liberation becomes tangible to me by bones, blood, bodies, lips, ideas, memories, words, but not a land. As McKittrick states, this view of liberation recognizes that "...the earth is also skin and that a young girl can legitimately take possession of a street, or an entire city, albeit on different terms than we may be familiar with."[94] Diversifying our methods and research designs challenges the assumptions underlying the stability of space in the nation-state. With this research perspective, the possibilities that these same spaces make tangible begin to appear.[95] Citizenship need not only be associated with the hard labor of demanding gender equality from the state. Instead, the bodies of Sahar and Nasim are also "speaking to and across the world" with a different vision altogether that includes a lightness and a floating through air that the modern nation-state system cannot contain and that we have yet to fully explore.[96]

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STATE REPRESSION AND ACTIVIST ORGANIZING IN INFORMAL SPACES: COMPARING FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN EGYPT AND IRAN

By Erika Biagini & Paola Rivetti

A decade since the so called "Arab Spring", women's success in advancing demands for gender change in the region is mixed. While the general consensus is that patriarchal regimes have been destabilized and things cannot go back as they were before,[97] in many countries we witnessed the resurgence of authoritarianism and state violence, which challenge women activists and movements

wanting to advance reforms.[98] Nevertheless, protests continue to erupt in the region, as witnessed in Sudan, Lebanon, Iran and Iraq, among others, and women, their mobilization and demands continue to be relevant to them. How do we explain women's ability to mobilize in contexts of authoritarianism and state violence, and where are we to look to capture the continuum of women's protest activities and claims?

Building on our previous work,[99] we are interested in explaining what happens to women's and feminist social movements when MENA authoritarian regimes repress them. We compare the Muslim Sisterhood (henceforth Sisterhood) in Egypt after the 2013 repression of Islamists and the progressive, pro-democracy activists for women's rights in Iran since the repression of the 2009 Green Movement and the 2013 election of President Hassan Rouhani. Our contention is that when state repression causes movements' fragmentation, marginalized activists find in informal spaces a more functional venue to sustain their activism and demands. Informal spaces, which we define as venues where activism is non-mediated by the formal leadership of an organization, explain how cycles of protests survive authoritarianism, allowing mobilizations to re-emerge as more favourable opportunities materialize again. This also explains the long history of protesting and political organizing in the region, of which the 2011 uprisings were just one peak.[100] This note is based on our individual research work in Egypt (2013-2018) and Iran (2015-2019) with women's activists of both movements. While substantial parts of both works are published, this is the first attempt at a comparative analysis.

The Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood

In Egypt, women's demands for greater emancipation in the Muslim Brotherhood (henceforth Brotherhood) movement emerged more prominently in the 1990s,[101] when Mubarak-led liberalization created opportunities for Islamists to participate politically, fostering internal debates for greater pluralism and democratic reforms.[102] While challenged, the senior leaders prevented genuine reforms from happening and successfully marginalized progressive activists, including women's claims. Consequently, like their male counterparts, more progressive Sisters found alternative venues outside the organization to advance their gender agenda. Mona, a Sister who had joined the Brotherhood in college during the 1990s and was active in *da'wa* at the time of interview, recounted that during her college years the Sisters were very active on university campuses to encourage women's political participation.

During weekly university meetings, they relied on the writings of Muslim reformers such as Abd al-Halim Muhammed Abu Shiqqa's book "The Liberation of Women at the Age of the Message" (*Tahrir al-Mar'a fi Asr al-Risala*), to promote women's involvement in society from an Islamic standpoint. After completing college, Mona continued to be active in *da'wa* and to use Abu Shiqqa's writings as part of the educational (*tarbyia*) material she used with the Sisters attending *da'wa* meetings in her district.[103] To be sure, not all the Sisters in the 1990s endorsed the call for reforms; rather, many Sisters, and particularly those belonging to the earlier generations, continued to espouse conservative gender views, epitomised in women's primary role within the family sphere. However, it is important to highlight that the Sisters too were part of the reformist trend that emerged in the Brotherhood in the 1990s, not only as recipients but also as promoters of emancipatory ideas. In the 2000s, the Internet and social media also became important venues for young activists, women included, to vocalize criticism of the Brotherhood leadership and demand change.[104] Thus, the emergence of political opportunity and informal spaces grew hand in hand, and both were important to sustain the activism of progressive Brotherhood fringes encountering the senior leaderships' resistance to change.

Demands for greater equality and opportunities within the Sisterhood grew stronger after the 2011 Egyptian uprising, which caused the delegitimization of the Brotherhood's traditional, nepotistic and hierarchical culture.[105] Senior Brotherhood leaders took advantage of electoral victories to fully marginalize progressive activists and their demands. Therefore, while after 2011, women enjoyed increased agency, political participation and leadership, only those women aligned to the conservative leadership were allowed to do so in the formal political offices and institutions the Brotherhood controlled.[106] Back then, many young male activists left the Brotherhood or were expelled by the senior leaders. Among women, defections also took place, but in a very limited number when compared to male members. Many of those Sisters who held grievances towards the leadership decided instead to use women-only spaces, such as women-gatherings and Brotherhood camps for women, to exercise greater freedoms, roles and leadership denied to them in the movement. For instance, with the support of reformist oriented senior Sisters, young female members introduced changes to the Sisterhood dress-code and lobbied to elect female district leaders of their choice, previously selected by the male leadership.

In 2013, the repression of Islamists severely damaged the Brotherhood's organization and leadership structure. With most male leaders either in jail, abroad or killed, women and their activism became instrumental to the Brotherhood's mobilization[107] and survival. While mobilizing in support of the movement, some Sisters also took the opportunity of increased leadership to make women's voices heard at the highest echelons of the Brotherhood movement. Against Brotherhood orders, younger Sisters self-organized and established independent movements such as Ultras-Banat and Bint al-Tawra, advancing partially independent agendas and challenging the Brotherhood's gender code. Women's direct experience of state-led violence, including gender based violence, also emboldened more radical demands among the young activists. These demands centred on bodily integrity and autonomy, and thus directly challenged the Brotherhood's discourse on women's modesty and respectability. It was then that more radical elements among the Sisters suffered the first significant wave of punitive purges from the Brotherhood leadership. By 2015, the Brotherhood re-established a leadership structure, largely from abroad and thanks to media channels and online platforms, regaining some control over its base. Then, the Brotherhood resorted to traditional patriarchal tools to silence and discipline those women critics of the leadership and who refused to abandon street activism, expelling some of them from the movement or tarnishing the reputation.

By 2016, protracted repression and the absence of men had placed extra burdens on women's shoulders, leading to their demobilization. Furthermore, the Brotherhood believed that under such circumstances, women could best support the movement by playing their traditional role in the family, promoting *da'wa* and sustaining the prisoners and their families. Most Sisters agreed that their family role was crucial to rebuild a strong movement and willingly redirected their efforts to this sphere. However, my fieldwork in Egypt (2017-2018) also revealed that those Sisters who had been most active in advancing a reformist agenda for women since 2011, particularly young Sisters but not only, continue to bring forward their struggle for gender change from within informal spaces. Some of those senior Sisters active in *da'wa* are currently revisiting the Brotherhood's curricula for women to promote a more moderate and pluralist interpretation of women and their role, while working to retain young members into the movement. Some Ultras-Banat and Bint al-Tawra activists enrolled in professional educational programmes to formalise the skills they gained while engaging in post-2011 activism, to build a life outside the Brotherhood. While men's absence adds to women's workload and responsibilities at home, a newfound sense of autonomy in that sphere led some Sisters to advance a critique of the patriarchal family, established on male privileges and authority. Furthermore, amid state repression, the Internet allows likeminded activists to share experiences, create a sense of community and re-build activist networks, particularly between those still in Egypt and those who fled abroad.

Thus, in absence of formal organizational structures and opportunities for political participation, current and former Sisters rely on informal spaces to bring forward their activism. Oftentimes, their ideas appear more radical as they challenge the Brotherhood's dominant heteropatriarchal gender regime, thus highlighting the connection between marginalization, violence and the emergence of radical feminist identities in hierarchical movements operating in constraining political environments.

Pro-democracy feminist activism in Iran

In the case of Iran, a similar pattern can be observed in junction with the different orientations that the regime and the government have taken up, shifting between repression and selective toleration of women's activism. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the so-called "reformist" governments engineered a more liberal political and public sphere, crafting opportunities for women's visibility and activism. This engendered expectations in terms of participation and autonomy among women activists at large. As the government became frustrated by such expectations for fear that they would translate into demands bypassing what the government was willing or able to deliver, women advancing more far-reaching demands were pushed into informality. The government's refusal of women's demands caused more radical feminist identities and activism to emerge, which went beyond the politics of institutional reforms it supported. An example of such feminist politics was the One Million Signature (OMS) campaign, which demanded pro-women changes in family and personal law, and emerged out of feminist grassroots initiatives, bringing a number of diverse feminist and women's groups together. One activist with the campaign reminds that "I used to go to *bassij*[108] barracks and ask them if they wanted to sign up for the campaign! Can you imagine? (…) we were so brazen!"[109] Such brazenness was the result of a decade of limited toleration for women's activism, which emboldened the activists. The campaign soon fell to state repression, but the activists could continue to rely on this pre-existing network and know-how to continue organizing politically after the OMS was disbanded. Hailing from informal spaces of activism helped women survive state violence and work in the lead-up to the 2009 presidential election and

subsequent political crisis. In June 2009, as Ahmadinejad was re-elected as president, millions of Iranians protested the electoral result and denounced fraud. The protests – which came to be known as the Green Movement – lasted for months and were suppressed with brutality by the state.

As interactions with activists in Iran suggest,[110] following the repression of 2009-2010, activists, including feminists, took refuge in activities such as research and education, avoiding public protesting as a strategy of action. Mass incarceration and emigration had put many activists in danger, and those who survived the wave of repression were struggling to re-build their network and recover from the trauma of the violence experienced. Informal spaces became a hub to re-create networks under the label of cultural activities. On university campuses, students organized conferences, seminars and other initiatives about women's political history, along with research-action initiatives aimed to work with women of diverse class and ethnic background. While before 2009 informal feminist activism was strong enough to supersede institutional reformism as the "real politics of change," after 2009 informal spaces were reduced in size and scope but still ensured the survival of a discourse of change alternative to state reformism. Informal spaces were also healing spaces for those affected by the 2009-2010 repression. The Internet also provided feminists with an alternative to offline activism, considered dangerous. While online activists are also at risk of persecution, online spaces allowed them to partially "free" themselves from close state surveillance, strengthening ties with the diaspora which grew bigger after the 2009 repression, and continuing their work to raise gender and feminist awareness. Manata, who has been involved in the campaign about women's right to access sport stadiums, is quite open

about the depression she suffered after 2009. As all her activist friends were either incarcerated or had to leave Iran, she found herself alone and in constant fear of retaliation by the state. At the same time, however, she also reflects that such a situation of isolation allowed her to start campaigning on her own, enjoying a degree of freedom and autonomy unknown to her. She improved her computer skills and proactively made contacts with international sport organizations, working to popularize the campaign.[111]

The election of Rouhani in 2013 did not alleviate the risks connected to feminist activism, in spite of the electoral promise to do so. Agitating in online or offline informal spaces, portions of Iranian feminists' focus shifted from a liberal women's rights agenda towards adopting an intersectional analysis of state-enforced gender regimes and capitalism. This is an extremely significant change of ideological orientation from the mainstream liberal feminism dominant in the 2000s. It took place because of the fragmentation and marginalization of the women's movement, which found itself with a more diffused structure and leadership, thus allowing for ideological renovation. Such unbowed feminist discourse and the sparse, yet persistent, women-led protesting prepared the terrain for the 2017-2020 protest cycle. Defiant and radical acts by the so-called Girls of Enqelab Street, who publicly took off their *hejab*, and less performative activism such as educational initiatives and online campaigning,[112] have been part of the movements taking to the street in 2017-2020. This highlights the relevance of informal and online spaces as incubators of dissent and as avenues where the link between marginalization, state violence and radical politics takes place and it is strengthened.

Marginalization, Informal Spaces and Radical Politics

Our case studies suggest that informal spaces are important to the emergence and resilience of feminist demands and organizing in both the presence and absence of political opportunities. They however acquire a greater significance in times of state repression, when violence causes the fragmentation of activist groups, thus causing marginalized fringes to rely on informal spaces to sustain their networks and demands, building on strategies and resources they availed of in times of political opportunity. This dynamic is observed beyond feminist activism and the MENA.[113] There is however a specific gender dimension to our case studies, because feminist activism remain dangerous in patriarchal MENA societies and Islamist movements, often causing women to be severely targeted by MENA authoritarian states and male conservative Islamist leaders. The longitudinal perspective we adopted on women's movements working for gender change in highly patriarchal MENA regimes, reveals a double shift has taken place in terms of women's space and demands, whereby activists' demands become more radical as opposed to conciliatory or reform-oriented when confronted with the exclusionary and *divide et impera* politics of authoritarianism, and where informal spaces act as incubators for cycles of feminist activism and mobilization.

While in Egypt a women's movement for internal Brotherhood reforms emerged prior to 2013 but was tamed by the conservative leadership, the 2013 repression of Islamists led to its radicalization, causing women to advance a critique of the Brotherhood's gender regime that challenged the very nature of the patriarchal family, a pillar of the movement's identity politics.

Similarly in Iran, while women's activists are more likely to raise demands for reforms in periods of political opportunities, their demands radicalize in times of repression. As one activist noted,[114] this dynamic is not necessarily positive for social movements because it increases the individualization of activism, thus making the goal of overcoming fragmentation more difficult. While informality and the absence of a strong leadership allow for more freedom and autonomy, the strength of the demands for change put forth by social movements necessarily weakens. Albeit resulting into little actual change, the electoral campaign and election of the moderate Rouhani in 2013 reignited some hope. The partial opening up of the opportunity structure for gender reform activists has led to the emergence of campaigns oriented to institutional change, such as the one aiming at increasing the number of women elected in Parliament in 2016, along with more radical and persisting demands and actions oriented to gender justice as part of a broader agenda for social justice. Such demands and persuasions were powerfully expressed both on the Internet and in the streets, like seen repeatedly in 2017-2020.

A second trend we see recurrent in both cases is the increasing significance of the Internet and social media for activist networking and the diffusion of campaigns in repression and post-repression times, as the scholarship on the Arab Uprisings highlighted.[115] As public and private spaces for mobilization and civil society campaigns falls under increasing securitization by authoritarian regimes, social media platforms and the Internet provide activists with a tool to stay informed, regroup and share ideas. This is true also for movements that adopt a strong surveillance of their members, like the Brotherhood. While authoritarian regimes

have invested resources to maximize the surveillance of the cyber realm –an indication of the importance of cyber activism in the region– and arrest cyber activists, the Internet still remains more difficult for states to systematically control; it requires states to invest in new infrastructures and capabilities rather than relying on repressive security service apparatuses they have spent decades to perfect. As such, the Internet offers activists in exile and fragmented movements a platform to reunite and voice dissent, explaining how activist networks survive repression and fragmentation, and diffuse campaigns.

While the informalization of activism is common among activists working on a diverse set of topics, we want to emphasize that the cycle of repression, marginalization, informality and radicalization has a gender dimension to it. Feminist activists are often more subjected to exclusionary politics because of the very nature of feminist work, seen as more threatening of the *status quo*. It follows that feminist analysis of contentious politics in the region will benefit from paying attention to informal venues of activism, beyond lobbying and campaigning for more women into positions of power.

Building on this, we suggest three directions for future research. First, we invite scholars to investigate the potential of online activism for feminist work and gender change in the region. Second, more theorization about the difference between formal and informal activism would be extremely relevant to scholars examining MENA social movements. Third, more engagement with feminist intersectional analysis in the region will help moving beyond the current focus on women's rights and towards a more comprehensive research perspective able to analyze the implications of non-binary gender identities, labour and class, race/ethnicity, queerness

and their multiple intersections, for anti-patriarchal political organizing.

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WHY AUTOCRATS ADOPT WOMEN'S RIGHTS: THE CASE OF MOROCCO

By Aili Mari Tripp

Why have the three Maghreb countries, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, passed more extensive constitutional and legislative reforms regarding women's rights than other Middle Eastern countries, especially since 2000?[116] The Moroccan case offers some explanations for why non-democratic governments adopt women's rights. The Islamist Party for Justice and Development (Parti de la justice et du développement, PJD), which has been in power since 2011 at the helm of a coalition government, has made major legislative and constitutional reforms in women's rights. This represented a sea change in its orientation towards women's rights. Morocco, nevertheless, remains a non-democratic country ranked as partly free by Freedom House.[117] This essay (which is also based on research in Tunisia and Algeria), draws on over 130 interviews conducted in Morocco between 2015 and 2016 with leaders and members of a variety of Islamist, feminist, and Amazigh women's rights organizations, members of parliament, women's ministry representatives; academics; journalists; and representatives of donor and UN agencies.

Maghreb countries have made advances especially with constitutional provisions regarding women and work, political representation, gender equality, discrimination against women, and gender-based violence when compared with most Middle East countries. They passed legislation regarding quotas both at the national and municipal/regional levels, sexual harassment, the prohibition of the marriage of victims to their rapist, nationality issues, violence against women, abortion, contraception, polygyny, and family law more generally. Some explanations focus almost entirely on the role of the women's movement and women in the judiciary (2009, 2017). Others have argued that women gained broader civil rights in countries with unitary legal systems.[118]

The adoption of unified legal systems and unified laws in the Maghreb at the time of independence helps account, in part, for the greater ease with which women's rights policies have been adopted in these countries compared to the Middle East. If one looks beyond the Maghreb, one finds that Iraq and Kuwait also have unified laws and a unified court system, and Libya, Yemen, Oman and Egypt have unified courts (but not unified laws). Yet none of these countries has made the same types of gains found in the Maghreb with respect to women's rights. Thus, the adoption of unified courts and laws may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for advancing women's rights.

I argue that Morocco (and the other Maghreb countries) made gains in women's rights as a result of four key factors: pressure from women's movements, close cooperation between women's movements in the three countries (Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco), support from King Mohammed VI, and the domestic interests of the ruling Islamist parties.