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How women in the Global South reclaim feminism

Female empowerment in the Global South was co-opted by the Western neoliberal development. Now, women are reclaiming their understanding of feminism

In an apparent win for feminists from the Global South, the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action set a roadmap for the empowerment of women and girls globally. At the time, 'empowerment' was not the buzzword it is today, but a new concept brought forth by Indian feminist Gita Sen and a group of other feminist activists and scholars.

Sen and her colleagues stressed the importance of empowerment through a bottom-up approach that centres the voices of women from the Global South. When they advocated for the adoption of their definition of empowerment by the UN – and later on through the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing –, however, they were unaware that the definition would be remodelled and blurred over time: it was transformed from its original political understanding based on collective action, solidarity, agency, and decolonial development models into an individualised, depoliticised, and westernised concept.

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In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, this shift in understanding – which was championed by neoliberal aid and development programmes – had serious impacts on the shaping of women's rights agendas and on the pace of advancement towards gender justice. But in recent years, more and more women across the MENA region are defying the mainstream empowerment narratives and are reclaiming the original understanding of what it means to be empowered.

Feminism from abroad

White-centred feminism has greatly influenced the development agendas of the international donor community, resulting in a context-blind and depoliticised approach to the empowerment of women and girls – one that conveniently ignores the role of imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, and racism in shaping the lives of black, brown, and Asian women across the Global South. This approach was supported by states in the MENA region that also aimed to build an understanding of empowerment that does not question current power relations, an empowerment that aligns with states' interest in fostering politically passive populations who are driven by capitalist fantasies.

An 'empowerment-lite' was thus imposed in the MENA region under two distinct and docile categories. The first, 'political empowerment', was mostly limited to increasing the numbers of female voters and women in parliaments, with a disregard for many of the actual challenges that hinder women parliamentarians or voters' meaningful engagement in the political process. The second, 'economic empowerment', was mostly related to increasing women's formal participation in the labour market without truly addressing any structural barriers facing women when entering or staying in the market. For instance, this approach supported providing micro-funding for women to start their own businesses – placing risks on the shoulders of women rather than markets or states; and attaining gender parity within the (capitalist) workplace where many men already experience exploitative working conditions.

After decades of programmes and initiatives, even these inadequate empowerment goals are far from being achieved. The region still suffers an 87.4 per cent gender gap in the political empowerment index and a 60 per cent gender gap in the economic empowerment index according to the Global Gender Gap Report of 2021.

No empowerment without redistribution of power

A decade of political and socio-economic instability has pushed women and feminists across the region to re-centre the redistribution of power within the empowerment conversation. Through reclaiming the feminist understanding of empowerment, they are actively and collectively fighting against the systems that have reduced their role in public life to the mere support of capitalist and authoritarian projects. These are the same systems that have allowed for the quality of education, health, social protection, and public services – which are essential components for truly

empowering women and girls – to be diminished.

Woman from various backgrounds have been, and still are, on the frontlines of protests demanding gender and social justice in many countries in the region. In the past few months alone, Sudanese women have fiercely stood up against militarisation and sexual violence, holding tightly to the political gains they have so difficultly achieved alongside their fellow Sudanese citizens. In a smaller, but equally empowered, example, young Lebanese students in Tripoli defied the patriarchal system that silenced their attempts to call out a harassing teacher. They held protests and promised to press charges against him.

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Tokenism in both the economic and political spheres is no longer enough to maintain the illusion that there is serious political will to empower women. When the first female prime minister in the region was appointed in September 2021 in Tunisia for instance, feminist activists and groups were hesitant to celebrate. They criticised the Tunisian President for using 'the women's card' to advance his own agenda and to gain positive publicity and support from the West in a politically questionable situation.

The white-centred, depoliticised, and capitalist image of an empowered woman – one who is westernised, high-paid, fashionable, and independent – is not accepted anymore as the only version of an unoppressed woman. Women in the region are celebrating their uniqueness, differences, their cultural roots, and their sense of community and passion.

Feminist activists in particular are defying the white-centred feminism that have dominated the global feminist scene. They are changing the funding ecosystem that has limited their scope of work and are showcasing how feminists from the region are in fact equal partners in the quest for gender justice globally. This might be best illustrated through feminist author and activist Mona Eltahawy's enraged refusal of the labelling of Egyptian feminist pioneer Nawal El Saadawi upon her death as 'the Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab world' by western media.

Power over our futures, our lives, and our bodies. This is the empowerment that women in the MENA region are striving for. They are demanding the serious support needed to truly empower all women and girls. But they are also finding their own forms of resistance and

roads to empowerment with or without that support.



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