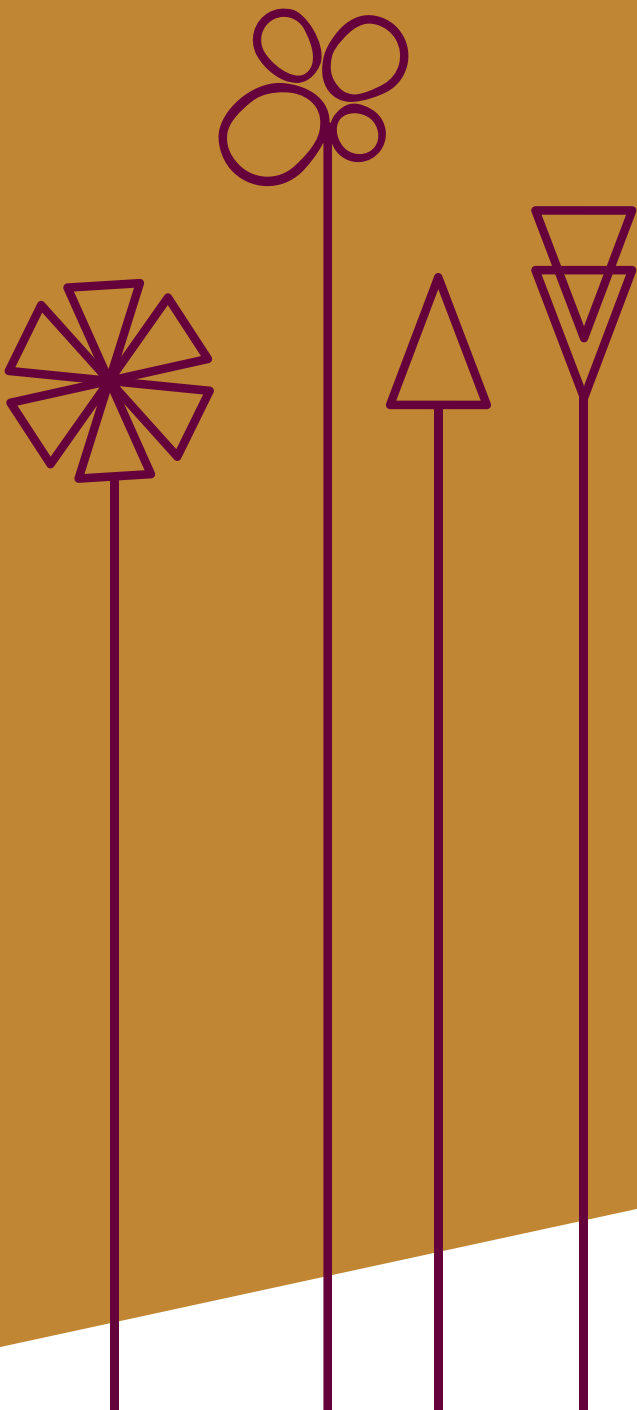


Flowering Under the World's Umbrella: MENA Feminists at the AWID Forums



Tales from the
AWID Forums

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Across the world and social movements, those who want to innovate tend to feel lonely and powerless before the 'movement status quo'. Historically, the AWID Forums have played a role in supporting these innovators by offering them a platform where their ideas and practices are welcomed and strengthened by the thoughts and actions of others - in different regions and communities - who have already explored them. Sara Abu Ghazal, Palestinian feminist in Lebanon, tells the story of what the Forums meant for a new generation of feminists in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region that introduced new ways of organising, new understandings of feminism and new issues to the regional women's rights landscape.

The story begins around 2008-2009

Sara says...

“Back then there were smaller, non-registered feminist collectives throughout the region. Our generation was more comfortable (than the elders) in calling ourselves feminists and in saying we were queer or even lesbian, LGBTQ. There were also the already-existing bigger organizations that had been to (the UN World Conference on Women in) Beijing, focusing on women's rights, with very specific discourses about combatting violence against women from a victimising perspective. They would try hard to package their discourse in ways that did not upset society - which was the opposite of what we wanted to do.

That generation also had grown up and were almost adults and young adults when the civil war was over, so in a way their investment in reform comes from their need or perception of state 'building'. We were the generation that were pre-teens/ children when the war was over, so our perception of the state and of politics more broadly came from a totally different experience.

Our groups and collectives were floating, trying to find our place and pushing forward an understanding of feminism as unpacking and contesting power. We started talking about lesbianism, 'smashing patriarchy', 'Our Bodies Our Rights'. In

early 2008, we created women-only spaces. We demonstrated. We talked about rape and sexual violence; we organised with migrant workers against the sponsorship system¹ – all topics that the more established movement did not have space for.

In the meantime, older women in the movement persisted in trying not to upset governments or society too much. We were accused of being men haters and asked to tone down, to stop saying the word ‘lesbian’ or ‘sex’ or ‘sexuality’ etc. We were about movement building because in a sense most of us needed an umbrella; they were about reform. It was a tense situation and there was an unbalance of power because the ‘good feminists’ were the only ones with access to the media and institutional recognition.

After a few years of tension, we stopped sharing spaces. Many of us made our living by working in women’s rights organizations and we had to leave our jobs”.

And then the world opened up

It was around that time that the AWID Forum in Istanbul (2012) happened. And it changed forever the way in which Sara and others who back then were young feminists from MENA perceived themselves and their work:

Spaces like the AWID Forum were just made for people like us: it was full of lesbians, sex workers, trade unionists, and unapologetic feminists who believed in inter-generational diversity. We realized that we were not an exceptional, weird type of feminist: we were internationalist in our discourse and local in our practice. We realized we were really not alone: there was a bigger kind of movement that could hold the space for us and lift us up. That feeling is crucial for any grassroots activist.

The Forum also validated these young feminists in two important ways: their sexuality and their organising choices:

In our context we had been criticized – told that we were radical because we were lesbians. And at the Forum our sexuality was celebrated instead of us being asked to tone

1 The sponsorship or *Kafala* system regulates the relationship between foreign workers and employers in Saudi Arabia and many of the Gulf countries. The system has been condemned by human rights institutions for years as it enables serious violations of workers’ rights.

it down. We also understood that you don't have to be an NGO, register and take big funds in order to do the work you want to do – you can just get the small money that you need and do your own things your way.

Finding sisters in your own region

The Istanbul Forum was intended to provide a platform for feminist groups in the MENA region to come together. In a region where security and costs made it difficult for informal collectives to meet each other, the Forum was the ideal place for that meeting to occur. And so it did.

We met others from our region and realized they were in a similar space as us. That was a crucial point in our process of change. After the Forum, we organized a knowledge production meeting with different groups in the region and embarked on a collaborative process on what is feminist knowledge production.

Post-Forum shining colours (not blues)

The (then) young feminists went back home and re-established themselves with more confidence. At the Forum they had met women's funds that gave them grants for what they most wanted to do: creating and sustaining their networks along with events to raise awareness, provoke, build solidarity and bring in new discussions.

From then on, the way I organised was not about watching the established women's organizations and criticizing them but about doing things our way. We were more connected than we had known – we had the right approach and the space to share it. Spaces like the AWID Forum were just made for people like us. That made quite a difference. Our being in that Forum also signaled a lesson to our elders: that this new generation was there to stay and they had to find ways to accept us or to negotiate the spaces with us, realizing that we were not going to be intimidated and just leave.

The Coalition of Women Human Rights Defenders in MENA

The Coalition was started in 2015 and it brings together individuals and organizations defending a spectrum of rights and struggles in the MENA region. The relationships forged at the Forum have been instrumental in shaping it, as Sara describes:

Through our involvement in the Forum and the relationship AWID had built with us and others in the region, 14 of us from 10 countries travelled for a learning exchange with the Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative (IMD) in Mexico. That gave us a hands-on experience in understanding what well-being was and also on how to organise a network of defenders. I used to think well-being was something horrible, did not want to have anything to do with it. I had seen only horrible models of wellbeing. But then in Mexico I met Ana María Hernández, who talked about wellbeing as something important for security and decision-making, having to do with values and the emotional cost of our work. We realized we needed to do things differently because what we are fighting against takes time to overthrow – but if we lose people along the way, those losses are forever. We learned about the importance of a healthy environment, of having support systems, of talking about your feelings.

All this gave the grassroots feminists that were creating the Coalition more of a push to make sure it remained at the movement level and did not become just a coalition of organizations.

New questions and challenges: the Bahia Forum

Once again, the role of a global space like the Forum to enable regional work when the circumstances in the context hindered it, became evident for the MENA feminists in Bahia (2016):

After Istanbul, we had realized the need for doing more intra-regional work but what stopped us was that our spaces began to be closed due to political repression. We needed to talk about queerness, knowledge production, historical movement structures but we did not have the space to do it in our region. And then the Forum in Bahia gave us the space to sit down together once again, ease some of the tensions that had emerged because of the counter-revolution processes in our countries. In that Forum, the mainstream NGOs were no longer there. Our region was less represented but

that was also because travelling had been made harder given the political situation. Still, discussions on WHRDs² and a regrouping of Lebanese, Palestinian and Egyptian feminists continued to happen because we were able to meet at the Forum. There was no regional alternative as everything was closed.

And, staying true to its best tradition of never settling for a comfortable status quo, the 2016 Forum made these MENA feminists, who had challenged their elders, to now feel challenged by issues they had not addressed. With honesty, Sara reflects on that and also expresses a hope for the Forums of the future to help them navigate these new questions:

The 2016 Forum opened up a lot of questions on our understanding of racial tensions within MENA: looking at our colleagues who went to the Black Feminist Forum we realized that we had not created a space for them. We understood and were told that the notion of Pan-Arabism hides existing racial tensions and issues that hinder the progress of some of our colleagues because of their colour. We could not do much about it because organising is becoming more and more difficult due to the increase in closing spaces for movements ... But this realization that we do have blind spots as a MENA movement, has informed our work even if we don't yet fully know what to do about it... In spaces like the Forum we can learn how to address and never again silence these issues. These are delicate conversations that require being face to face, taking the time to understand and deconstruct things together. And we want to do it. 🌸

The Forum is a live example of what the bigger WE can do. We go to the Forum, we are seeds, we then get sowed.

This we have to celebrate.

Sara Abu Ghazal



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