the risks of repression and persecution. Active minorities, such as Kurds and Jews, also played a critical role in the movement (Metcalf, 2018).

Furthermore, during Saddam Hussein's rule, the implementation of a no-fly zone in 1991 allowed non-governmental organizations to operate without being subjected to the strict regulations of the authoritarian regime. This led to increased funding and resources for these organizations (Al-Ali, 2012).

Before the U.S. invasion in 2003, Iraqi women were only allowed to join the "General Federation of Iraqi Women," which focused solely on fighting imperialism, and they were not allowed to make any claims against the state or form any other organizations. Despite these limitations, Iraqi women still enjoyed relatively progressive laws compared to other countries in the region. For instance, personal status laws prohibited women from being legally married before the age of 15, and if they were not yet 18, a judge had to approve the marriage. Forced marriages were also illegal, and women had greater custody rights. Furthermore, women were encouraged to work outside of their homes, with 46% of teachers, 29% of physicians, and 46% of dentists being women in the 1980s.

Before the 2003 invasion, little was known about the lives of Iraqis, and the country was often solely associated with Saddam Hussein in media and policy discourse. At the time, some Iraqi women advocated for military intervention by US forces due to the impact of war and UN sanctions after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, which

had led to extreme isolation from the Western world. The liberation of Iraqi women was among the selling points for American and British decision-makers, along with the spread of democracy and human rights (Al-Ali, 2009).

The surge of armed conflicts in Iraq had left many women in charge of households and incomes, even when men were present, and they had to shoulder additional work in difficult circumstances to make ends meet. The bombing during the first Gulf war damaged sewage and electricity infrastructure, making household management even more challenging for many women who had to leave their jobs. As a result, the economy deteriorated, and the government prioritized men in the workplace by offering them more opportunities.

Following the US invasion, a number of women's movements emerged in Iraq, with some focused on providing humanitarian aid and others advocating for democratic reforms. The increased international attention brought new opportunities for the movement, but also introduced challenges as foreign governments involved in Iraq had their own agendas which influenced local politics and the women's movement.

The Bush administration failed to anticipate that many institutions would collapse during the war, which further worsened the socioeconomic and political situations for women and marginalized minorities. Article 41 of the constitution ended the civil system regarding personal status law, putting it in the hands of respective religions, sects, and beliefs while only briefly mentioning choices that would be regulated by law. This ambiguity regarding the status of women in divorce and custody rights and other family aspects left women vulnerable and uncertain of their legal rights (Kidwell, 2012).

Another persistent obstacle faced by women in Iraq was increased violence in the midst of post-invasion chaos. There were alarming numbers of cases of sexual violence and abduction in Baghdad alone. Even today, years after the invasion, women activists are still subjected to threats, and some have been assassinated by various armed groups, including increasingly powerful extremist Islamist militias and insurgent groups.

## 3

## INTERVIEWS WITH FEMINISTS ACROSS THE REGION

### OPINIONS, PERSONAL EXPERIENCES, DEMANDS, CHALLENGES, AND SELF-CRITIQUE

Challenging established traditions and accepted modes of thought is a complex and multifaceted process that is neither one-way nor linear. Feminist movements have always been diverse, reflecting different understandings of feminism, social justice, and gender. As a result, there are numerous approaches to these questions, as well as tactics and strategies that have evolved over generations, years, and social upheavals.

#### NATURE OF THE FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

The evolution of feminism over time has led to a more inclusive and intersectional approach. As M3,<sup>1</sup> an environmental feminist from Morocco explains, it is “a convergence of all social justice struggles - social, political, economic, and environmental - for women and social minorities.” Major events that have agitated the region, such as the Arab Spring, have given rise to new waves of feminism that are often critical of their predecessors. The generations of feminists that emerged since 2011 view their forerunners as “classical feminists” who were elitist, discriminatory, and exclusionary. As a result, “classical feminism” contributed to the institutionalization of feminism and the creation of State Feminism in many countries across the region. Younger generations have a pluralist understanding of feminism as a struggle that intersects with anti-capitalism, anti-homophobia, and anti-racism. Therefore, many of the theoretical and political concepts used by emerging feminists to describe their politics are hybrid concepts that travel between the global South and the global North, as well as different feminist schools, ideologies, and approaches, thus making them more intersectional and inclusive.

As T1, a queer feminist from Tunisia, asserts, “feminism has personal, political and communal dimensions.” This explains why many feminists discovered their feminism

through their personal and intimate experiences before their “intuitive experience” matured into a political struggle. LE2 from Lebanon began to question why “he is a boy, and you are only a girl” is even a valid argument before becoming one of the pillars of a leading feminist organization and starting her journey with digital activism and knowledge production. M4, a queer Moroccan feminist and co-founder of a widespread feminist platform for change, recounts her “first feminist act” at the age of eleven when she established a girls-only soccer team in a small village where soccer was known to be a “boys-only” sport. Similarly, I1, the Kurdish Marxist feminist, shares her experience of how her marriage with a “progressive leftist activist” and subsequent divorce contributed to her feminist beliefs: “He presented himself as a progressive pro-feminist in public but acted as a patriarch in the household.”

Moreover, conflicts and crises have shown that women and marginalized groups are disproportionately affected not just because of laws and policies, but also due to societal norms and behaviors that prioritize heteronormative patriarchal values. This context significantly influences how feminists define their movement, set priorities, develop tactics, and perceive themselves. For example, A2, an Algerian leftist feminist, drew inspiration from the Moujahidat who fought against French colonialism in Algeria, stating that “women who participated in the movement back then were courageous because they were fighting a colonizer and because they were also facing their families in a patriarchal society. They were leaving their homes, their villages, and their neighborhoods to join what was considered a ‘men’s fight.’ They were angry, and that anger fueled them.” For A2, feminism was not only a personal journey but also an intergenerational, shared fight that connected the nation on common goals post-independence and during the HIRAK movement. As A1, another Algerian feminist, put it, “it is not a bourgeois fight, but rather a structured movement that opposes patriarchy and advocates for women’s and minorities’ rights.”

<sup>1</sup> The names of the interviewees remain anonymous as per their request due to security and safety concerns

However, it is not only the definition of feminism that has evolved with the critical contexts and personal experiences, but also the stigma surrounding the word “feminism” itself. Many interviewees stated that the negative connotations of the label “feminist” hindered their progress for decades. They operated in complete secrecy and avoided calling themselves “feminists” because they feared the backlash. For instance, LE1 and LE4 from Lebanon eluded labels for years before finally and proudly coming out as feminists. A4 from Algeria highlighted that fear-mongering was indeed a strategy employed to simply erase feminists from existence through hate speech, backlash, and constant threats.

Regarding ideology, among the older generations of feminists in the region during the 1970s and 1980s were liberal feminists who focused on issues such as women’s political representation, equal access to education, and equal opportunities in the labor market. At the same time, Marxist feminists started their journeys within leftist political parties, labor unions, and independent social movements. They expanded their critique beyond the formal inequality solely between women and men to tackle capitalist and neoliberal political economies and how they impact the daily lives of women and minorities. They placed class and gender at the center of their feminist struggle and were more vocal when in regards to religious institutions and the political instrumentalization of religion to justify patriarchal practices.

Many of the interviewees found it interesting that the political sphere in the MENA region has historically been divided between “progressive secular” political parties and organizations, and Islamic stakeholders whose politics are rooted in a religious frame of reference. This binary split has led some feminists in the region to frame their understanding of patriarchy and gender inequality as solely rooted in Islam, without extending a systematic critique that also covers the state and its politics. For example, in Morocco, M1 and M2 noted that the state designated itself as the protector of women’s rights and the ally of the “progressives,” and that by siding with state institutions against Islamists during the 2011 social uprisings, feminists contributed to the creation of state feminism within an authoritarian context, thereby alienating themselves from other women who were active within Islamist organizations.

The interviewees also found it both intriguing and alarming that women from all walks of life and different countries in the region had almost identical demands and faced similar struggles in raising them. Despite differences in how they defined feminism or whether they identified as feminists, or even if it took them time to liberate themselves from the stigma, 48 women highlighted similar struggles and violations of their basic rights. However, the non-homogenous realities and the contextualized specificities of each country have led to analogous forms of resistance from governments, societies, and even among “feminists” themselves.

## FIGHTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Feminists in the 12 aforementioned countries have focused on addressing immediate needs in the context of wars, fights for independence, and constant political unrest, but they have all highlighted legal reforms as a central fight to ensure the dignity, safety, and protection of women. They have tackled family laws or personal status laws that regulate marriage, divorce, inheritance, and nationality laws. Additionally, addressing articles in the penal code that criminalize the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as others that justify honor crimes and disregard accountability, has also been at the center of the feminist fight in the region. They have also raised the vital necessity for laws that combat gender-based violence and femicides, expand the definition of sexual harassment and domestic abuse, and criminalize rape and marital rape.

It is evident that the legitimization of violence against women and minorities has been a major concern for feminist movements in the region despite variances in their choices, reactions, demands, visions, and tactics. For example, Libyan feminists launched online campaigns against Article 375 of the Libyan penal code, which reduces the sentence of men who commit “honor crimes,” as well as another campaign against Article 424, which allows the rapist to marry the victim. Similarly, Article 475 of the Moroccan penal code was amended in 2014 after relentless feminist campaigns that followed the suicide of 16-year-old Amina Filali, who was forced by her family to marry her rapist. Another example of a “marriage loophole” is Article 552 of the Lebanese penal code, which protects rapists from prosecution if they marry their victims. Although this article was appealed in 2017, as highlighted by activists LE1 and LE4, Articles 505 and 518 stipulate that Article 552 would still apply if the victim in question is a minor (a girl between the ages of 15 and 18). Jordan and Tunisia abolished similar laws in 2017, according to J1 and T2.

In addition to the issue of marital rape, child marriage is another form of violence against women that is widely legitimized in the MENA region. This explains the persistent feminist campaigns that call for setting a minimum age of 18 for marriage. For example, Yemeni women’s rights groups have been campaigning for the criminalization of child marriage for decades, as reported by Y2 and Y4. However, they have faced constant resistance and attacks from political and religious stakeholders. During the National Dialogue Conference in 2013, which had 30% female participation, a clause setting the minimum age of marriage at 18 years was approved and arranged to be codified into Yemen’s new constitution. However, the ongoing civil war and political unrest have delayed the process, as is often the case.

Furthermore, preventing and protecting women in the region from violence and femicide is a primary concern for feminists across countries and generations. The network WASILA has facilitated collaboration among various organizations to address femicides and provide counseling and



other forms of support to the victims' families, as well as assisting survivors on physical and psychological levels, given the devastating effects of violence in all its forms. For I3, an Iraqi feminist and lawyer, discussions on violence against women and femicides must also include women who commit suicide to escape various forms of violence perpetrated against them, as these suicides are also indirect forms of femicides resulting from sexual, physical, and psychological violence.

Algerian feminist A4, who specializes in femicides and gender-based violence on a political and judicial level, stated that the WASILA network, along with many researchers, works on collecting data on a regional level due to the absence of official statistics regarding the number of victims. This research has helped in drafting specific policies and laws to detect and prevent violence and femicide and ensure women's safety. A4 was among numerous interviewees who stated that protests have led to arrests and extra surveillance, putting many lives in danger. Therefore, younger generations tend to focus on long-term strategies such as raising awareness and conducting research rather than protests. This explains the emergence of transnational forms of solidarity against femicides and honor killings, including the online campaign "strike of women." The campaign mobilized organizations and activists across the region during the summer of 2022 under the hashtags #Solidarity\_cross\_border\_ and #Women\_General\_Strike, sparked by the murder of Naira Ashraf in Egypt, Iman Arshid in Jordan, Lubna Mansour in the UAE, and Shaima Jamal in Egypt. Numerous protests and strikes supporting the campaign also occurred in the region.

## SOCIOECONOMIC REALITIES

The impact of neoliberal policies on the political economy of the MENA region has led to economic disparities and rising inequalities, which have predominantly affected women and disadvantaged groups. Women in the region are often unemployed, underpaid, or working in precarious situations in the informal sector. This "feminization of poverty" has contributed to women becoming economically dependent on their partners or male relatives, which in turn increases their exposure to other forms of abuse. Most interviewees have indicated that a large number of women are still not allowed to have a separate income, further exacerbating their economic dependence.

A3, an Algerian lawyer and women's rights activist, is the founder of one of the leading centers for documentation and information on children's and women's rights. The center publishes annual reports on women's participation in Algerian politics and economy. In her latest report, A3 highlights that women are mostly employed in education and health sectors, which are considered "feminine." However, women are often disadvantaged and discriminated against in high-paying jobs. Although the percentage of women who graduate from universities is higher than men, they are more affected by unemployment given that they are perceived as care workers and are more likely

to work in informal, undeclared business networks where they are subject to exploitation and violence.

## CLAIMING SPACES WITHIN THE PHYSICAL SPHERE

Ensuring women's safety and autonomy on a social, political, or economic level has always been a primary demand of feminists in the MENA region, alongside combating violence in both private and public spheres. For instance, in Iraq, through the Aman collective, feminists are advocating for personal freedoms and demanding safe and unrestricted mobility for women to promote their independence and sense of agency. Similarly, Yemeni feminists are fighting for unrestricted mobility and independence without the control and guardianship of male family members. In February 2020, Yemeni women launched an extensive online campaign using the hashtag #جوازي\_بلا\_وصاية (My passport without guardianship) followed by a protest in Taiz demanding access to their passports and travel documents without guardianship or permission from male relatives. The campaign was aimed at ending the discrimination women face at the Passport Authority in Taiz and other municipalities, where officials deny women their travel documents without the presence and approval of a male guardian.

As mentioned earlier, in countries experiencing armed conflicts, economic and political crises, and wars, women and marginalized groups are often the most neglected and, as a result, the most affected. They are also the least included and recognized in the institutional and formal processes of peacebuilding. For example, according to LE1, Lebanese women are not involved in the current IMF negotiations despite the country experiencing one of its most severe economic crises. Therefore, there is a need for security, stability, and sustainable just peacebuilding that is centered on gender and the needs of women and marginalized minorities as per Y4. One of the founders of the Yemeni Peace Track Initiative, Y4 emphasized this need by citing the siege in the city of Taiz and its drastic impact on women. Given that only one road is open to and from the city, pregnant women face significant risks in accessing health-care, resulting in deaths and loss of newborns during birth due to limited, expensive, and unsafe care.

## TACTICS AND STRATEGIES

To advance their claims, organize themselves, and build coalitions, feminists in the MENA region have been employing different strategies and tactics, depending on the context in which they are operating and the vision and aspirations they have for the movement. Strategies in most countries in the region also evolved over time and generations, from protesting, advocacy campaigns, and lobbying to knowledge production and digital activism, among others.

Most interviewees reported that older generations of feminists often align their work with political parties or other

formal institutional political groups, adopting negotiations, lobbying, and coalition building as a strategy to advance their demands. For instance, in Algeria, feminists demanded the abolishment of the discriminatory Family Law through on-the-ground protests, whereas in Morocco, women's rights organizations adopted lobbying through "Koutla," a left-wing alliance that emerged in the 1970s to address similar laws.

Younger generations of feminists in the MENA region have increasingly turned to social media as a platform for consciousness-raising, launching targeted campaigns, and building support for their demands. In conflict-ridden regions such as Yemen and Libya, feminist and women's rights groups rely heavily on social media to organize and raise awareness, as political unrest has restricted mobility for all citizens, particularly women and marginalized groups.

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns further amplified the role of digital activism, allowing for transnational feminist connections and a global perspective beyond the region. Many interviewees noted that transnational feminism and digital activism have enabled the diaspora to participate in and support local movements, giving them greater visibility and impact. For instance, women in exile played a critical role in the new movements that emerged in Sudan following the Arab Spring, according to SU2 and SU3.

Furthermore, digital transnational activism has shed light on the intersectionality of the new movements that surfaced after the Arab Spring in the region. In particular, queer activists and queer feminist groups have turned to digital activism and online campaigns on social media for security and confidentiality concerns. According to M1 and M2 from Morocco, many queer collectives have created informal online support groups that offer assistance on various fronts, including capacity-building programs for queer individuals in need.

## CHALLENGES

Throughout the pre-Arab Spring era and after, the 48 participants in this study faced strikingly similar challenges. External factors such as established power dynamics and traditional patriarchal practices have consistently hindered the progress of the movement in the region.

On a societal and communal level, feminists have had to deal with a range of obstacles including harassment, negative connotations, hate speech, marginalization, and different forms of violence including rape. Moreover, they have faced constant threats which have sometimes led to assassinations and femicides. M1 from Morocco warned of the "rising repression, tyranny, persecution, and threats to the safety of activists." Similarly, Iraqi feminists like I4 reported that some of their comrades have been kidnapped, beaten, tortured, and even murdered. For instance, feminist Sarah Talib and her husband Hussein, founding mem-

bers of Aman Feminist Alliance from Basra, were among those who were assassinated. The activist Reham Yacoub and countless others have also been victims of violence.

On a societal level, it is noteworthy that, as P4 highlighted, high and unrealistic expectations were placed on the feminist movement within Palestinian society to fill all gaps on all fronts, which has contributed to stagnation in the movement for years.

Furthermore, pressure from powerful political parties and religious authorities to reinforce their ideologies, restrictions on freedom of expression, the right to assemble and protest safely, discriminatory policies and laws, and multiple arrests have all contributed to the silencing of the movement at the local and regional levels. For instance, P3 was under house arrest by Israeli authorities for seven and a half years, while numerous feminists and activists remain under constant surveillance by either the Palestinian authorities or the occupiers.

Most governments in the region have attempted to use State Feminism to project a progressive image of their authoritarian, regressive, patriarchal, and discriminatory politics. This maneuver is aimed at undermining the feminist movement while appearing to be pro-diversity. For instance, as reported by LY2, specialized governmental institutions, known as "women empowerment bureaus," were established in Libya, but women were excluded from the decision-making process. Similarly, Y3 highlighted the superficial and reductive inclusion of women in the peace-making processes following the multiple armed conflicts in Yemen.

On the local and regional levels, the feminist movement also faces numerous hate campaigns launched on both traditional media outlets and digital media platforms, with the aim of demonizing feminist work. Feminists often receive rape threats and death threats, and deal with defamation, accusations of moral and financial corruption, and being funded by foreign enemies, as well as accusations of flouting religious and social codes of their respective countries. Governments and independent groups alike systematically employ "digital police" and "online trolls" to post the personal data, including addresses and pictures, of activists and their families, posing a real threat to their safety as reported by LY1, M3, I3, Y1, and many others.

Additionally, the issue of international donors, funds, and the process of NGOization and how they have been shaping the narrative was raised by all the interviewees. The focus on foreign agendas has shifted attention away from the goals, discourses, and needs of local organizations and activists. According to several interviewees, organizations are now competing for resources and funds to secure personal and individual careers, leading to a rise in individual egos. This, among other internal factors, has hindered collective work and thus slowed the progress of the movement in the region.

## SELF-CRITIQUE

The participants conducted a thorough self-critique and identified many factors within the movement, such as the lack of structure and a shared vision, as stated by LE1. A4 also raised concerns that this lack of structure and vision on a local level has led to the emergence of new power dynamics on a regional level. During regional collaborations, the country with the most organized and structured movement often imposes its ideologies and ideas on the others.

The lack of structure and absence of collective work within the feminist movement were aggravated by personal agendas and the failure to communicate and negotiate between older and younger feminists. This clash between generations has been one of the biggest obstacles preventing the movement from utilizing its diversity and age gap to raise multiple demands and employ different strategies to reach a bigger audience on a local or regional level. Moreover, the absence of effective alliances and shared cross-generational discourse has been attributed to the undocumented history of women's movements, as older feminists have often failed to transmit lessons learned to their younger successors. In many countries in the MENA region, some older feminists are resisting changes demanded by younger feminists, such as queer activism, bodily autonomy, SRHR, abortion rights, and more inclusive demands.

Several interviewees from across the region, including A3, P4, and LE1, have highlighted that the universal values and utopian concepts promoted through the NGOization process may not address the complex local political and socioeconomic contexts. By relying on clichéd definitions of social justice and equality, the movement has struggled to make progress in the region. Many feminists have high expectations that are not always met by these ideas, which do not adequately address the diverse experiences and realities of their respective countries and the region as a whole.

Several interviewees concluded their self-critique by emphasizing the lack of continuity within the feminist movement, both at the national and regional levels. Despite political unrest, socioeconomic crises, and the COVID-19 pandemic, the movement failed to prioritize its demands, according to A1, LE1, T2, SY3, and others. The movement has yet to master the relationship between offline and online activism, and the lack of communication, intergenerational clashes, and absence of a common vision continue to hinder the development of shared discourses, strategies, and effective local and regional alliances..



## 4

## FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN THE DIGITAL SPHERE

In addition to offline feminist mobilization, digital activism through social media can be a powerful tool for social change and mobility. By demanding greater transparency from governments, social media enables the public to hold those in power accountable (Skalli 2006, 36). This has led to the emergence of a “new Arab public sphere,” a term coined by some scholars to describe the political liberalization of new communication technologies in the MENA region (Gheytauchi & Moghadam 2014, 6). In other words, it creates a space from which one can create new structures and new meanings, allowing individuals to engage in activism that they would not normally be involved in.

Given the importance of online activism for feminists in the region, this publication takes a deeper look into the discourses and activism in the digital world. It explores and analyzes content shared on social media during specific campaigns such as the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence global campaign from 25 November 2021 to 10 December 2021, Women’s History Month in March 2022, and Pride Month in June 2022..

### DOMINANT DISCOURSES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media platforms in the MENA region were utilized to advocate for women’s leadership and economic empowerment, promote the campaign against gender-based violence, and call for solidarity. Many social media posts celebrate women, echoing the typically celebratory atmosphere of International Women’s Day on March 8th. Notably, some posts in certain countries, such as Egypt, exalt nationalized bodies, honoring individuals who carry the country’s name and traditions, and whose accomplishments are considered a natural extension of the nation’s own achievements.

Most of the content that celebrated women’s leadership and achievements in the digital sphere exhibited individualistic tendencies. The prevailing public discourse tended to break down collective movements and efforts into isolated individual figures, reflecting a trend towards neoliberalizing collective memory. For example, when the queer community in Morocco worked on archiving the history of the LGBTQAI+ movement, influential feminist figures and individuals were celebrated without contextualizing their

achievements within the broader context of collective efforts and movements.

In the public online discourse, women are encouraged to participate in the labor market to decrease the wage gap, particularly by NGOs and INGOs. There is particular emphasis on women’s entrepreneurship and economic empowerment in the Syrian, Jordanian, and Egyptian contexts. However, despite reflecting many challenges in the region regarding equal access and opportunities between genders, much of this discourse fails to address the structural barriers that hinder women’s economic participation and increase their unpaid care work burden.

Across the MENA region, social media campaigns have been launched to raise awareness about gender-based violence (GBV), with many organized by NGOs sharing the stories and experiences of women affected by GBV. Syrian female activists and organizations also launched campaigns advocating for the safety of women journalists and demanding accountability for victims of sexual abuse and torture of women in prisons. While some feminist discourse links violence to capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy, and considers it a violation of women’s rights, there are still discourses that call for ending violence against women based on their reproductive roles and perceived “delicate nature.”

Online discourse in the MENA region highlighted the marginalization of the LGBTQAI+ community. For example, in the Libyan community, online users predominantly denied the existence of queer persons in Libya, which they cited as justification for the total lack of rights for this community. This erases the identities of queer persons and reinforces their oppression through anti-queer rhetoric and legislation. Furthermore, hate speech against the queer community was prevalent on some social media platforms, including TikTok, with accusations that the Arab queer movement is a manifestation of Western influence and colonialism.

Finally, in the digital sphere, archiving local feminist and queer movements emerged as a dominant discourse, highlighting the importance of documenting the history of these movements. The sentiment of solidarity, mourning, and storytelling of important events within the femi-

nist movement was particularly strong among the queer community, which seeks to preserve their history from oppressive regimes. Many Arab feminists also used social media to archive their narratives through activism and art. In July, the Women’s Strike served as a primary manifestation of solidarity in the feminist movement, in response to the ongoing femicide incidents, with a strong emphasis on the use of art to carry messages of solidarity and to lobby communities.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR ACTIVISM

Due to political insecurity, instability, restricted mobility, and the increasing number of women’s rights activists being exiled from conflict-affected countries, offline organizing for feminist and women’s rights activists is limited. In Yemen, the Yemeni Women’s Solidarity Network was established as an online coalition to provide protection and support for women’s rights defenders. With over 300 members based in Yemen and the diaspora, the network engages in online discussions on the country’s future and collaborates to lobby for the inclusion of a gender lens in peacebuilding plans. The Facebook group and WhatsApp chat provide legal, financial, social, and emotional support to activists both inside the country and abroad. The group also serves as an informal support network for victims of violence, connecting them with women who work in the justice system to pursue justice for their abusers without fear of police shaming or dismissal of their claims.

Similarly, younger generations of queer feminists in the MENA region often use social media as a means of community solidarity and capacity building. Online activism through social media is a common strategy for security reasons, as it can provide anonymity and “relative protection” from violence, legal persecution, and discrimination that they would face when engaging in public. For example, in Morocco, many queer collectives create informal online support groups that provide assistance and capacity reinforcement to queer people in need. Moreover, the queer platform Tanit produces a series of podcasts by queer individuals around topics of sexuality, desire, and relationships, further building community and providing representation for queer individuals in the region.

Social media played a significant role in facilitating transnational solidarity with Palestinian people and Palestinian feminists, as noted by P1 and P4. In the Palestinian feminist and queer activism context, social media was instrumental in mobilizing people and raising awareness. Additionally, digital activism became essential for feminist organizing during the COVID-19 pandemic, given the lockdown policies and restricted mobilities. For instance, RAWSA: Network for Women’s Rights and Access to Safe Abortion in North Africa and the Middle East provided telemedicine services to women seeking reproductive and sexual healthcare when access to care was limited.

In Sudan, digital activism is widely used for organizing and mobilizing, as well as to reach a broader audience and gather allies. Campaigns such as #فوطة\_تسد\_الخانة #خشبي\_اللجنة #تشوف\_قميص\_ماتشوف\_بلوزة #أبوي\_قتلني #خمسين\_خمسين (fifty-fifty, my father killed me, see a shirt do not see a blouse, fear the committee, a campaign addressing period poverty) are just a few examples. Women from various political backgrounds and regions in Sudan are campaigning and organizing against violence against women, with women’s participation reaching 40% in local committees, according to Sudanese feminist and activist SU4.

In Lebanon, LE1 views digital activism as a powerful tool for fostering regional solidarity and raising awareness of various issues through campaigns. As the editor of a regional platform, she believes in its potential to pressure authorities into taking action and to create and spread feminist knowledge through various online initiatives. Moreover, digital activism enables feminists to be more vocal in their demands and strengthens the documentation and monitoring of Arab feminists’ activism, transforming what was once private and forbidden into the public sphere where it can become political.

## CHALLENGES OF ONLINE ACTIVISM

While social media has been a powerful tool in advancing many feminist causes, such as online campaigns on custody rights (#الولاية\_حقي) sexual harassment, detainees, rape, femicide, etc., it has also exposed many activists to various risks. In interviews with feminist groups, many indicated a preference for working in closed groups to avoid cyber violence, legal consequences, or community and family pressure. Unfortunately, this preference for closed groups often translates into fewer transformative messages in open digital spaces. This trend is further reflected in social media analysis, which shows that mainstream messages tend to be rather heteronormative, NGOized, and focused on reform rather than radical transformation.

Salma Eltarzi, an Egyptian feminist and filmmaker, was recently fined 50,000 EGP for showing solidarity with rape survivors in a social media post. A Yemeni feminist faced a cyberattack from her local community after organizing a TEDx event for women and had to flee to Cairo. Similarly, digital activism in the Syrian context remains unsafe, especially in regards to queer activism, as social media is considered effective in this context, but could also be harmful and used to target and identify activists, which is also the case in the Sudanese context.

In Jordan, younger feminist activists like J2 use social media for advocacy and networking despite the high monitoring by the authorities, and the risk of being charged under digital crimes laws. Meanwhile, in Palestine, journalist targeting by authorities is a concern for P3, who highlighted the imprisonment of journalists and hate speech against feminists supporting LGBTQ+ rights or feminist causes such as CEDAW. Additionally, P1, a Palestinian activist, faced de-

tention by Israeli occupation forces for half a day due to an article she wrote, which posed a threat to her activism.

Feminist activists in Sudan often face targeted hate campaigns as women's presence in the public sphere is not accepted. Groups are formed to harass and threaten women activists, as experienced by Sudanese activist SU4 who encountered the group "Intisab" (which translates to 'erection' in English) created to target feminists and which did not cease its harassment until one of the activists' male relatives intervened. In Egypt, women activists are prosecuted for social media posts supporting victims of violence, and are often digitally harassed, slut-shamed, and stalked. While campaigns like #قانون\_أسرة\_عادل #الأمومة\_ليس\_لدينا (custody is my right, motherhood has no religion, a fair and unbiased Family Law) were less provocative, they still faced backlash and misogyny from the digital community.

According to E3, access to social media has empowered women in Egypt to speak up and share their stories about the violence they suffered and expose perpetrators, especially after the revolution. "But this is not enough, social and on groundwork should follow, people thought they made the revolution online and that's it," said E3. While social media has contributed to movements and mobilization on the ground, there are concerns that the priorities of women in Egypt are not adequately represented in online activism.

## 5

## CONCLUSION

Despite significant obstacles faced by feminist movements in the MENA region, including economic crises, uprisings, the global pandemic, and ongoing conflicts, activists are finding innovative ways to work within increasingly limited civic spaces.

In this publication, 48 feminists from 12 countries in the MENA region, including Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and

Yemen, from diverse socioeconomic, political, and cultural backgrounds who have gone through different experiences on all fronts, shared their fears, reflections, and claims. They opened up about the obstacles that hindered their progress and their feelings vis-à-vis the realities that they had to cope with and admitted that they might have been at fault sometimes, but they also managed to resist despite the risks, threats, and hate.

#### **Feminist movement activists on their dreams, aspirations, and their feminist “utopia”.**

“I want a movement where we understand that this difference in choices, demands, visions, reactions... is healthy and it gives women the right to choose.”

“Diversity, I dream of diversity and a movement that is not afraid.”

“I dream of a country where I can live freely and in peace with all of the citizens regardless of their ideologies. A country where I am accepted.”

“I dream of specialized fights in a structured movement with effective alliances.”

“My aspirations? Well, I can summarize them in a safe space that is inclusive, transparent, organized, and well-structured and that practices what it preaches.”

“I want a movement that is present in all of the crucial and pivotal historic moments, a movement that knows how to address women’s rights in those moments. A movement that looks at gender equality as a part of a series of rights that are fundamental. A secular movement beyond all forms of discrimination. A movement that is organized and well-structured. An inclusive movement that covers all women educated or not, from cities or living in rural areas, poor or rich, regardless of their sexualities and gender identities.”

“I imagine a movement that addresses freedom first and recognizes women as human beings and works on their autonomy and on spreading awareness. Women should be aware of their rights and the importance of their autonomy. They need to liberate themselves from the heteronormative structures and the male gaze.”

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize the feminist movement’s capacity for self-reflection, a strategy that fosters improvement and growth. Despite challenging circumstances, including conflicts and fundamentalistic ideologies, the collective efforts of the movement have succeeded in garnering public support, despite shortcomings identified by regional feminists.

With new political realities, problems, and emerging challenges, feminists in the region are exploring new solu-

tions and tools, experimenting with available options, and engaging in digital activism, strikes, protests, and demonstrations.

The feminist movement is becoming more inclusive and intersectional, extending its focus beyond the patriarchy to address the intersecting forms of oppression. The emergence of extensive ideologies, indigenous activism, and innovative approaches highlights the movement’s understanding of the depth of inequalities and the inter-

play of multiple identities leading to concurrent forms of oppression.

This publication seeks to spark a wider dialogue among feminist activists and organizations by examining the perspectives and experiences of feminist activists from the MENA region. The goal is to gain a better understanding of the movement's present condition and to develop more effective strategies for future action..

ANNEX

A1	Algerian feminist
A2	Algerian feminist
A3	Algerian feminist
A4	Algerian feminist

P1	Palestinian feminist
P2	Palestinian feminist
P3	Palestinian feminist
P4	Palestinian feminist

J1	Jordanian feminist
J2	Jordanian feminist
J3	Jordanian feminist
J4	Jordanian feminist

T1	Tunisian feminist
T2	Tunisian feminist
T3	Tunisian feminist

M1	Moroccan feminist
M2	Moroccan feminist
M3	Moroccan feminist
M4	Moroccan feminist

I1	Iraqi feminist
I2	Iraqi feminist
I3	Iraqi feminist
I4	Iraqi feminist

SY1	Syrian feminist
SY2	Syrian feminist
SY3	Syrian feminist

LY1	Libyan feminist
LY2	Libyan feminist
LY3	Libyan feminist
LY4	Libyan feminist

E1	Egyptian feminist
E2	Egyptian feminist
E3	Egyptian feminist
E4	Egyptian feminist

SU1	Sudanese feminist
SU2	Sudanese feminist
SU3	Sudanese feminist
SU4	Sudanese feminist

LE1	Lebanese feminist
LE2	Lebanese feminist
LE3	Lebanese feminist
LE4	Lebanese feminist

Y1	Yemeni feminist
Y2	Yemeni feminist
Y3	Yemeni feminist
Y4	Yemeni feminist

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## FROM HISTORIES TO FUTURES

### A Mapping of Feminist Movements in the MENA Region



In the MENA region, the rights of women and marginalized minorities have been sidelined amid ongoing crises. Gender inequality, rooted in discriminatory societal frameworks linked to historical political factors, is prevalent in countries like Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Yemen, and Iraq.



Despite having different understandings of feminism, intersectionality, gender, and social justice, local feminists from the region faced similar challenges and shared common priorities. Gender-based violence in both public and private spheres, the NGO-ization of the movement, and the use of State Feminism by governments to impede local initiatives were among the most frequently mentioned issues.



The lack of an intergenerational dialogue poses a significant obstacle to forging coalitions and progressing as a movement on local and regional levels. Nevertheless, feminists across the region, from various backgrounds, are engaging in transparent and in-depth self-critique to assess their achievements and shortcomings, and to strengthen their movements.

<https://feminism-mena.fes.de/>