How can women reclaim shrinking spaces for activism and organising? How does “proximity to power” threaten radical agendas and prevent true progress? These questions were at the heart of a recent conversation between feminists from Sudan and Syria, who connected virtually to share their experiences of movement-building and explore cross-cultural links between activists mobilising for peace.

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During WILPF’s annual Convening as part of the Feminist Movement for Change in Syria project in early 2021, Sudanese feminists – with their rich experience of organising – engaged in a discussion with Syrian activists about the dynamics, trends, and challenges faced by feminist movements. The discussion prominently featured the concept of ‘space’ and how women occupy spaces in their diversity.

The shrinking of both local and regional civic spaces and increased state surveillance of activities were central talking points, highlighting these challenges as a shared struggle for the Sudanese and Syrian feminist movements.

From digital spaces to protest sites, the conversation touched on the various and often creative ways in which women activists continue their resistance despite deliberate attacks on their organising spaces. Activists in Sudan drew on this point, reflecting on the years under the Islamist regime when women’s informal spaces – such as coffee circles, grieving spaces, and wedding celebration spaces – were transformed into sites for women’s organising. Similarly, women’s private Facebook groups (initially made to share photographs of attractive men, for example) were often transformed into spaces to reveal images of security forces targeting women activists during the revolution.
Though post-revolution Sudan is now experiencing the reopening of civic spaces, Syrian feminists noted that they face ongoing restriction of their activities – a struggle that is further aggravated by the regime and other controlling factions. These continued challenges have forced Syrian feminist activists into new modes of resistance in order to maneuver through the erasure of civic spaces and ensure their work continues. Moreover, Syrian activists reflected on how, despite these difficulties, the revolution has positively influenced the previously exclusionary nature of feminist activism, allowing it to erupt across different regions, classes, and ages.

Resisting power structures and depoliticisation

While offering intra-movement reflections, Syrian activists shared their concerns surrounding the institutionalisation of feminist spaces and the challenges it poses to their homegrown agendas. The increased reliance on donor organizations to carry forward feminist projects has been a growing concern for many feminist activists globally, as it often runs the risk of depoliticising radical agendas. Another danger that arises in the process of “NGO-isation” of feminist groups is the risk of deterring and diminishing the feminist labour done outside of the confines of traditional organisations.

In relation to this, the activists spoke to issues around “proximity to power” as currency in feminist spaces, as such proximity facilitates greater access to donor funding and resources. The disciplining process that occurs during NGO-isation makes particular feminist bodies more palatable to holding power. Through this process, particular women activists have been granted occupancy of spaces that enable them to claim to speak for women as a collective while not always representing the needs, mandate, or plans of the broader feminist movement. This is particularly damaging as it can lead to the deprioritisation of everyday strategies and discourses that ensure transformative agendas are being realised while diluting the feminist movement’s opposition to power.

In order to resist this narrative, the women emphasised the need for feminist activists to be alert to how power and privilege are exercised within feminist movements, including who occupies space, shapes agendas, and receives financial support at the peril of the collective movement’s agenda.

The threat of inadequate “representation” and tokenism

Following the theme of space, Sudanese activists mentioned the role of descriptive representation in formal political spaces as it has come to shape women’s participation in the transitional period.

An issue repeatedly seen across various contexts is that of women occupying tokenistic political positions, present to advance a “representation” agenda without being able to create fundamental
progress or change women’s lived realities. That is, women are used as decorative tokens for change rather than being extended actual power to bring women’s issues to the forefront and yield the necessary change to structures that cement women’s subordination.

The theatrical performance of inclusionary politics results in the muting of feminist agendas, despite women’s physical access to decision-making spaces. As a result, feminist activists must grapple with the silencing of their agendas, veiled as an increase in women’s political representation. This draws us to think about the stubbornness of patriarchy as it adapts to diminish hard-won feminist gains.

**Persisting and resisting against all odds**

A common conclusion made throughout the discussion related to the importance of both nurturing and sustaining the transformative nature of feminist spaces and agendas. In acknowledging the copious amounts of energy devoted to feminist organising, the discussion contended that the labour of organising must be supported by spaces to recharge.

Similarly, both groups highlighted the importance of young feminist voices and experiences to feed the movement and sustain its life. The discussion offered reflection on the activism of women university students throughout the revolution in both contexts and emphasised the necessity to create space for younger voices within the larger movement. This discussion deeply recognised the need to move beyond traditional approaches to feminist organising by capturing collective building as crucial for the growth of feminist movements.

As the above discussion has emphasised, revolution and post-revolution spaces remain hostile to women’s lives, making it increasingly difficult to create and sustain feminist spaces. In both Syria and in Sudan, this is seen in the stifling of feminist voices through the shrinking of activist spaces, sidelining of feminist agendas, and co-optation of their hard-won achievements.

The discussion described here calls us to begin to reconsider the present constraints facing feminist organising, while commending their commitment to sustainability in light of these constraints. With that being said, the referenced arguments serve as a reminder that in order to effectively dismantle the roots of patriarchy, autonomous feminist spaces must be protected, against all odds.

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