

# WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE:

## An Introduction and Overview

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The articles in this special issue were among those presented at a workshop we organized for the Sixth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting, which took place from 16-20 March 2005, in Montecatini, Italy. The purpose of the workshop was to examine the proposition that the public sphere in a number of MENA countries is changing and civil society becoming “feminized” due to women’s greater social participation, the proliferation of women’s organizations, their involvement in or initiation of public debates and national dialogues, and their access to various forms of media. Twelve papers were submitted and presented at the workshop, leading to a very lively discussion, but only a few could be included in this special issue. The papers lay out the complexity of various versions of women’s activism, their intricate relations with public space, and how that plays out in contemporary political and legal debates. In what remains, we provide a brief introduction to the guiding ideas and an overview of the papers’ arguments and findings.

In Habermas’ conceptualization, the “public sphere” is a modern institution and a set of values that brings private persons together in public to engage in a context of reasoned debates (Habermas 1989). Civil society—the non-state realm of associational life, civility in public discourse, and state-society relations—constitutes an important part of the

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public sphere of media and other forums of public opinion. As feminist scholars have pointed out (Fraser 1996; Lister 1997), civil society and the public sphere historically were cast as male, although women's suffrage and the women's movement expanded, democratized, and feminized these spheres in the course of the twentieth century.

The public sphere has been conceptualized largely in connection with the single society and the nation-state, but processes of globalization suggest the emergence of a "global space" within which reasoned debates, associational activities, and collective action take place. This is the impetus for the new literature on "global civil society" (Florini 2000), the "transnational public sphere" (Guidry, Kennedy, and Zald 1999), "transnational social movements" (Smith, Chatfield, and Pagnucco 1997), "transnational advocacy networks" (Keck and Sikkink 1998), and "transnational feminist networks" (Moghadam 2005).

A burgeoning literature on civil society, citizenship, and democratization has emerged in the context of Middle East Studies, in tandem with a body of work by feminist scholars (Brynen, Korany, and Noble 1995, 1998; El-Sayyid 1994; Norton 1995; Arat 1994; Brand 1998; Botman 1999; Joseph 2000; Moghadam 2003; Sadiqi 2003). As an earlier generation of feminist scholars noted for the West, the public sphere of politics in MENA has been cast as male and distinguished from the private sphere of women-and-the-family. Moreover, the state and the market have been long regarded as masculine domains. Rights of the citizen—limited for all in the authoritarian and neopatriarchal states of MENA—have been differentiated by gender (and religion). It is this state of affairs that is being contested by an emerging social and political constituency—women—who are motivated by aspirations for equality and enhanced rights and who also draw on international standards, conventions, and networks in support of their claims. As a social movement, women's activism in the public sphere uses strategies that do not reproduce Western frameworks but that feed into global synergy with their guiding cultural worldviews. It is only through understandings of intercultural worldviews and various meanings of "pragmatism" that MENA women's rights tactics can be appreciated globally (Sadiqi forthcoming).

The papers in this special issue explore the changing nature of the public sphere in MENA and women's contributions to it, as well as women's involvement in the transnational public sphere, through an

examination of countries such as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Jordan, where these changes have been observed.

An examination of political developments over the past decade in MENA countries leads to the formulation of the following propositions.

Proposition 1. The public sphere in a number of MENA countries is being *engendered* and *feminized* because of the emergence of women as political actors/agents and as an increasingly important political constituency—as voters, as members of parliament and local councils, as civil servants, as new “public intellectuals,” as participants in civil society organizations (e.g., human rights organizations and professional associations), and as heads of women’s organizations, associations, and networks. As such, women are challenging the patriarchal underpinnings of state and society and the monopoly of the state and of men over the public sphere.

Proposition 2. Women’s strategic use of the media as a means of access to the public sphere transforms and feminizes both. This includes the print media, including the women’s press (e.g., women’s magazines and newspapers, women’s studies journals, novels and poetry produced by women, women-owned publishing houses) and films (the emergence of women filmmakers, as well as the growing importance of women’s issues in filmmaking). In addition, the participation of women in the establishment media provides a voice and a platform for the dissemination of women’s issues.

Proposition 3. Women’s contributions and participation are leading to the *democratization* of the public sphere and the formation of a modern civil society—in contradistinction to forms of clientelism, masculine privilege, and “primordial associations” that have hitherto characterized these domains (see Ibrahim 1992; Turner 2000). In Turkey, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, women’s rights activists see their movements and organizations as both democratic and feminist, and they have widened the discursive space through the language of liberalism, individualism and autonomy, secularism, and Islamic feminism (Arat 1994; Sadiqi 1999, 2003; Moghadam 2003).

Proposition 4. Women’s roles in *Shari’a* law-changing and legal reform evince an unprecedented form of women’s agency and insertion in the public sphere. As women increasingly participate in public debates around family law and their place in society, ideas and practices that have

long been taken for granted and understood as Islamic are being confronted and challenged. Such women's participation helps to promote thinking about Islam that is not limited to self-ascribed religious authorities.

In addition to the above propositions, several questions were presented to the workshop participants to guide their research:

(1) What are the different strategies—including discourses, forms of collective action, and extent of coalition-building within and across countries—pursued by the women's movement and organizations in each country?

(2) What is the relationship of the women's movement to the state, and what is the state's position vis-à-vis women/feminists in the public sphere? This will entail addressing the extent of "state feminism," the efficacy of the women's official organizations, the question of Convention to End Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), revisions of family law, etc.

(3) What has been the influence of women's activism or "the woman question" on the public discourse(s), for example, through the women's press and other media?

(4) What is the role or influence of global forces and developments in creating new political spaces and a more inclusive public sphere in MENA, particularly where women are concerned?

Local/global linkages are exemplified by developments in the Maghreb. Here, women's activism in the public sphere has centred largely on the family law around which other discourses of equality and individual rights are expressed. This activism is perceived as a new form of resistance to the various forms of patriarchal oppression. With the advent of globalization, this struggle is no longer dictated by local concerns only—it is also heavily influenced by international discourses. The recent debate on the Moroccan Family Law showed that women's organizations were inserting themselves into the public sphere, changing the terms of participation in this sphere, and making women and gender issues a matter of national dialogue and contention. Both national and international discourses and connections had an impact on the debates, on the King's speech of 10 October 2003, and on the parliament's passing of the bill.

## OVERVIEW OF THE PAPERS

Michaëlle Browers' paper sets the stage by drawing attention to the

marginalization of women, as well as women's rights issues, from high-level discussions. In examining the "Nationalist-Islamist Conferences" that were convened between 1994 and 2004 by the Center for Arab Unity Studies in Beirut, she shows that this particular corner of the Arab public sphere has studiously avoided taking up gender issues. This is one clear reason why women's organizations have been so resolutely asserting themselves in the public sphere.

Loubna Skalli then places the spotlight on women and information technologies in the region. Although the use of the Internet is not yet widespread and its potential has not been realized, Skalli elucidates the influence of crusading journalists (e.g., Rana Hussein of Jordan), feminist publishing houses, and documentary filmmaking on the public sphere. In politics also, and as Abdelkader Cheref demonstrates, a number of outstanding Algerian women leaders and dissidents have been developing what can only be called a counter-hegemonic discourse. Focusing on three feminist leaders, Cheref explores governmental and societal attitudes toward them, as well as their place in the Algerian feminist movement.

In their case study of Morocco, Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji demonstrate the strategies of the women's organizations in the struggle for the Family Law reform and show how the "gradual reorganization of space" paved the way for the visibility of women's issues and the need for legal reform. Finally, Carol Malt highlights the role that museums play in the public sphere and the broader implications of the feminization of museum employment. MENA women museum staff may yet realize the potential powerful role they can play culturally.

Overall, the papers in this volume explore women's contributions to the changing nature of the public sphere in the MENA region. The local linkages within particular countries exhibit both common patterns and specific characteristics. The specificities stem from sociopolitical environments and events, along with domestic discourses that may be distinctive to that place and time. Common patterns attest not only to the similarities in family laws, Islamic norms, and patriarchal practices but also to the salience of global influences and the relationship between women's movements in the MENA region and the global women's rights agenda.

By gathering the papers in this volume, we hope to lay the groundwork for more investigations into the broader significance of women's

activism in the MENA region, particularly with respect to civil society, the public sphere, democratization, and transnational linkages. Feminist activism is propelling non-state actors to the forefront of social change, making them of inescapable relevance for governments and the global system. The themes of the papers regarding public debates and knowledge-production, the media, policymaking, legal change, and cultural influence attest to the impact women are having on the MENA public scene and the influence they are having on public opinion. Civil society, in its constituent diversity, is a key promoter of democratization. Its power is not the authority to decide or to enforce. It is the capacity to argue, to denounce, to propose, to experiment, and to innovate.

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