

Women and Activism in the Arab World

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Democracy, simply defined as the rule of the people, by the people, for the people, is a term that has dominated political and sociological discourse and literature from ancient times up till now. However, determining who constitutes “The people” was, and continues to be, a culture- and time-bound issue.

Throughout most of human history, women constituted one of the social groups excluded from the category of “The People.” They had to wait till the twentieth century, and in some regions the third millennium to acquire equality with the male population in social, political and economic rights. This was brought about by the efforts of many women activists and their male supporters aided by various developments at the social, economic and political levels.

A close look, however, at the scope, nature and levels of this equality and its actual exercise reveals the existence of a gap between theory and practice even in the most developed of nations. It is the width of this gap and the possibility of bridging it that varies among regions and cultures. Unfortunately, the Arab world is the region that possesses the widest gap and is the area where the gap is the most difficult to bridge.

In light of a) the various efforts made by international governmental organizations, local and regional non-governmental organizations, and foreign governments to enhance gender equality at all levels as a necessary step in achieving sustainable development in the Arab world, and b) the results achieved so far, which can by no means be considered satisfactory, one cannot but wonder why the gap is still that wide.

Is it simply a result of the nature of Arab political systems and/or cultural and religious traditions? Or is it the result of lack of Arab women activists? Do Arab women today display a disinterest or even apathy towards such issues? Is it a result of changes in the perception and definition of activism, its scope and goals brought about by local and external developments at the social, cultural, political and economic levels? Is it the result of lack of coordination, or maybe an inherent conflict among various women’s movements? (Secular versus Islamic feminism.) Are the activists of today any different from those of yesterday, and how?

The list of such questions demanding answers can go on and on. This is why an *Al Raida* issue on *Women’s Activism in the Arab World* is in order. Though it may not



be able to provide answers to all the above and related questions, it will shed light on many aspects of Arab women's activism and its status today.

Defining "activism" to determine what can be included in this issue was no easy job. Proposed definitions ranged between the highly restrictive narrow definitions, such as those that make activism synonymous with dissent and protest, and the very broad definitions which consider activism a synonym of participation. This wide range of definitions reveals a lack of consensus among scholars and practitioners over the basic characteristics of an activist, as well as over the components of activism, its scope, means, and the direction of change it seeks to achieve. It also reveals that the definition of activism and the identification of its components is time- and culture-bound.

The issue of defining activism becomes more complex when it comes to defining "women's activism." The starting point in dealing with this issue — and in an attempt at unfolding

its complexities — is drawing the line between three major concepts: exercising one's rights, participation, and activism.

Participation, broadly defined as involvement, engagements, and playing a part in the activities of the community (regardless of the size of the community or the activity concerned) is a concept that encompasses the other two. It is manifested in different forms and at different levels. The major

criteria that can be used to distinguish between the various forms and levels of participation are basically related to the level of awareness, intention, concern, drive, belief in the feasibility of participation and the ability to make a difference, and the nature of the goals desired by the participant.

Using these variables to identify the various levels of participation results in the "exercise of one's rights" being the simplest and lowest level of participation and activism as the highest most complex level. Noteworthy are two major points on this subcategorization and leveling of participation. First the levels and forms of participation are by no means mutually exclusive. The overlap between them may blur the observers' view of the realities of the role played by the participant if all factors are not considered. Second, each of the levels of participation can be

divided into sublevels with some of those sublevels constituting the overlap points with the following level. This suggests that there are different levels and forms of activism.

Exercise of one's rights is not necessarily a form of activism although it is an inherent first step towards it. Such action when resulting from habit, the need to fill one's time or to be accepted by the community (family or broader), the wish of pleasing God and securing a place in heaven or any reason emanating from the self, rotating in its sphere, with serving it being the final goal without any calculated decision to influence the environment cannot be considered a form of activism. As such, the individual — male or female — who is engaged, for example in welfare and social work for the above purposes cannot be considered an activist. The same applies to a person casting a vote in local or national elections or even joining in protest politics in compliance with family or peer pressures and demands. This also applies to a woman going to court or an NGO to report home violence to end her personal suffering. It is only when such actions are intentionally carried out to serve people other than the self that we can consider them a step towards activism — i.e. when the woman in the above example carries her case further by making her experience public for others to benefit from, or exposes lack of impartiality and bias in the judicial system or the discriminatory character of personal status laws and their implementation as evidenced in her case, thus directing attention to the need to act on such issues.

The fact that a) the simple exercise of such rights by women is very much highlighted and labeled activism (especially those called direct-action activism) and b) that they are not, at least not equally, called so when carried out by men raises two important points that one must keep in mind. The first is that the definition and scope of activism is time- and culture-bound sometimes necessitating the use of broad definitions to account for mundane non-compliance actions in daily life or pure exercise of a natural right which may be a major form of activism in some cultural and social settings while not in others. The second is a warning against mixing the instrument with its user when adopting such broad definitions. Women who are filing a case on home violence or involving themselves in social and welfare work etc. are mere cases that are by themselves insignificant until an individual, an organization, an institution etc. decides to add these cases up to show the existence of a social trend or problem, raises awareness about it, mobilizes support, and demands dealing with it for the sake of present and/or future generations. These banner holders (who may be male) are the real activists and not the individual cases. The essence of their final goals is more often than

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not a restructuring of power relations in society. This makes activism, regardless of its concerns, a political activity at heart.

The next level of participation (which can also be divided into sublevels, some of which are prone to become activists) is that of the active participants. At this level the participant is characterized by a relatively higher level of awareness, knowledge of, and interest in what goes on around him or her. His or her choice to participate is generally a deliberate calculated one guided by a belief in the ability to make a difference and induce gradual peaceful change through available means and instruments. However, the level of commitment, participation and devotion to work on certain issues is dictated more by convenience than by conviction and devotion. This is why their participation outside the available and necessary is rather sporadic and temporary (attend meetings, participate in discussions but do not go for long-term commitments).

Activism, the highest level of participation, is usually guided by a vision of a better future for a group of people (regardless of the size of the group). Activists working on bringing about such visions set, individually or collectively, precise objectives or goals, draw up action plans the initial steps of which are exposing the issue, its nature, size and scope, raising awareness about it, mobilizing support for it to put it on the agenda of decision-makers or people capable of making the change. An activist's work, which is usually voluntary, is characterized by continuity, devotion, persistence, service to the public not private interest, and readiness to devote time, effort, and resources to achieve desired goals.

As such, activism is one form of participation, but not all forms and levels of participation can be categorized as activism. Regardless of the nature and scope of the issues it may be covering it is in the final analysis a political activity. It tries, directly or indirectly, to restructure power and influence in a society (empowerment of certain groups, spreading a new culture, making specific demands etc.).

After defining activism by identifying its components and the basic characteristics of an activist that sets him or her apart from others, is the issue of defining women's activism, i.e. the criteria that must be used to differentiate women's activism from male activism. Is women's activism only that dealing with women's issues and/or that carried out by women-only organizations?

Adopting these criteria results in a very restrictive definition of the concept which will, among other things, lead to

- a) the exclusion of major contributions made by women on issues that have nothing to do with exclusive women's

concerns, e.g. women activists demanding the loosening of the royal hold on the judiciary and other institutions in Morocco or women activists in Lebanon demanding legal punishment for inhumane treatment of housemaids or those demanding an end to foreign occupation and meddling in Lebanese domestic affairs.

- b) the exclusion of joint concerted male-female activism on women's and non-women's issues (thus excluding many women activists) which have proven to be the most effective in achieving set objectives.

- c) raising questions as to why some activities are considered activism when carried out by women (welfare and social work, mosque movements etc.) and not labeled so when carried out by men.

- d) the mislabeling of certain types of women's activism due to lack of conformity with cultural and social norms and/or acceptance by the society. i.e. To what extent do social, cultural and religious constraints impact on the definition, nature, scope and goals of women's activism?

- e) the difficulty of drawing the line between women's activism on one hand and feminism on the other especially since many Arab woman activists reject being called feminists due to the Western connotations associated with the term and some extremist trends in the history of the feminist movement which are seen, even by women, as a threat to the traditions and culture of the Arab world.

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The above indicates that a broader definition of women's activism is more feasible since it will encompass all forms and levels of activism in which activists are involved and will prevent any underestimation of the role of women in pressing for the improvement of their communities and higher levels of democratic practices.

In most cases activism aims at change and improvement of a particular situation. This raises a few questions. First, is change unidirectional moving according to a set course mainly towards progress? Second, improvement towards what? i.e. What is the goal at the end of this course of change?

A significant part of the literature on modernization and development published in the second half of the twentieth century has dealt with the first question and rejected the unidirectionality of change (contrary to Fukuyama's



argument). However, the second question and the answer to it remain subjective, value laden and culture bound. This is best evidenced by the position of the Western-oriented secular feminism and women's activism from Islamic feminism and women's activism and vice versa where what is considered an advancement or improvement by one group is considered a retreat and deterioration by the other. It is also evidenced by the impact of the degree of societal acceptance and conformity of the demanded change and desired goals with the culture, traditions and social structures in determining what is considered activism and what isn't (sometimes labeled hereticism).

Finally, and since most activism is taking place nowadays through NGOs and civil society associations, one cannot but wonder as to the real causes behind, and the implications of the mushrooming of such organizations specialized in women's issues and having overlapping agendas. Is this phenomenon an indicator of democratic practice and good governance? Is it a source of strength for activists or a sign of weakness and manipulation by com-

peting politicians and local as well as foreign funders? Who are the active members of such associations and what are their socio-economic and political backgrounds? What motivates them to become activists? How close or disconnected are they from the wider population? What is the degree of turn-over, rotation of power and networking within such organizations? Does their search for specific skills lead to the exclusion of a large part of their population? What is the degree of commitment among their members? Do we need more NGOs or a functionalization of the existing ones?

It is our belief that an in-depth investigation of such issues and an attempt at providing answers to the above questions will not only contribute to an objective assessment of Arab women's activism today, but may help direct our attention to the possibility of women's activism, same as many other social movements, being in some cases an instrument in the ongoing struggle over power and its restructuring in Arab societies which may have negative consequences not only on the status of women but on Arab societies as a whole.

