From Sudan to Syria: Lessons on Feminist Movement Building

In 2019, Sudan experienced a major shift in political power following a coup d'état that ended President Omar al-Bashir’s 30-year stronghold on the country. Sudanese women, who have long fought for recognition of their social, political, and economic rights, played a crucial role in protesting against the government – and continue to organise for peace and equality in post-revolution Sudan.

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In conversation with Syrian feminists navigating through the ongoing conflict in Syria — during WILPF’s 2021 annual Convening as part of the Feminist Movement Change in Syria Project — Sudanese activists shared their top lessons on feminist movement building to help guide and strengthen the efforts of their Syrian counterparts.

Visibility does not mean justice

In the Sudanese context, widespread celebration of women’s instrumental roles in protesting both locally and globally has arguably contributed to difficulty in realising women’s transformative agendas.

As Sudanese women’s post-revolution realities continue to be characterised by various forms of violence extending beyond state powers, false discourse commemorating the reinstatement of women’s rights continues to permeate. This reminds us that visibility of women and/or public acknowledgement of women’s revolutionary roles does not always mean material advancements are being made for gender justice on the ground.

Although a number of policy and law reforms have taken place in Sudan, a closer look at the changes reveal grave contradictions in the reality of their application alongside other existing structures. The outward celebration of these changes through the media and
public discourse serves to conceal the violence being perpetuated within the system. The lesson here is that although changes in the law are important steps, they must be understood as progress within a system that we acknowledge as flawed and in its existing form cannot yield the necessary changes for women. This relies on an understanding that transformative radical change is not about law reform and shallow representation in flawed institutions of power; rather, it is rooted in the ceaseless dedication to dismantling these structures.

This reality calls on feminist activists to remain diligent by resisting acceptance of their outward celebration without meaningful social, political, and economic guarantees.

**Strategise for the protection of women’s social, political, and economic rights in the post-revolution/post-conflict period**

As Sudanese feminist activists face increased violence and the sidelining of their agendas, they cautioned the Syrian feminist movement to effectively plan and strategise for the protection and rights of women during the revolution period and beyond. In relation to this lesson, Sudanese activists underlined the worsening economic conditions of women following the revolution. This was arguably attributed to the fact that these issues were not directly addressed with regards to gender during the revolution and the immediate period that followed.

While issues of women’s political representation were at the centre of post-revolution discussions, vigorous approaches to achieving women’s economic rights did not hold the same weight. This has since been illustrated in piecemeal “women’s economic empowerment” narratives and discourses that fail to address deep underlying structural violence fueling women’s difficult and often precarious conditions.

Another issue addressed by Sudanese activists was the continuous lack of regard for the magnitude and systemisation of sexual violence. This was exemplified in the failure to name rape as a weapon of war in the series of peace agreements made in the transitional period. The conversation conveyed the general disregard for the presence and impacts of gender-based violence after the revolution as a direct result of the fact that leadership in the transitional period was male-led and centred on men’s experiences, whose realities do not (and inherently cannot) advance the plight of the most marginalised peoples.

In the Sudanese context, this occurrence was attributed to the feminist movement’s reliance on broad coalitions to further their agendas. The danger of women’s organising within broader alliances runs the risk of having feminist agendas become sidelined and positioned as secondary to the goals of the collective. The undermining of women’s voices within larger organising spaces reminds us that feminist
movements must fiercely protect their agendas and remain vigilant to the spaces where they choose to devote their energies.

Revisit history
When addressing the question of what could have been done differently by the Sudanese feminist movement, the discussion centred the revisiting of our histories as a crucial and often overlooked part of movement building.

For feminist movements in particular, the processes of reflection and resistance must go hand in hand. Reading the position of feminist movements today through a revisiting of our histories allows us to study the gaps and honour past achievements to effectively grasp current challenges. In other words, by engaging in both resistance and reflection feminist movements are able to draw on how history informs our futures and are more equipped to contextualise modern struggles to better strategise for feminist futures.

Hope and resistance are the heartbeat of feminist mobilising
It is without doubt that dedication to feminist resistance is a tiresome battle that requires a great deal of labour, which often translates to overwhelming hopelessness and the overall exhaustion of energies.

Although the conversation reflected on the very real of experiences of both rage and burn-out that face feminist activists, the final lesson to the Syrian movement came in the form of a reminder that hope and resistance are the heartbeat of feminist movement building as, together, they continue to ensure that liberation is the only option. The power derived from the belief of the collective agenda is what will ultimately ensure that the fight endures and that liberation is experienced.

Therefore, the ever-changing journey of feminist resistance must be embedded in an understanding that the fight against patriarchy needs be one that is as relentless and aggressive as patriarchy itself.