

A feminine Spring Cleaning?

Women's organizations in MENA after the Arab Spring

Executive summary



Before the Arab Spring, civil society in the Arab world did exist, albeit in different forms than in other regions of the world and with limited space to challenge the political regime. In the countries subject of this study (Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Jordan) now, new grassroots movements are growing in number, scope and diversity and both these groups and individual activists are increasingly capable to voice their concerns and successful in achieving the sought after change. This study looked into how the landscape of civil society has changed since 2011, thus analyzing this flourishing of new organizations and actors in the context of civil society as a whole and what their development has brought in terms of changes. Focussing on women's organizations solely, the main research question was "*How has the landscape of women's civil society in the MENA region changed since 2011?*". This question is answered through a series of in-depth interviews with activists or NGO-representatives from the respective countries, combined with extensive desk research.

The first change that each country has experienced is a vast influx of new civil society actors and organizations directly after the demonstrations in 2011. A new generation of young women entered civil society during the momentum. These young women participate in civil society in a different way than more established women activists. Civil society is often said to have the dual role of service delivery and creating dialogue. These young women were different in their work in civil society, as they rarely held more principled generic feminist slogans, but rather focus on one issue that impacts women's daily lives. On the creating dialogue side, we can see that the new generation mostly aimed to create a space for discussion and policy change by linking women's issues to more generic issues of social justice and equality, instead of linking to feminist ideas.

The second visible change in women's civil society since 2011 can be seen in the types of activities employed by all actors, but especially these new actors. Social media and other creative methods like intervention teams, graffiti, civic journalism through social media, wiki-pages of HR violations, underground music, documentaries etc have been employed more widely by both generations of women's organizations.

The third and final theme of change in women's civil society discussed in this thesis is the network of civil society. The new generation places much less emphasis on connecting different levels of policymaking and networking, and hence is much less connected to other civil society organizations, media, government or policy makers.

Recommendations for Dutch civil society organizations and government

- Given the big differences between the different generations of women's activists in the MENA region, it is important for international actors to **recognize the different backgrounds, aspirations, aims, needs, methods** when working with different women's organizations in the MENA region.
- International actors can play a role in **bringing different organizations together to share experience and knowledge, and complement each other's work where relevant**, focussing on a joint learning environment more than forced joint projects.
- International donors should also realize that the differences in these organizations and activists, **reflect a difference in the broader community**. Young activists represent a younger generation of women than the more established organizations, so international actors should keep this in mind when designing policies or project for different beneficiary communities

On the topic of protection:

- International actors should be aware that the **different methods of working of different generations of women's organizations and activists require different means of protection**. The younger generation often chooses much more visible methods and less policy discussions in closed environments, and hence a different form of protection is needed to ensure their space in civil society