

Third (3rd) Feminist Roundtable:

How has the discourse on gender-based violence been changing among Arab young activists?

Wednesday, June 2nd, 2021 at 5.00 PM – 6.30 PM (Beirut time)

Speakers:

Mozn Hassan: Executive director of Nazra of Feminist studies

Maya El Ammar: Feminist Journalist

Banan AbuZainEddine, Executive Director and Co-Founder of Takatoat

Montaha Nottah, Research Intern at Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship

Saja Akmail, Volunteer at Takatoat

Moderated by Carla Akil, Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship

This roundtable discussed the overall situation of gender-based violence in the MENA region, bringing perspectives and experiences of feminists from Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, and Egypt. The following is a brief of the main discussion points.

Gender-based violence (GBV) takes different forms, including physical, emotional, verbal, sexual and economic. While 'violence' is associated with the physical form, awareness must be raised on emotional and verbal forms of abuse - which have become normalised in society – yet are experienced by most females in the MENA region.

The speakers referred to various social categories, including refugees, females, the LGBTQ+ community, domestic workers amidst races, classes and ethnicities, which creates interdependent and overlapping types of discrimination and GBV in the MENA region. Recognition of the rights of these groups has come with high costs, and unfortunately it is only after tragic incidents, including loss of life, that these groups get can get public and media attention.

During the past decade, drastic changes in the political and social context have brought GBV to the forefront of feminist discussion and activism. Most recently, women experience with domestic violence has increased following the outbreak of COVID-19 and lockdown measures which put women in direct and constant confrontation with their abusers. The murder of women has increased since the outbreak of COVID-19; yet the reporting of GBV cases remains low, reflecting a lack of trust in the available protection system. It also reflects the dynamics of patriarchal societies which justifies the actions of abusers, blames victims, and silence them.

The feminist movement has achieved significant and promising advances including claiming the right to share the public sphere, which was previously dominated and owned by males, which has decreased victim blaming especially amongst women. However, the feminist agenda has been falsely politicised through claims that it has ties to foreign agenda that aims to damage the moral construct of the society.

The feminist movement is an ongoing political activist movement that adapts to available spaces and situations. It is in constant battle against patriarchal systems that aim to control women and their bodies and deny the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. Feminist movements today, and their achievements, cannot be viewed in isolation from movements of the past. Acknowledging previous achievements and how the movement has evolved over time is essential to the success of the

current movements, in order to build on their learnings and their struggles. Knowledge sharing with the new generation of activists is a responsibility on current feminists, especially regarding resource mobilisation, which is one of the most challenging areas due to its scarcity compared to other sectors of development.

Social media has played a substantial role in advancing the feminist movement and activism against GBV. It has provided spaces for feminist activists, especially youth, that enabled them to reach wide communities and raise awareness on women and queer rights. "Hashtags" have been used as a tool for public opinion mobilisation against GBV practices and crimes, which has shown in some cases to push governments to adopt policies and laws that benefit the feminist movement - for example, pushing parliament discuss a law against sexual harassment in Lebanon. However, matters related to feminist activism should not be viewed only as a trend that picks up momentum on social media for a short period.

Simultaneously, the internet has introduced cyber violence including cyber sexual abuse, which is extremely dangerous due to the lack of protection measures and legislation that incriminates abusers in this space. Solidarity and collective movements have emerged on social media to fight these types of abuse, for example by exposing serial abusers including powerful individuals.

When addressing violence, ambiguous definitions of private and public matters are maintained in patriarchal societies. This is one of the patriarchy's tactics to avoid accountability or pursue actions against violence. Gaining support to stand against violence through laws that incriminate is one of the main challenges for feminist activism, since many males, including powerful politicians, parliament members and even supposed activists themselves benefit from the absence of these laws. This serves their positions of power and protects their own acts of abuse. While clearer definitions of "public" and "private" are required, violence should not be tolerated or disguised under the label of being domestic private matters.

One of the most important skills that will ensure the movement's solidarity and sustainability is acquiring the art of disagreeing constructively, where exchanging perspectives is made possible and differences are accepted. The feminist movement lacks spaces that allows individuals to discuss "hot topics" freely and safely. The feminist movement should always fight for those whose voices are not heard and the less privileged because of their differences.

Fatima Kaddour