

Dossier: An Unexpected Party Crasher: Rethinking Euro-Mediterranean Relations in Corona Times, 25 Years after the Barcelona Process

Unequal Gender Relations and the Subordination of Women in the MENA Region: What the Covid-19 Pandemic Has Taught Us

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“Women belong in all places where decisions are being made. It shouldn't be that women are the exception.” Ruth Bader Ginsburg

At the time of writing this essay, a sequence of unfortunate events had befallen Lebanon in general, and its capital Beirut, in particular, where I am based. Writing about the ways in which Covid-19 has shed a new light on the situation and position of women and gender relations in the MENA region has thus been particularly influenced by my own positionality as well as by the extraordinary turbulence that Lebanon is going through, notwithstanding the acute challenges, crisis and uncertainties facing the MENA region today.

It is during such times that reflection and reflexivity become extremely critical as well as difficult and trying. For, how can we take the time and make the effort needed to look back, take stock and look forward when the past is unresolved, the present is opaque and the future is uncertain. Yet, women in the MENA region are doing just that. In their lived experiences, their everyday struggles and resistance, they fight the demons of the past, resist and challenge patriarchy and patriarchal institutions and prepare for a feminist future which they may not live to enjoy.

This paper is inspired by the struggles of individual and organized feminists in a region that insists on maintaining its patriarchal heritage and resists transformation towards gender equality. It is this context of political, and social rigidity that makes the struggle and resistance of women and feminists all the more formidable and important to understand and document.

About This Paper

This paper will offer a bird's eye view of the context of Covid-19 in the MENA region with emphasis on the ways in which this global event, or rather calamity, has accentuated and amplified existing gender and other inequalities, whilst at the same time opening spaces for innovative and significant feminist actions and engagement.

The information used for the analysis presented in this paper reposes on the author's feminist work in Lebanon and the region at the level of activism, research and collective engagement. The author also draws extensively on her feminist networks within and beyond the MENA region in an attempt to visibilize feminist action in a time of crisis.

The paper argues that looking at Covid-19 through a gender lens can only be possible if we are cognizant of the situation of gender equality, or rather inequality, in the region and the activism around it before the pandemic. The paper also maintains that, as with all major crises and calamities, while amplifying inequalities and various forms of injustice, Covid-19 has also created a window of opportunity for change. The paper suggests that, whilst this window of opportunity may be short lived, it nevertheless carries immense opportunities for transformation in the lives of all women and girls in the region.

Patriarchal Institutions, Reproduction of Gender Inequalities and Resistance to Change

Many a feminist scholar and feminist activist from most countries of the MENA region have deplored the ways in which societies and social institutions, including the household as well as state, market and community institutions, reflect entrenched patriarchal norms and hierarchies which determine, control and limit women's choices and opportunities.

Indeed, religious family laws, or specifically the body of laws that codifies relations within the family, are based essentially on the supremacy of the male head of household as the main provider and income earner and also as the decision maker within and beyond the family. As such, all aspects of women's lives, decisions, choices, including their bodily choices and integrity, as well as their mobility, are strictly regulated and controlled by the male members of their families. This has meant that for several decades, women's lives in most MENA countries have been restricted within the confines of the household, whilst age-old practices have been maintained and reproduced in order to keep women under strict control, especially in terms of controlling their bodies and sexualities.

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It is no coincidence that the MENA region maintains the lowest rates globally in terms of women's political and economic participation. Even advances made at the level of closing the gender gap in education and health have yet to materialize into propelling women to decision-making spheres, whether in the household or the public sphere. In short, the world of politics and political leadership remains hermetically closed for women, save a few exceptions, which are far from being considered permanent.

Control over women's bodies and sexuality is sanctioned by law in many countries of the region and up-

held by strict traditions. Indeed, brutal and barbaric practices such as female genital mutilation, forced feeding and honour crimes to name but a few, remain in force with laws that either simply condone them or relieve perpetrators from any liability or punishment. Despite efforts to curtail the practice, girls are still given out as brides, and violence against women and sexual and other forms of harassment have yet to be criminalized in many countries in the region.

Feminist Resistance and Accrued Hard-Earned Triumphs

Despite the challenging situation described above, women in the MENA region have resisted discrimination and oppression, and this resistance has taken many forms throughout the past decades. Feminist activism in the MENA region has been guided by a strong desire for reforms in outdated and discriminatory legal texts and frameworks, as well as transformation of mindsets, beliefs and behaviours. In fact, and prior to the onset of the "Arab Spring" in 2011, women and feminist social movements were at the forefront of resistance vis-à-vis dictators and autocrats in the region. Their definition of the desired democracy was one that provided equal access, chances, opportunities and benefits to all citizens and where women and girls do not face challenges in fully participating and engaging in public life. Feminist resistance in the MENA region was and remains an uphill battle. However, many gains were made, notwithstanding the fact that these gains remain volatile and, as we have seen during the last few years, are subject to the return of obscurantist powers in the region.

Perhaps the main gain has been in framing gender equality issues as political issues and as concerns to be debated in the public domain, thus breaking age-old taboos around equality. Moving these issues as subjects of public and social dialogue has meant that these have become topics to be debated within official bodies such as cabinets and parliaments. As such, the last two decades have indeed witnessed significant legal reforms pushed forward by women and feminist activists and connected with changes in family codes, as is the case for Algeria, Egypt and Morocco, to name just a few, as well as the establishment of laws to protect women from domestic

violence as well as violence in the public sphere, as is the case for Lebanon and Morocco, for instance.

Revolutions and Counter-Revolutions

I have chosen here to talk about the second wave of Arab revolutions, namely in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan, and thus highlight the critical role that women and feminists have played as leaders and speakers, as well as movers and shakers in these uprisings. I would like to posit that the massive participation of women in the recent protests across MENA has been the result of the confluence of several factors. Indeed, the various outcomes of the first wave of revolutions in the region have shown the immense risks posed by the return of conservative and fundamentalist powers, which took immediate action to roll back on the gains made by feminists in the region. Such a disappointment came with a failure in governance as well as deteriorating living conditions in many MENA countries and the recrudescence of various forms of oppression against women, often encouraged and condoned by new powers which remain indifferent to the plight of women and girls. The second wave of MENA revolutions involved a new narrative, one where the uprisings echo the feminists' demands for equality, inclusion and freedom for women, LGBTQI, migrants and refugees, as well as women with disabilities and other vulnerable and/or excluded groups. Many a courageous feminist in the region paid with their freedom, livelihoods and lives as is the case with feminists from Egypt and Iraq for instance, some of whom were directly targeted and simply eliminated. This testifies to the lengths to which regimes in the region are ready to go in order to silence the voices of women.

The Differential Impact of Covid-19

It is against this backdrop that Covid-19 hit the region and exposed the sharp inequalities which feminist movements have been exposing, as indicated earlier, struggling against and disseminating knowledge about for several decades. The immediate and expected long-term impact of this pandemic has been uneven and disproportionately distributed, largely due to these stark inequalities, which many a

government and policy maker failed to take note of or even understand their magnitude and gravity and the critical need to take radical action several decades ago, actions which would have simply saved lives. The similarities between what happened and is still happening during the pandemic and feminist discourses throughout the past decades are no coincidence.

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As noted earlier, feminists challenged and deconstructed the artificial divide between the private sphere (essentially the household) and the public sphere (everything beyond the household). In doing so, they argued and proved many times over that the boundaries of the private sphere kept women in subordinate positions, stripped them of their bodily agency, reduced their life chances and left them vulnerable to all forms of violence and oppression, against which they have no legal or societal recourse given that both laws and popular mindsets are simply patriarchal. Feminists thus challenged the myth of the harmonious, loving and safe family and demonstrated that intra-household gender relations are in fact constituted by unequal power relations determined by patriarchal norms, codified by laws and reproduced by social institutions.

That patriarchal legacy came into full play during the Covid-19 pandemic, as women's vulnerability and burden increased exponentially against a system that, even before the pandemic broke out, was unable (even unwilling) to protect women and secure their rights and entitlements. The rise in domestic violence worldwide, leading to the killing of women and girls, has been explored and exposed throughout the MENA region and beyond, where neither justice nor law enforcement were able to respond to what the UN Secretary General has called "the silent pandemic."

Feminists have also long exposed what is known as the gender division of labour, a pillar of the patriarchal system which binds women and girls to the obligation of assuming most of the invisible and undervalued care work and social reproduction, at the expense of pursuing other aspirations. The pandemic has meant that women the world over were stuck at home, often in abusive relationships, and having to bear the brunt of care work and, where applicable, paid work as well.

Feminists have also long exposed the injustice of any system, whether social, economic or political, which favours the interests and material benefits of the elite and privileged over people and which does not consider that all lives are equal and that everyone has equal rights. Indeed, and during the pandemic, migrants, refugees, queer and trans people, sex workers and people with disabilities have been hit the hardest, as the crisis has exacerbated their exclusion, stigma and experiences of discrimination as well as their limited access to any kind of service or support system. Meanwhile, failing, discriminatory, authoritarian, inept and corrupt systems and states in the MENA region have responded to the pandemic with militarization, heightened oppression and control over people's liberties, mobility and freedom of expression, while at the same time refraining from providing any significant form of social protection or support, at least to those hit hardest by the pandemic.

Maintaining Gains and Pushing back the Pushback

Saying that there are no options for the MENA region is simply a lie or a case of combined carelessness and irresponsibility. The Association for Women's Rights in Development,¹ unpacks what it calls a "feminist bailout." Put simply, the feminist bailout is what it takes to fix the world following this pandemic. This does not require finding new resources, but simply shifting current mindsets and existing resources to what matters, namely the wellbeing of all humans, living things and the planet. This is certainly a major shift, which will require putting all people first in politics, policies and resource allocation.

¹ www.awid.org

The starting point of a feminist bailout is the recognition and valuing of women's care work as the foundation of the post-Covid economy through redistributing this burden within households and also through state policies. So far, women have been penalized for their social reproduction role, a role which is ironically a condition *sine qua non* for the production, reproduction and nurturing of labour and human capital. An economy that is based on the recognition of care work is an economy that shares the burden of and invests in social reproduction and all aspects of care work, including parenting. It is an economy that recognizes the importance of care work in both the private sphere and the public sphere and treats it as work deserving proper compensation, protection, benefits and rights. What the world has been shamelessly doing so far is dumping the burden of care work in the household on less fortunate, poor and often racialized women, who are expected to undertake this work in conditions that remain appalling and inhumane. In the public sphere, the post pandemic economy will recognize the value and critical importance of all forms of jobs related to care and will provide them with due rights, compensation and protection.

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The post pandemic economy that is based on the recognition and valuing of women's care work is also one that operates beyond the exclusive gender binary. Such an economy is inclusive of queer, trans, non-binary, and sex workers. Policies will ensure that bodily agency is secured and access to all forms of free, safe, and quality sexual and reproductive health and rights, including safe abortions, is safeguarded.

The post-pandemic economy will be based on the recognition that all lives are of equal value and that all people have equal access to free healthcare and education. It will recognize all forms of work and the legitimate rights of all workers to access health and social services and protection and to be free to organize.

For the inept regimes in the MENA region, the policies and changes that are needed are way beyond any form of soft reform or repackaging and rehashing of what has thus far been causing the impoverishment, despair, migration, exploitation and oppression of most of its people, especially women, migrants and gender non-conforming people.

Women have proven during the pandemic that they were at the forefront of the fight, that their age-old demands are valid and that communities and countries cannot thrive amidst such social and gender inequalities

With all the ravages that this pandemic has brought, it has nevertheless created windows of opportunity. On the one hand, it has revealed the cruel way in which the incompetence of regimes actually destroys lives and causes irreparable damage to countries at large. The pandemic has revealed the human costs of corruption and of conscious lack of investment in policies that would ensure people's wellbeing. The fact that our social policies and social protection schemes are either bankrupt, disinvested or badly run is indeed one of the main reasons which will make the recovery of large segments of the population almost impossible. The relegation of all matters related to women and what is referred to as "families" to religious institutions and religious laws has proven to be at the detriment of women and children. In fact, family laws have proven to be hazardous to women and to gender non-conforming people. By promoting a specific heteronormative and hierarchical model of a family, they have created households that are conducive to violence and op-

pression, which were simply exacerbated during the lockdowns.

Perhaps the main opportunity that this pandemic has reinforced is the fact that in many countries in the MENA region, it arrived against a backdrop of bubbling revolutions; revolutions where the voices of women, queer and trans people, migrants and people with disabilities were loud and clear. The demands of the MENA revolutions were simply validated by the pandemic. These are the demands for human rights, universal healthcare, proper compensation for all forms of work, equality in practice and in the law and, at the heart of it all, an end to state impunity, corruption and oppression.

Epilogue

In the nineties, feminist organizations in Morocco got together across various divides and ideological differences in order to push for the reform of religious laws. Such efforts had started earlier on in the seventies but took a particularly powerful impetus in the eighties, especially with the outstanding engagement and leadership of the Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc. The feminist organizations created and adopted a very powerful and inspiring slogan which bore resonance across the region. The slogan, which is still relevant today, goes, **"change is possible and necessary."**

The Covid-19 pandemic, despite its heavy toll on the lives and livelihoods of people in the MENA region, has opened new spaces for reflection and resistance and for women to take the lead in shaping the societies we seek in this region. There is no dearth of evidence at this stage in terms of the toll that the pandemic has taken on women and girls. Simultaneously, women have proven during the pandemic that they were at the forefront of the fight, that their age-old demands are valid, and that communities and countries cannot thrive amidst such social and gender inequalities. The pandemic has also shown that, despite the challenges, the solutions that are the most sustainable and beneficial to all communities, while also being inclusive, have come almost exclusively from women. What the pandemic has also shown us, yet again, is that "change is possible and necessary," and that there is no going back on women's and feminists' demands for rights, justice and inclusion.