

The Women's Movements in the MENA Region in the Early XXI Century: Paths, Generations, Labels

The recent political, economic and social transformations and the consequent movements of protest have marked a new stage in the history of women's movements in the MENA region. In these last years, we have been witnessing to an indisputable growth in women's political agency both inside and outside the traditional feminist spaces. The Arab Uprisings - as the previous Iranian Green Movement and the successive Turkish Taksim movement - showed a great presence of women in the protests and at the same time new forms of youth engagement that reconfigured women's activism and the relations between generations of activists. Within squares, streets, political organizations, public sphere - online and offline -, gender relations were reconstructed and new feminist cartographies emerged.

This new women's political agency is the result of a long history of feminist struggles in the area. In the MENA countries, women's movement goes back to the end of the XIX century and intertwines with the state-building processes along the XX century. At the moment, this history is characterized by multiple positions and perspectives; some groups adopt a 'secular' position - i.e., they marginalize religion to the private sphere -, while some others put religion - considered as the main instrument for claiming their rights - at the center of their demand for equality.

The present papers testify to these different approaches and concentrate upon specific experiences but at the same time they cast them in the wider context of MENA women's movements. The research papers stretch from Morocco to Iran, from Tunisia to Turkey and Egypt thus exploring both Arab and not Arab countries; from a historical and sociological perspective, these essays sketch specific national movements. The generation gap between women activists and their different political approach is the common thread that runs through the papers and is characterized by continuity and change. Authors here pay particular attention to the raising of a new generation's activism.

The aim of this volume is to shed light both on women's movements evolution and on the features of young women's activism from a comparative perspective. We believe that these issues are crucial in order to understand the social transformations in the area. Indeed, since the start of Iranian Green Movement in 2009, and more and more during the Arab uprisings, gender issues and youth's activism emerged as two central keys for understanding the changes happening both in the region and in the social movements. It is not coincidence that young women's faces and bodies have become iconic and effective images of the recent revolts: suffice to mention here the girl with the blue bra in Tahrir square, the one with the red dress at Gezy Park, and the girl with the green veil killed during a demonstration in Tehran. The images of all these cult people who have emerged as new Antigones, went viral and circulated worldwide, emphasizing the centrality of women in the current social movements (Casalini 2015). In spite of women's substantial presence the reference to feminism and feminist organizations doesn't seem so relevant for youth's identifications and political subjectivities. However, we can say that feminism has penetrated the social imaginary of new generations of activists and informed their practices. While we can argue about labels, definitions and categorizations of the current women's activism and about the quality and the range of the results women have achieved so far, it is undeniable that the Arab uprising, as well as other social movements in the region, has triggered new gender awareness and political identities.

Thus, the essays collected in this volume describe new patterns of female youth's activism and compare them to the women's activism of previous generations, underling points of friction, influence and tensions. Moreover, they analyze gender dynamics emerging among the various components of the protest movements, notably in the secular and in the religious segments; and they sketch a new map of protests led by women but not necessarily inscribed into feminist practices and discourse, by also providing categorizations and definitions of these new forms of women's activism. One of the main aspects emerging in all the present researches is the young generations' trouble in identifying themselves with a 'traditional' feminist discourse. In Maryam Ben Salem's article on Tunisia and in that by Renata Pepicelli on Morocco it is evident that young female activists are far from the feminist discourse

of the 1980-1990's and that they do prefer to be active in gender-mixed structures; consequently, they avoid separatism and self definitions explicitly referring to the 'feminist' terminology. From these activists' point of view, women's rights constitute a cross-cutting issue to be cast in a 'general' action for claiming rights and democracy. For many of them feminism no longer represents their main militant identity. Very often they have a range of priorities that sometimes would bring feminism to the fore, while sometimes would privilege issues as social justice, terrorism rather than feminism.

The ones who have occupied central stage between the first and the second decades of the 2000s went beyond the political and identity positions typical of the previous generation (from the 1970s to the 1990s). The proof of this phenomenon is the overcome of a cut-clear opposition between 'secular' and 'religious' women in Egypt, Iran and Morocco. In these countries, in the last years a post-ideological dimension has taken place and has both swept away rigid ideological barriers and favored new alliances between 'secular' groups and groups who refer to 'religion' in their political projects. This is the case of the 20 February Movement (hereafter, M20F) secular activists in Morocco who in 2011 took to the streets together with the Islamists of al-'Adl wa al-ihsan while simultaneously broke the alliance with traditional feminists associations supporting the King towards constitutional reforms. Also in Iran the Green Wave movement created unedited coalitions between secular and religious feminists, as Anna Vanzan describes here; while Mulki al-Sharmani narrates how many so called Islamic Feminists are trying to find a way to collaborate with female groups with a different attitude rather than destroying them.

The present essays start from the same question: how are women's movements developing? Does the high visibility of women in recent movement protests indicate the rise of a new feminism? Do most women recognize any form of 'feminism' as a paradigm for their struggle or have they discovered new and more efficacious patterns in order to accomplish their rights? Could we call the emerging female youth's activism 'feminism'? If yes, in which sense? Which other labels can we use to define female youth activism during and after the Arab uprisings? Do new gender relations within the movement influence gender relations in the rest of society? What kind of relation does exist between the new generation of female activists and previous generations of feminists? What are so far the consequences for women's rights in the MENA region? Is there any collaboration among 'secular', 'Muslim', 'Islamic' and 'Islamist' women activists? Do women move beyond the binaries of secularity/religiosity? The questions asked are the same, but the Authors have adopted diverse methods in order to answer them: while Ben Salem, Şimşek-Rathke and al-Sharmani have a sociological perspective, Pepicelli and Vanzan prefer a historical approach. Maryam Ben Salem, from the University of Sousse and the Center of Arab Woman for Training and Research of Tunis, bases her paper on the results of a qualitative survey

(semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups) conducted between 2012-2013 with Tunisian women activists (associative activists, cyber activists, members of political parties) from different generations. She has covered the differentiated forms of feminist activism in Tunisia and the varied meanings that women associate with them after the 'revolution of 14 January 2011'. Starting from a comparison among different generations of women activists, whether they claim to be feminist or not, Ben Salem has examined the role of different processes of socialization and the effects of context on the transformations of feminism in Tunisia.

Mulki al-Sharmani from University of Helsinki offers a detailed cartography of Islamic Feminism in Egypt. Her article is based on fieldwork in Cairo and Alexandria, on interviews with scholar/activists working on Islamic feminism and with Al-Azhar graduate students and academics seeking reform in religious education. She describes the goals and the nature of some Egyptian Islamic feminist organizations, thus shedding light on the generational and intellectual differences among them. By examining how Islamic feminism scholars/activists intersect or collaborate with a number of actors in the country who are also seeking reform, Al-Sharmani underlines the contributions of Islamic feminism as a potential movement that can facilitate social transformation.

Leyla Şimşek-Rathke from Istanbul Marmara University bases her research on semi-structured interviews with women engaged in feminist politics. She discusses the direct and indirect role of feminist struggles for equal citizenship, social, economic and political participation and representation on women's agency in current social movements (generally named 'Gezi Park') that started in Istanbul in May 2013, and turned out into a nationwide protest in at least 79 Turkish cities. From her article it emerges how two generations of women activists are dialoguing together.

Anna Vanzan from the University of Milan retraces Iranian women's movement story and shows how "adaptability" is the key to understand Iranian women's struggle. Women on the Iranian plateau have been inventing and adjusting their feminist movement according to the political situation for more than a century. It can be said that they are among the inventors and the promoters of many forms of the so-called Islamic Feminism. As their words and actions reveal, while keeping an eye on the international female scene (both in the West and the in East), they are working for an indigenous and therefore long lasting formula of feminism.

Renata Pepicelli from LUISS University in Rome articulates the positions of the M20F young women's in the genealogy of women's movement in Morocco and shows elements of continuity and disruption. She divides the history of Morocco women's in four phases: the phase in which women would join their fight with the independence seekers and, once obtained it, continued to struggle for rights in the so-called 'years of lead' (1950-1970); the phase in which an autonomous feminist movement emerged (1980-1990); the phase of the achievements of legal reforms

(the 2000s); and finally the present phase characterized by the growth of the M20F movement and of a generation of young activists who do not recognize themselves as feminists but have been informed, in practices and imaginary, by feminist struggles. All the papers contribute to forge the idea that in the MENA area women nowadays are not much interested in understanding how feminism is or is not relevant to them; rather, they demonstrate the primacy of self-determination by recuperating the lesson of feminism and forging new forms of organization and contestation in order to achieve a full citizenship. Their claims for equality are embedded within a broader framework of claims for democracy, freedom and social justice.

Renata Pepicelli and Anna Vanzan, editors of this issue

Note: each article adopts a simplified system of transliteration and according to the author's choice.

References

Casalini B. (2015), *Nel segno di Antigone: disobbedienza femminista e queer*, in «Genesis», vol. XIV, pp. 117-140