

Feminist Struggles in the Middle East Region: Some Reflections on the Recent Political Developments and the Changing Status of Women's Rights

Selin Çağatay

2017/03/16



Funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



Post-Arab spring period

Two main processes:

1. Popular protests and grassroots mobilizations politicized thousands of young women, who then organized in feminist organizations and/or with feminist agendas.
2. Democratic demands were quickly suppressed as the region experienced a high level of political instability, authoritarian regimes, fundamentalist movements, deepening of ethnic and sectarian clashes, in some cases foreign intervention and huge waves of migration and asylum seeking, creating difficult conditions for women to pursue feminist politics.



Funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



Male violence against women

- Women are treated differently than men by the state forces and counter-revolutionary groups: Organized harassment and rape.
- In conflict zones and refugee camps, rape is used as a tool of war and sexual exploitation.
- New feminist organizations that adopt new forms of organizing and document and challenge the assaults women face.



Women's rights agenda

Two tendencies in dominant discourses about women's rights:

1. Labeling it as an elitist legacy of the previous regimes and keeping women within the confines of religious, cultural, or traditional norms.
2. Passing a legal reform but giving up on the implementation of it, both to avoid criticism from the West and to shut down the opposition in local contexts.



Women's rights agenda

What is the status of women's rights for feminist activists?

- Many organizations draw on a discourse of rights and rely on its legitimizing power.
- Refers to transnational processes which serve as a leverage for legal reform.
- Helps women to build regional coalitions.
- Supports political participation and participating in peacemaking in conflict zones.
- Enables the politicization of issues related to sexuality.



Conclusions

- Problematic polatization: Modern/secular vs. Islamic.
- Class and labor perspective are missing.
- Avoid creating Middle East exceptionalism.
- Gender is at the heart of social transformation.

