

DISPLACED AND DISPERSED: Women and Gender Activists from the Arab Middle East and North Africa

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Introduction

Women in the Arab MENA have been at the forefront of pro-democracy protests and various forms of resistance against oppression. According to Amnesty International, the political space for women working on democracy and gender is severely challenging in the Arab MENA, and it is worsening. The deteriorating conditions of repression have led to waves of migration and displacement of women and gender activists. For decades, programmes by international agencies have sought to improve women's rights and gender equality in the region. But instead, the region is witnessing increased violence, discrimination, and marginalization of women and gender activists. This essay focuses on critical questions that have emerged in recent years: *how does the experience of migration impact the lives of women and gender activists? How can activists in migration contribute constructively to their new surroundings?* Answering these questions will shed light on the complex (and dangerous) routes of migration in the Mediterranean; and how migrants and local communities can work together to address common problems. I am writing this from my new positionality as a Lebanese migrant in Barcelona; I am privileged to be in a safe and welcoming city and therefore see a lot of constructive space for working across borders and nationalities. But I do realize that every person's journey is different.

Framing the Problems

There are more refugees and displaced persons from the Arab MENA than anywhere else in the world. The Mediterranean Sea is the world's deadliest zone for migrants and refugees. Between 2014 and 2020, the United Nations estimated over 33,000 men, women, and children drowned crossing the sea. Forced migration and conflict exacerbate gender-based violence and entrench inequalities. Women escaping through the Mediterranean are not only running from mass conflict, persecution, and atrocities but also from entrenched systems of gender-based violence, gender-biased laws, and unequal access to economic and political participation. The Arab MENA is home to severely repressive and violent regimes that persistently discriminate against and marginalize women. The region has the lowest rates of women's

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political and economic participation. This is not surprising given that women are treated as second-class citizens subject to laws that have favoured men in power for many decades. The Arab MENA shares these patterns but also has nuanced contexts that need to be understood. Some countries like Yemen and Iraq have ongoing wars; Lebanon is one of the most corrupt countries on the planet; and Libya has regional militias regulating its resources. Women and gender activists in these countries have been systematically targeted by detentions, death threats, assassinations, and increased censorship. The literature on mass migration and displacement rarely recognizes the political and civic space as a driver of migration. There has been consistent evidence that politics is the driver for migration, throughout the course of my research with activists from Syria, Lebanon, Libya, and Iraq². Women and gender activists have been experiencing repression in the last decade and repeatedly explain to me that their lives became impossible. This phenomenon of pushing activists either to migrate – or to be silenced – has weakened social movements and trans-national mobilizing across the region.

The problems migrants face stem from the experience of isolation in migration. My research focuses on this idea of “disperse-ment” that is in contrast with existing research on diaspora mobilization. Women and gender activists forced to leave, do not see themselves as members of the diaspora. In fact, Arabic-speaking diasporas may be unwelcoming to them because of their pro-democracy engagements and work on gender equality. This creates many problems for migrants. Those who survive the dangerous journey must re-invent their lives. For women, this comes at a very high cost to their careers and well-being. Not only do women risk systemic de-skilling of their labour and expertise, but they also lose networks of support from friends and family.

When women and gender activists are able to re-settle as migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers they face social and psychological pressures to conform to a new context. Increasingly – and every now and then – refugees also face the looming threat of forced return. Migrants cannot risk losing jobs or cannot be fussy about what kind of jobs they get because, without a work permit, they will also be on the first place back home. There are three stops for migrants and refugees that are gendered, especially if the journey is seen from the perspective of activists escaping violence and persecution.

Oppression and violent repression in the Arab MENA are among the main drivers for women to migrate or be forced to leave. The short-lived gains and momentum from mass uprisings in the last decades have been reversed. Across the region, and severely in Lebanon, we are witnessing a backlash against women in politics and gender activists. For a short moment in time, women were at the forefront of pro-democracy protests but are now being pushed to leave witnessing the

² The quotes used here are part of an ongoing multi-country research I am conducting on this topic. Cities across Europe have been de-identified to ensure complete anonymity of participants in the study.



destruction of their movements and increased intolerance towards gender equality in the region. In the below section, I share some quotes from the ongoing research that highlight how gendered the various steps are in the experience of forced displacement.

Departure

Women leave their countries already as second-class citizens, reeling under regimes of corruption, mass murder, and kafala systems that lock migrant women in slavery-like conditions. Women and gender activists depart in a state of despair having been rendered hopeless and helpless.

"I almost died getting out, I was put in a car trunk for about two days straight. But that was the easy part. I left Syria because it was no longer safe for me even to go out on my balcony."

"I did not really 'leave' Libya, I still do my work and activism, but I am not there physically. I would have stayed believe me. The death threats did not scare me personally, but I am a mother of two children and I have seen what happens to orphans in my town, so I left – physically – for them. We went to Malta and from there to Europe. I am here now; my body is here yes but my heart and mind are still there."

Arrival

Simply arriving to safety, women's well-being and personal autonomy are not automatically secured. Women and gender activists arriving in a new city may face antagonism from the diaspora just as much as from nationals of the host country.

"I was an activist back home and had so much hope. But right now, I lost hope and I lost all of my friends. I am starting over from scratch and barely have enough time to catch up because now I am supporting my parents who lost all their money. All in all, I am not sure if my career will ever recover from this blow."

"Berlin gave me the freedom to enjoy my life and express my sexuality; something that would have gotten me killed in Syria. I want to support others back home but I feel marginalized and with little voice, as if I am here only to survive not more."

"I try to lay low here in Europe, because of my participation in the Lebanese revolution. I worry about other Lebanese people judging me or even harming me. So I keep a low profile but I wish I did not have to."

An Impossible Return

Migrants and refugees may not be able or willing to return; for a variety of complex and different reasons.



These reasons can range from fear of persecution and violence, loss of assets or jobs, to wanting a different future for themselves and their loved ones.

"I dream about it every day, and I wish I could stop dreaming about it so much. It will never be, it can never be home again. As an artist and critic, it is a black box, the ones who go in may never go out, and for people like me it literally means suicide."

"My kids are European, our family lives in a very European neighbourhood. I am involved in human rights protection back in Libya, return is out of the question. What I'll do next, I have no clue."

"Life in refuge made me more open about my sexuality and my activism through my art and my writing. I can't imagine going back, even with all the guarantees in the world. Even if in a hypothetical scenario there could be peace, my family would never accept me back in this way)."

Recommendations for Inclusion through Co-creation

These narratives reveal various dimensions of how gender and activism weigh on the well-being and potential career avenues for women from the Arab MENA. One of the most repeated sentiments in my research spanning over several years has been the loss of a sense of political agency. In this section, I propose co-creation as a lens through which migrants can practice dignified participation in their new contexts. Host cities, like Barcelona, have a large role to play in not only welcoming migrants but also engaging their different types of experiences and expertise. It may be true that the Arab MENA has severe forms of oppression but the experiences of repression, discrimination, and marginalization of women, are rather global experiences and trends. Women and gender activists who are migrants can have a lot to share from their experience, even on what went wrong. For example, a wealth of international organisations is working on women's rights and gender equality in the Arab MENA. These organisations would benefit from hearing from migrants about what went wrong and continues to go wrong in the Arab MENA. The invitation I am making here is not about simply consulting migrants, interviewing migrants, or even inviting migrants to speak. My invitation is that we think of common problems and solutions together through a process of co-creation. We can do that using three related mechanisms and activities. These mechanisms and activities are not restricted to national level mobilising but rather modelling this approach at the local level. Inclusion as co-creation can be initiated through multi-stakeholder collaborations among local businesses, universities, civil society organizations, and city councils.

Co-creation is the process through which policy questions are formulated and solutions are developed. In this process, participants in decision-making and agenda-setting sit on an equal footing with each other. In action, this means that refugees and policymakers, professors and students, media representatives and civil society organisations, together with employers all engage in a deliberative dialogue about what the problems are and equally contribute to solutions. This decentralises accountability and gives migrant women a dignified opportunity to participate and be heard. Some recommendations that emerge from my research - and that inspired by my time in the uniquely welcoming city of Barcelona – include:

- **Designing research interventions as spaces of reflection and sharing:** statistical data on numbers of refugees and migrants from the Arab MENA do not help policy-makers unpack the nuanced dynamics and experiences. Migrant women are not monolithic entities, and we can begin to avoid stereotypes by documenting and synthesizing stories and lived experiences.
- **Avoiding only extracting data and insights and replace that with a process of identifying together with women migrants what local priorities for policies should look like.** Decision-makers, whether city councils or employers, can benefit from integrating the perspective of migrants in identifying unseen problems and proposing solutions.
- **Advocating across disciplinary or sectoral boundaries in a way that engages a maximum number of allies and allied institutions.** Decision-makers can avoid institutions working in silos by bringing everyone together sharing common demands such as labor market inclusion, protection mechanisms, and better healthcare.