

## Women's/Feminist Activism in North Africa

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**Abstract.** A survey of women's rights activism in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia from the 1980s to the Arab Spring shows reveals an emphasis on legal equality through family law reform, collective action against fundamentalism and political Islam, advocacy to end violence against women, and lobbying to enhance women's political participation and social rights.

The history of feminist activism in North Africa – or the Maghreb – dates back to the 1970s, when women-and-development study groups were formed. In the 1980s, academics and activists mobilized to warn about the growing Islamist influence, and in the latter part of the 1980s they became part of feminist sociologist Fatima Mernissi's Maghreb-wide anti-fundamentalist network. In the early 1990s feminists from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia formed the Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité to push for egalitarian family laws and full citizenship for women. Since then, a number of key legal reforms and policy initiatives for women's rights have been achieved. In addition, women played prominent roles in the Arab Spring protests of 2011, which led to the collapse of governments in Egypt and Tunisia, constitutional changes in Morocco, and promises of reform in Algeria.

Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia form a geocultural subregion in that they are contiguous in territory; share an experience of French colonialism; retain some francophone identity as well as French-influenced institutions such as the education system, the judiciary, and trade unions; and are home to some of the most prominent women's rights groups in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. A common pattern is attention to labor and social rights issues as well as to the enhancement of women's civil and political rights. Maghrebian women are major contributors to, and participants in, civil society and democracy movements; they see a democratic polity as both a desirable alternative to authoritarianism and a pathway to their own equality and rights. Noteworthy is that until 2011, the only MENA countries with women political party leaders were Algeria and Tunisia; Louisa Hanoune and Maya Jribi led left-wing parties; Khalida Toumi (Messaoudi) co-led the ruling party. Because of these shared characteristics, this essay focuses on the three countries. And although non-feminist forms of women's activism, such as the activities of women associated with Islamist movements and parties, exist in the Maghreb, this paper focuses on *feminist* activism.

The immediate post-colonial period saw women involved almost exclusively in either official women's organizations or charitable associations, but new organizations formed in the 1980s and 1990s, including Morocco's Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc (ADFM), Algeria's SOS Femmes en Détresse, Tunisia's Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (known as Femmes Démocrates), and women-led professional associations. In the

absence of significant female participation in the labor force or in government, critically minded educated women could establish their authority, take part in decision-making, engage with various publics, develop their civic skills, and exercise political rights in their own organizations. Another form of women's participation in civil society has involved literary efforts, including the production of books, magazines, and films. These developments reflect socio-demographic changes in the female population, including greater educational attainment, the rising age at first marriage, smaller family size, and women's presence in an array of professional fields and occupations. Travel abroad, access to satellite TV, and knowledge of information technology facilitates international connections and fosters civic and feminist activism. Participation in media, including a feminist press, and in cultural production enables women to access the public sphere and thus national debates and dialogues.

At the same time, the Maghreb participates in the world economy and world society, which makes it vulnerable to the vagaries of global capitalism and the recipient of global discourses. Thus, when states began implementing structural adjustment policies from the late 1970s into the 1990s, not only unions but also the burgeoning feminist groups began to raise objections. While the unions protested on the streets, the feminist groups wrote critiques in their domestic publications as well as in documents prepared for the UN's Third World Conference on Women, in Nairobi in 1985, and the Fourth World Conference, in Beijing in 1995. The Collectif was able to draw on the emerging global women's rights agenda, notably the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), as well as funding from German foundations, to advance its case for an egalitarian family code and to launch campaigns to improve their legal status and social positions and to ensure that their governments implement international agreements. The group also relied on the support of other transnational feminist networks, such as Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML) and the Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace (WLP). The WLP's translation service produced an English-language version of an important Collectif study of family law across the Maghreb.

The contemporary discourses of women's participation, human rights, civil society, modernity, citizenship, and democratization reflect the changing sociopolitical dynamics of women's activism. Advocacy becomes more pointed, with a focus on the need to reform discriminatory family laws and bring them in line with constitutional guarantees of equality and with CEDAW; to criminalize domestic violence and prohibit sexual harassment; to grant women equal nationality rights so that their children may acquire citizenship through the mother and not just the father; and to create mechanisms to facilitate women's access to employment and political decision-making. The demands and strategies are indicative of the political maturity of the women's rights movement.

## **Tunisia**

Tunisian scholar-activists have underscored the importance to women's rights of the 1956 Code du Statut Personnel (Tunisia's family law), introduced by President Bourguiba. Still, progressive women were aware of discrimination and oppression. The *Women's Condition Study Club* celebrated International Women's Day on March 8, 1980 and subsequently a group of women intellectuals formed the Taher Haddad Club – named after a famous liberal thinker – which became a center for the discussion of social problems and women's rights. Themes included low-income and rural women's precarious conditions, the plight of divorced mothers without family

support or resources, girls forced to leave school, household violence, and media images of women. A bilingual (Arabic and French) feminist magazine called *Nissa* (Woman) appeared in 1985; feature articles over the first year of publication included discussions of the problem of illegitimate children, the personal status laws of Tunisia and Egypt (both under attack that year), the Israeli bombing raid of the PLO headquarters in a suburb of Tunis, the pros and cons of sex-segregated activities, the risks of childbirth, and feminism. The magazine folded in 1987 mainly because of disagreements among its staff members, who then went on to join some of the associations mentioned above.

Political opportunities specific to Tunisia, even in an authoritarian context, enabled the women's rights movement to grow. The Tunisian government signed CEDAW in July 1980, though it would be another five years until ratification. In 1982, Tunis was host to UNESCO's Expert Meeting on Multidisciplinary Research on Women in the Arab World. Two autonomous feminist organizations appeared in 1989: the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (known by its French acronym AFTURD) and the Femmes Démocrates, which would come to have close ties to the Women's Commission of the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT). Other women's organizations – notably the National Union of Tunisian Women and the Association of Tunisian Mothers – were more closely linked to the state. Khedija Arfaoui has argued that government policies and programs enabled the emergence of women's organizations and other NGOs in that period. Still, as law professor Alya Cherif-Chammari noted in a 1992 book, women remained unequal in inheritance and the law prohibited the marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man while allowing a Muslim man to marry a Christian or Jewish woman. Women activists also were concerned about the economic crisis and the rise of *intégrisme* in Tunisia and elsewhere in North Africa.

As a result of women's activities – and possibly, too, because of their stated opposition to Islamic fundamentalism – the Tunisian state under President Ben Ali introduced wide-ranging amendments to the family law in 1993. The mother's consent was now required in addition to the father's for the marriage of a minor; a wife's duty of obedience to her husband was replaced by her right to be treated with care and concern; she gained the right to participate in the management of the family's affairs, such as children's education, travel, and financial matters; the couple could choose joint or separate financial holdings, to be stipulated in the marriage contract. If a child is born out of wedlock and the father is known, the child carries the father's name, has the right to the father's support until reaching adulthood, and inherits the same portion as a daughter. In 1998, a law criminalizing crimes of honor was adopted; what is more, the punishment for domestic violence was made double that of an ordinary offense.

At the 2004 Arab League Summit held in Tunis, as described by Lilia Labidi, the host nation called on the member states to “consider the promotion of the rights of Arab women as a fundamental axis of the process of development and modernization of Arab societies.” Thus were the Femmes Démocrates able to secure the passage in 2004 of the country's first legislation combating sexual harassment; the association also established the first *centre d'écoute*. This counseling center and hotline was followed by one in Algeria hosted by the country's main trade union.

With the launch of the Arab Spring in Tunisia in January 2011 and the collapse of the Ben Ali government, feminist groups mobilized to ensure a democratic transition *with* women. Fearing that the “Dignity revolution” in which they had taken part would come to favor Ennahda – the Islamic party that had been banned since the early 1990s – and recalling Ennahda's

regressive stance on women's issues in the past, Tunisian feminists staged a protest on the eve of leader Ghannouchi's return from exile in January 2011. When the constituent assembly, which was dominated by Ennahda, sought to replace the term *equality* with words akin to *complementarity* or *partnership*, women's rights activists and their male supporters in the secular and left-wing parties took to the streets and to the domestic and international media in protest. The constituent assembly retained the term *equality*. The new Tunisian constitution was finalized and adopted in January 2014.

## **Morocco**

Long subject to a highly patriarchal family law, the Mudawana, Moroccan women saw its replacement in 2004 with a more egalitarian set of laws and norms for marital life and family affairs – the result of a 12-year feminist campaign led by feminist groups such as l'Union d'action feminine and the ADFM, as the latter noted:

The new law embodies the principle of shared family responsibilities between the spouses. It was the product of extensive public discussion of challenges women faced under the previous law, as well as analysis of the implications of human rights standards and religious texts. To help ensure effective implementation of the new rights that have been guaranteed, the legislative changes were accompanied by the creation of dedicated Family Courts, and the Ministry of Justice is enhancing the provision of support services and training for judges and court officials.

Introduction of the new family code was part of a broader wave of important reforms within the country, including changes to the electoral code (in 2002), which introduced a “national list” that reserved thirty parliamentary seats for women, to the labor code (in 2004) to introduce the concept of sexual harassment in the workplace, and to the nationality code (in 2007) to give women and men equal rights to transmit nationality to their children as required by CEDAW's Article 9. In February 2004, a coalition to ensure the implementation of Morocco's new labor law was launched by the Centre des Droits des Gens, the Ligue Démocratique pour les Droits des Femmes, and the Association Marocaine des Droits des Femmes, and in November of that year it was joined by the Union Marocaine du Travail, the Confédération Démocratique du Travail, and the Association Marocaine des Droits Humains. The campaign also issued a report entitled *Protection des Droits des Femmes*, which, among other things, pointed out that Morocco had yet to sign and ratify ILO Convention 183 on maternity protection, designed to protect the rights of working mothers. More recently, Moroccan feminist groups formed a coalition with physicians' groups and human rights organizations, called the Springtime of Dignity, to urge the government to revise the penal code to criminalize all forms of violence against women and “preserve the dignity of women, their physical and psychology integrity, and their autonomy.”

Following the Arab Spring, ADFM hosted a regional seminar in Rabat in May 2011 on Women and Democratic Transitions in the MENA region, which was attended by representatives from civil society, women's rights organizations, UN Women and other international organizations and the diplomatic corps from Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. The Moroccan Minister of Women's Affairs at the time, Nouzha Skalli, announced that after years of advocacy by women's rights organizations, the Moroccan government would officially ratify

CEDAW's Optional Protocol. Minister Skalli, a socialist well known for her commitment to gender equality and to women's rights, also discussed the challenges and prospects for equality in the constitutional reform process in Morocco; she also noted that women made up five of the eighteen members of the Consultative Commission for the Constitutional Reform Coalition. Morocco's constitutional amendments were approved in a referendum in July 2011.

## **Algeria**

The Algerian women's movement has endured – but stood against – patriarchal laws and norms and Islamist terrorism, and it helped to build the Collectif. It has shown a most audacious opposition to both Islamism (and state autocracy) in a manner that cost a number of women activists their lives during the wave of Islamist terror in the 1990s. Algerian feminists saw their movement as simultaneously democratic and feminist, fighting for modernity and individual rights while also holding on to the socialist legacy of equality of citizens. They were critical of past practice subsuming the woman question under national liberation and the building of Algerian-style socialism. The ideological and cultural divide between Islamist and non-Islamist women activists was enormous; feminists distinguished “women of the modernist trend” from the women of the Islamist movement. According to one such activist-theorist, Doria Cherifati-Merabtine, the modernist women's movement, comprised mainly of older university women from the first post-independence generation of intellectuals, “have learned at their expense that no change is possible if the outlook on woman and her place within society does not evolve.” These modernist women are committed to both “an egalitarian social project” and recognition of the rights of the “Woman-Individual”.

In previous work, I have examined three waves of Algerian women's collective action since the 1980s: against the conservative family code in the immediate post-Boumediène period, against the Islamist movement and the terrorism of the 1990s, and for gender justice in the new century. Algerian feminist groups have worked with each other, with human rights groups and the country's main trade union, and with the Collectif to achieve policy and legal reforms, including some amendments to the family law in 2005, and a law against sexual harassment. Still, feminist groups gathered in March 2010 to call for the total repeal of the family law and its replacement with a new, egalitarian code. In this they were supported by Louisa Hanoune, leader of the Workers' Party. (Her party won 20 seats – out of 462 – in the 2012 parliamentary elections.)

In 2002, in recognition of the feminist movement and its valiant stance in the face of Islamist terrorism, Algerian president Bouteflika appointed five well-known women's rights advocates to his cabinet. Although the government fell after one year, the remarkable 25 percent female composition of the cabinet was unprecedented and has yet to be replicated elsewhere in the region. In May 2012, as a result of the adoption of a gender quota for the new parliamentary elections, women came to comprise 31 percent of parliamentary seats – the highest in the region. (Elsewhere in North Africa, women's parliamentary share in 2013 was 27 percent in Tunisia, 17 percent in Morocco, and a mere 2 percent in Egypt.) As of late 2013, the Interparliamentary Union's ranking of women in national parliaments placed Algeria at 26 out of 142 countries examined. The cabinet was less impressive: just three women – including the well-known feminist Khalida Toumi, minister of culture – out of a total of 39 ministers.

Turning to feminist studies in the Maghreb, Fatima Mernissi's first book, *Behind the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* – which appeared in 1976 as the

product of her doctoral dissertation in sociology at Brandeis University in the United States – influenced a generation of scholars and set the stage for the fields of North African women’s studies, Middle East women’s studies, and the study of women and Islam. Mernissi’s sociological insights and bold analyses laid bare some of the key contradictions in women’s status and gender relations in Muslim societies generally and in Morocco in particular: the application of Sharia-based family law privileged men, subordinated women, and prevented companionate marriage. The second edition of her book appeared in 1987 in revised form with a new Introduction that now examined Islamic fundamentalist movements and found them to be the products of the contradictions of modernization, including changes in gender relations and women’s roles. As she memorably noted in the Preface: “If fundamentalists are calling for a return of the veil, it must be because women have been taking off the veil.”

Founded in 1987 by Leila Chaoui, the publishing house *Le Fennec* promoted writing by and on women. As Loubna Skalli notes, *Le Fennec*’s multi-disciplinary and multilingual research strengthened regional research networks of Moroccan, Tunisian and Algerian activists, media professionals, and academics; published texts in both Arabic and French to cater to needs of larger circles of writers and readers; and encouraged men and women researchers/activists to work, write and publish together. In Algeria, women academics such as Cherifa Bouatta, the novelist and essayist Assia Djebar and the filmmaker Horria Saihi have sought to uncover women’s roles in the 1950s liberation movement and the building of the new state and society, and have boldly criticized fundamentalist thinking and Islamist terrorism. Saihi’s documentary *Algérie des Femmes* recounts the horror of kidnapping, torture, and rape inflicted on women during the years of Islamist terrorism. The combination of women’s literary production, advocacy efforts, mobilizing structures, access to various media, use of new information and communication technologies and engagement with various publics has been called by Valentine Moghadam and Fatima Sadiqi “a gradual feminization of the public sphere” in North Africa.

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