

Women's Mobilization in Arab Social Movements: What Gains, What Pain?

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The revolutions and protest movements that unfolded in the Arab world in 2011 and 2019 have profoundly impacted women's struggles and engagement. While the focus has been on the opportunities these movements provided for fighting for gender equality and making women's struggles more visible, less attention has been paid to the impacts of rising authoritarianism and human rights restrictions on women's mobilization and organizing capacities. There is a dire need to consider these events from a long-term perspective and link them to the challenges experienced by women activists in Arab social movements post-2019, shedding light on the strategies employed, the limitations faced and the emerging trends in their mobilization efforts.

Successful Strategies for Women's Rights as an Inherent Part of the Revolutionary Agenda

One of the key factors contributing to the success of women's rights struggles in the region has been the active involvement of young women, particularly university students. These women have brought fresh perspectives and re-politized feminism in ways that have resonated with a wider audience.

Thanks to decades of experience and efforts to enhance their professional advocacy skills, women's rights promoters, including academic researchers, members of non-governmental organizations, grassroots activists, and experts in fields such as law enforcement and journalism, effectively utilized public spaces and, even more so, social media and cyber activism, to advance their cause. These efforts were

marked by three successful strategies. Firstly, social media platforms allowed women activists to connect and unite across generations, strengthening their collective presence. Secondly, it helped raise awareness among non-politicized individuals on the importance of gender equality as a fundamental element of a just society. Lastly, women activists strategically positioned themselves against neoliberal economic frameworks and advocated for economic justice. They transcended the ideological polarization that marginalized their voices in the past, such as by solely targeting (and being targeted by) Islamist movements and state feminism.

Intersectional Approaches and Expanding Demands

In 2011 and 2019, another reason for the successful integration of women activists in broader political demands for change and their resonance in new audiences was their presentation of gender-based discrimination from an intersectional angle, explaining the interplay of violence with ethnicity, class and religion. By aligning their struggle with broader social justice movements and leveraging cultural norms of solidarity, they cultivated greater societal openness toward rejecting discriminatory laws and protecting the most economically vulnerable women from sexual harassment and domestic violence.

Shifting away from the big debates on the need for major institutional reforms, they focused on cases previously considered to be trivial, launching pressure campaigns on governments. These campaigns sometimes led to legal reforms, but more often resulted in the involvement of many ordinary men and women in highlighting the normalization of women's presence in public spaces and their recognition as

full political subjects. They thereby drew attention to the need to tackle what were once considered insurmountable social taboos. Tunisia passed legislation protecting women from violence, and a large coalition of Moroccan associations called for the legalization of abortion, their arguments fuelled by examples of rape victims. Algerian activists and public figures active in the Hirak raised awareness about femicide by launching a campaign that lists cases and makes them public.

Limits of Gender Activism after 2020

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and subsequent lockdowns and restrictions imposed by governments had detrimental effects on gender activism in the Arab world. The confinement measures exacerbated domestic violence, making it harder for activists to address this issue effectively. Furthermore, the digital space, which had previously provided a platform for women's voices, became a breeding ground for online harassment and attacks from supporters of authoritarian regimes. Women activists, who had previously played diverse roles as scholars, journalists, human rights defenders, politicians and activists, faced restrictions on their freedom of expression. This limited their ability to participate in public discourse and advocate for gender equality.

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While official participation, such as implementing quotas and encouraging women to run for public offices, has resulted in increased female representation in institutions, its effectiveness in driving genuine change remains questionable. Restrictive laws, the autocratic use of political parties and limited access to state resources and decision-making spaces have hindered the transformative potential of of-

ficial participation. Additionally, the promotion of women's exceptional roles within revolutionary movements has often been used, like after Arab countries' historic independence, to limit their engagement to symbolic and tokenistic positions. This prevents their meaningful participation in substantive political debates.

Fragmentation within grassroots and civil society organizing seems to be the most pressing issue

The emergence of what has been referred to as the "Fourth Wave" of feminism in the Arab world, fuelled by the opportunities brought about by the protest episodes of 2011 and 2019, continues to face challenges, due to the political transformation mentioned above. Fragmentation within grassroots and civil society organizing seems to be the most pressing issue. While women's movements have made significant strides in mobilizing across the region, the lack of cohesive coordination and unified goals has hindered their ability to effect substantial and lasting change. Fragmentation has been further exacerbated by an overreliance on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and foreign support (forced by the national scarcity of economic support), which has led to an overemphasis on specific issues and agendas dictated by external actors rather than addressing the broader needs and aspirations of women within the Arab context.

Increasingly, younger generations of women activists are navigating cultural norms and traditions by framing their demands for gender equality in ways that resonate with local contexts. They leverage existing social networks and alliances to gain support and legitimacy for their cause.

Looking ahead

The post-2019 Arab social movements have provided unprecedented opportunities for women's mobilization and the politicization of citizens on gender issues. Women have increasingly focused on self-representation, local resistance and women's movements'

organizational capacity. They have also developed trans-class solidarity networks to share strategies and build support.

However, challenges persist. Maintaining a central position in public and political debates in times of authoritarian restoration will have the greatest influence on women's mobilization in the future. There is a need for research studies to explore how women's concerns can be brought back into the public sphere and given a more prominent role. Moreover, it is critical to reflect on how Arab mobilizations can be unpacked and how local actors can continue to contribute and support the transformation of their societies. The broader public's access to information on the importance of women's rights, circulating knowledge and appropriate new technologies, tools, and funding sources are some of the means to bypass the challenges evoked earlier.

Other challenges lie in how women activists can continue to build on their gains from the 2011 and 2019 protest episodes. Feminists, women's organizations and activists must strengthen interoperability. This can be achieved by establishing networks and platforms that facilitate information sharing, resource mobilization and joint advocacy efforts. By fostering solidarity and creating dialogue spaces,

women activists can build alliances across different sectors and movements, amplifying their collective voice and impact. It is imperative, for example, to better engage with traditional and religious institutions, but also with private sector actors, for example, in promoting gender awareness in policies that protect women's rights from various forms of violence and harassment.

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Women's mobilization has fostered and helped the rebirth of a culture of activism. This culture inspires upcoming generations of women and men to continue advocating for their rights. Looking ahead, it is vitally important now to build on these gains and reinvent spaces and voices that will keep these issues on the political agenda.