



Arab  
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# EMERGENCE, RESILIENCE, AND TENSIONS: A DECADE OF LGBTQ ACTIVISM IN MOROCCO

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## Introduction

Although Article 489<sup>1</sup> of Morocco's Penal Code criminalizes homosexual acts, LGBTQ organizing in Morocco has taken a new turn since 2011, with the emergence of multiple collectives that organize and employ a variety of strategies to claim their rights as a community. The emergence of LGBTQ collectives can be traced to a post-2011 wave of new forms of organizing.<sup>2</sup> During the 2011 social uprisings that swept the MENA region, Morocco's 20 February social movement mobilized large numbers of citizens around socio-economic and political demands. The movement marked a new era in Moroccan politics and political resistance in the public space. As a youth-led movement, it challenged previous modes of organizing and existing alliances and divisions within the political scene and expanded the public sphere by offering alternative spaces to express grievances and to organize around them. The movement symbolized "hope for Moroccan youth"<sup>3</sup> and challenged classical ways of taking political action while bringing into the public debate taboo topics such as feminist body politics, reproductive rights, religious freedoms, and the rights of sexual and gender minorities. At the same time, activists who identified as LGBTQ brought forward discussions around sexual orientation and the rights of LGBTQ. These issues were not explicitly part of the political agenda of the 20 February movement, however, many activists within it who identified as LGBTQ brought queer slogans during official protests with signs reading "Oppression is here, I am here" or "Love is not a crime." New forms of organizing that emphasized occupying the public space in addition to artistic expressions (such as the production of magazines and zines, graffiti, and music) and underground cultural expressions (such as teach-ins and social theater) came to the surface.

This essay explores the evolution of LGBTQ organizing in Morocco since 2011, highlighting the impact of the 20 February social movement as a catalyst for activism. It discusses the emergence of LGBTQ collectives, their strategies for claiming rights, and the challenges they face, including surveillance, violence, and cooptation. The essay

also examines new generations of LGBTQ activism, the role of social media, and the response to outing campaigns. It delves into the tensions within local LGBTQ politics, including the debate between culturalist and systemic approaches, and the effects of NGOization on the movement's goals and strategies. It underlines how the increasing visibility of the LGBTQ movement, and the queer critiques of the Moroccan women's rights movement compels feminist groups to reflect on their politics and the very definition of what feminism is and who it is for.

## 2011 as a Catalyst for LGBTQ Organizing

Within the context of the Arab Spring, members of the LGBTQ community decided to organize around questions of sexual orientation and gender identity. The social movement represented a catalyst and "a collective energy" that encouraged them to take action.<sup>4</sup>

This led to the emergence of Aswat in December 2013 as the first LGBTQ collective. Before being established as a collective, Aswat started as an [online magazine](#) launched in April 2012 and focused on topics related to sexual health and sexual education, contemporary culture, and personal life narrative articles written by and for members of the community. Aida, one of the co-founders of Aswat, observed that while some human rights groups were advocating for the decriminalization of homosexuality from the standpoint of individual freedoms, activists felt the need for an organization led by LGBTQ individuals themselves. Aswat worked on documenting the arrests of LGBTQ people under Article 489 nationwide, provided legal support, and exposed homophobic and transphobic assaults carried out by individuals and mobs. They used media and online campaigns and garnered the support of Moroccan intellectuals, public figures, and international actors to call for the release of individuals prosecuted under Article 489 and to push for legal reform. They also observed the trials of those charged under Article 489, documented the court hearings, interviewed relatives of victims, and organized press interviews for the lawyers.

Aswat began campaigning through many avenues that bridge cyberactivism and organizing in the streets. They conducted an online campaign under the hashtag "Love\_is\_not\_a\_crime" with the testimonies and contributions of individuals

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1 "Article 489 of the Moroccan Penal Code states, "an indecent act or act against nature" with a member of the same sex is punishable with six months to three years in prison. In addition to imprisonment, LGBTQ individuals may have to pay anywhere from 200 to 1,000 dirhams for committing these "indecent acts."

2 The first organization that advocated for LGBT rights was founded in 2005 under the name "Kif Kif" and is now operating from Spain. For the purposes of this article, I am tracing organizations founded after 2011.

3 Interview with Aida.K, April 2023.

4 Interview with Lamyaa.A, May 2023.

## 2 Emergence, Resilience, and Tensions: A Decade of LGBTQ Activism in Morocco

from the LGBTQ community and the support of public figures. They also occupied the street and intervened in public by attending protests as members of an openly LGBTQ collective. They aimed to create a network of allies and bring LGBTQ slogans and politics into the street by participating in protests organized by union workers, teachers, unemployed youth, and other civil rights movements. Over time, they succeeded in building unlikely alliances. Aida notes that Aswat “started with a dream, with rage against oppression and hope for a sincere and real struggle for our right to exist.” At the same time, other LGBTQ organizations were emerging. One was Akaliyat, an LGBTQ organization and online magazine. In 2015, they launched an online campaign under the hashtag “Love\_is\_a\_human\_right” and published a series of videos of individuals openly discussing their sexual orientations and the right to fall in love as a human right.

During the summer of 2015, which many Moroccan LGBTQ activists named the “dark summer,” surveillance and a crackdown on activists reached a new height. Many members of Aswat felt surveilled, harassed, and persecuted, and many were outed to their families and workplaces. Many activists reported being followed by police officers and having unmarked police cars parked in front of their houses to intimidate them. In Rabat and during a public teach-in organized through the initiative “Philosophy in the Streets”, one of Aswat’s co-founders was leading a discussion on the campaign “#Love is not a crime” before he was arrested for the “violation of public decency” for speaking about LGBTQ rights in the public sphere. During the same summer, two Moroccan men were arrested for allegedly “standing too close to each other” in front of a historic site in Rabat, where one day earlier, two Femen activists had posed topless protesting anti-gay laws and were arrested and deported.

From 2016 onward and with the increased visibility of Aswat, activists found themselves enmeshed in a political game. On the one hand, they faced an increased interest from international actors and journalists who approached the situation with an orientalist perspective, oversimplifying the narrative by framing LGBTQ stories through a reductive and simplistic narrative of mere repression. Activists felt that the Western media coverage of homophobia and transphobia in Morocco presented a caricatured portrayal that panders to Western homonationalist<sup>5</sup> narratives. These

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5 Homonationalism is a concept that describes the intersection between LGBTQ rights and nationalist agendas within the context of global politics. It refers to the strategic utilization of LGBTQ rights as a marker of cultural superiority, often by Western nations, to distinguish themselves from other societies, particularly those in the Global South or with predominantly Muslim populations. This concept was coined by scholar Jasbir K. Puar in her work “Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times” (2007). The concept of homonationalism highlights the complexity of LGBTQ advocacy, as it can be co-opted to serve broader geopolitical interests. Reference: Puar, Jasbir K. “Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times.” Duke University Press, 2007.

homonationalist discourses played into the concept of “Western exceptionalism,” positing “the West” as the forefront advocate of LGBTQ rights while remaining uncritical of its own LGBTQ discrimination and obscuring its culpability in co-producing such discrimination in global majority contexts. At the same time, homonationalist narratives portray the non-Western others, notably brown and Muslim bodies, as the antithesis of progress. By writing on homophobia and transphobia as inherent features of the “MENA” region and of “Muslim societies”, this discourse isolated LGBTQ activists from their local contexts. It painted them as progressive exceptions, facing the dangerous violence of their backward societies. This discourse minimized LGBTQ activists’ agency and contributed to exacerbating racist and Islamophobic discourses. Well-meaning international actors, who often lack knowledge of the intricate local dynamics in which LGBTQ activists operate, took public stands and issued statements that put local activists at risk of [unwanted attention](#) that could lead to their arrest or ostracization. On the other hand, Aswat risked cooptation by state-sponsored associations who sought to depoliticize it while at the same time polishing Morocco’s image in international spheres. When receiving official invitations from state-sponsored organizations that sought to help Aswat become a legally registered NGO, the activists refused, stating that “we do not want to be recognized by a state that does not recognize our existence and our humanity.”<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Aswat activists felt rejected and dismissed by feminists and some leftist organizations who considered defending LGBTQ rights risky and “too shocking” to Moroccan society.

Ultimately, the increased surveillance and violence led to activist burnout with some seeking asylum outside the country and others taking a step back from activism or creating new initiatives. Aswat members experienced their separation from one another as “an amputation” that heralded the end of the group, which was officially dissolved in 2019.

## New Generations of LGBTQ Activism and New Challenges

Currently, there are around 13 active LGBTQ collectives across Morocco working on different priorities including community capacity-building and financial support of precarious queer people, knowledge production and archiving practices, activism and representation, and lobbying and advocacy. I interviewed the co-founders and members of Nassawiyat, Trans Dynamique, Taanit, and Groupe D’Action Auto

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6 Interview with Lamyaa. A May 2023.

### 3 Emergence, Resilience, and Tensions: A Decade of LGBTQ Activism in Morocco

Feministe to discuss the history behind the emergence of their collectives, their demands, and the strategies they employ to push them. Since the social movements of 2011, many other social and political moments have impacted the evolution of LGBTQ organizing in Morocco.

2016 marked a significant shift in LGBTQ methods of activism and a turn towards more online organizing. The arrest in 2016 and prosecution of two minor girls, who were detained in adult prison, for posting a picture of them kissing on a rooftop in Marrakech sparked a wide campaign, spearheaded by LGBTQ actors and the support of local and international human rights organizations. The campaign's success, which led to their release, gave a new surge of hope to activists nationwide. In the words of Izgar, one of the two people arrested "The fact that we won this case gave us a newfound hope for change, however, I often ask myself if we need a tragedy like this one to be able to come together and organize."<sup>7</sup> This case highlights the potentiality of crisis in creating political solidarity.

Since then, a second wave of LGBTQ organizations and collectives started to emerge online, using social media platforms first as spaces to connect and organize with the community and then as spheres for advocacy and awareness-raising. Online dating apps were also used by LGBTQ members as a safer tool to interact with the community while safeguarding their anonymity and security. Some organizations focused primarily on art, media, and cultural production. For instance, Nassawiyat, an LGBTQ feminist organization founded in 2018, published a magazine titled "Beyond Gender" (*ma waraa al jandar*) and produced "Houmouna", a web series on sexual orientation and gender identities. They also organized art exhibitions to showcase the work of queer artists and opened their physical space for workshops and discussions with members of the community. Taanit Platform chose to focus on knowledge and media production and has been working on building a digital feminist and LGBTQ archive documenting the personal and political histories of the community in Morocco. They are also producing Daba Podcast, highlighting interviews with members of the community on topics like coming out and chosen families. Other trans-led organizations such as Trans Dynamique work on the rights and liberation of trans, non-binary, and intersex people. They focus on research and advocacy by producing reports on legal, social, and medical discrimination against trans people and provide community support such as gender-affirming care. The founder of Groupe d'Action Feministe organizes feminist self-defense workshops for trans, non-binary people, and women. It provides a comprehensive approach to the prevention of violence that centers on the empowerment of victims by appropriating physical, verbal, or psychological defense techniques. Talayan is a newly founded trans sex workers movement and the first collective to explicitly advocate for the rights of sex

workers in Morocco and bring the issues of transphobia and sex work criminalization to feminist debates.

During the Covid-19 lockdown period of 2020, Morocco's LGBTQ community was shaken by a series of violent outing campaigns and online attacks sparked by a Moroccan Instagram celebrity. In April 2020, the Instagram celebrity known as Sofia Taloni instructed cis-heterosexual women to create fake online profiles on same-sex dating apps to expose gay men. Many posted private photos and private information of gay men on social media while inciting violence against them. The violence of the campaign coupled with the strict lockdown laws at the time meant that many queer people were trapped in situations of violence and abuse while others were ostracized and kicked out of their family homes. Many gay and bisexual men received death and rape threats – according to Nassawiyat, over 100 people reported being outed to their surroundings with at least one reported suicide.

A group of LGBTQ organizations and human rights organizations and defenders issued a joint public statement denouncing the attacks and calling on Instagram and Facebook to shut down the accounts of the influencer for inciting hate speech against the queer community and for same-sex dating apps to suspend the creation of new accounts. The statement also called for the decriminalization of homosexuality and the enacting of laws that preserve the dignity of the LGBTQ community in Morocco and others that criminalize acts of hatred and discrimination. After having succeeded in banning the accounts of the influencer and limiting the creation of new dating profiles, the group sent an official collective letter to the Moroccan Head of the Public Prosecution Office to call for an investigation into the violent outings, hate speech campaigns, and the incitement of violence. Although the Public Prosecution Office said they would open an investigation in this regard, no follow-up is known to have been made.

These outing events marked a collective moment of fear, mistrust, and devastation for the LGBTQ community and a terrifying realization of the fragility of existing as a member of the LGBTQ community in Morocco even in online spaces. Dating apps and social media that once helped to bypass the dangers of coming together in public spaces, were becoming new spaces of repression. At the same time, for many activists 2020 was also a politicizing moment pushing for more community-led forms of organizing. LGBTQ organizations worked to provide shelter, food, financial and psychological support to queer people affected by the outing campaigns and those impacted by precariousness heightened by the covid-19 lockdown. In the absence of government responses and interventions to protect the dignified livelihood of vulnerable communities more generally and queer communities specifically, including by guaranteeing basic rights such as shelter, food, and access to healthcare, community-led initiatives remain central ways to ensure the survival and the protection of queer individuals.

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7 Interview with Izgar, April 2023.

## Navigating Global Tensions in Local LGBTQ Politics

With its expansion over the last decade, the LGBTQ movement inevitably faces fundamental questions over its priorities and tactics, and the sources of gender injustice and discrimination. LGBTQ politics do not exist in a vacuum; they are inscribed in both its immediate and local contexts and in the global forces that shape feminist, sexual, and national politics. For example, many groups often single out culture, religion, and society as the sole perpetrators and unique sources of homophobia and/or transphobia and do not develop systematic critiques of economic and political systems of oppression and how these create and exacerbate these discriminations. The culturalist reading of LGBTQ discrimination qualifies the country's "culture" as inherently patriarchal, misogynistic, and anti-progress and points to "society" and its norms and values as the sources of homophobia. This understanding, therefore, leads to advocating for top-down, legal change, where the state is seen as the guarantor of the protection of the queer community and legal reform as a means of "changing mentalities" and a goal in and of itself.

Therefore, many groups, such as Kasbah Tal'Fin and l'Union Feministe Libre (UFL), choose to prioritize formal equality and legal reform and employ lobbying and advocacy on the national and international levels to achieve their goals. The UFL, the only officially registered LGBT organization in Morocco, demonstrates an affiliation with the state and its institutions and appeals to a mainstream form of LGBT-friendly state feminism.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, other groups, which hold the state accountable for perpetuating discrimination, adopt a more encompassing and radical definition of activism and locate their struggle within a broader understanding of how oppressions are interconnected and that while discrimination is locally rooted, it is shaped by global forces such as imperialism and capitalism.<sup>9</sup> These groups are wearier about collaborating with state institutions and international actors. For instance, Nassawiyat's co-founder Oumaima explained

that advocating for LGBTQ rights in Morocco is not simply a question of "defending individual liberties." Nassawiyat see their work as inscribed in the fight for dignity rather than freedom. In other words, they want to guarantee dignified living, and access to healthcare, education, and employment for queer people. At the same time, legal reform and the decriminalization of homosexuality are for them a strategy and not an end goal. "We don't want to just change the laws; the real change will start after we change the laws!"<sup>10</sup>

The process of NGOization and the professionalization of feminist and LGBTQ activism is also at the center of discussions within and between collectives. NGOization refers to the process of professionalization, institutionalization, and bureaucratization of social movements and grassroots activism and its inscription in the capitalist job market.<sup>11</sup> This is not unique to LGBTQ activism but a common trend across social justice struggles in the Middle East and North Africa region. The professionalization of feminist activism more broadly through the process of NGOization has led to a depoliticization of the struggle and shifted the focus from collective organizing to competition over funding and individual career paths.

The increasing NGOization in the region means that feminist and LGBTQ activism risks becoming project-based, depoliticized, and softening its critiques of structural issues. Competing for funding from international stakeholders can often mean that the priorities and agendas of many feminist organizations are set up according to the funder's agendas rather than based on local needs. LGBTQ activists are navigating these dilemmas: on one hand, the necessity to have funds that support the activities of the collectives and also guarantee the livelihood of the activists themselves, and on the other hand maintaining independence, self-led, and community-centered forms of organizing that put the priorities of the queer community before the agendas of the funders. They navigate dependence on global north funding and lack of economic resources with awareness and criticism of the risks of cooptation and flattening of social justice struggles.

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8 "Activism and the Economy of Victimhood: A Close Look into NGO-ization in Arabic-Speaking Countries: Interventions: Vol 22, No 4."

9 Interview with Zeyne, April 2023. For more on the complex interplay between historical legacies of colonialism and global forces of capitalism and imperialism on one hand and the contemporary realities and struggles for LGBTQ rights in postcolonial settings, including the MENA region, see Arondekar, Anjali. "'Thinking Sex' with Geopolitics." Edited by Valerie Traub. *Women's Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 3/4 (2016): 332–35; Hayes, Jarrod. "De Groove Is in de Move: Decolonizing Sex and Sexuality in Middle East and North African Studies." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 14, no. 2 (2018): 143–51; Rao, Rahul. "The Locations of Homophobia." *London Review of International Law* 2, no. 2 (September 1, 2014): 169–99.

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10 Interview with Oumaima, May 2023.

11 Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor, eds., *NGOization: Complicity, Contradictions and Prospects* (Zed Books, 2012)

## Queer Critiques of Inclusion and Exclusion Politics within the Moroccan Feminist Movement: Who is Feminism For?

The growing LGBTQ movement in Morocco is built by people who draw their activism from their direct experiences of marginalization, violence, ostracization, and in many cases, precarity. The importance of centering lived experiences and bringing forward the personal into the political sphere is at the core of LGBTQ movements. Most of the organizations that identify as queer feminist organizations are often led by cis women, trans and non-binary individuals rather than by cis-gay men. These collectives often identify with queer and intersectional feminism and question the power dynamics embedded in women's rights organizations in the country and question their very definition of feminism and who it is for. They have a pluralist understanding of feminism as a struggle that converges with anti-capitalism, anti-homophobia, anti-racism, etc. LGBTQ organizations present a sharp critique of the Moroccan women's movement and state that the dominant feminist movement continues to privilege the demands and the priorities of upper-middle-class, urban, educated, heterosexual cis-women while disregarding the experiences of other marginalized communities including Sub-Saharan migrant women and LGBTQ communities. Activists recount experiences of being shunned by established feminist groups who refused to collaborate or support LGBTQ organizations or show public solidarity during arrests and attacks that the community was subject to. Lamyaa, the co-founder of the Taanit platform writes that previous generations of women's rights activists are "not only classist but also homophobic and racist." She adds that "they lacked inclusivity towards LGBTQIA+ persons, in particular shunning transgender persons, and made organizations exclusively for the advancement of cis-gendered women." Similarly, Izgar explains that established women's rights organizations have at times been spaces of violence and micro-aggressions towards queer activists for being queer or being younger and therefore seen as less legitimate to participate in political

discussions.<sup>12</sup> Many activists reported hearing statements such as "queer rights are not a priority" and "we do not want to shock Moroccan society." The culturalist argument that reverberates within Moroccan feminist spaces seems to suggest that queerness and by extension the queer community is foreign to Moroccan society. This dangerous rhetoric puts Moroccan LGBTQ individuals at the fringes of the fight for social inclusion and relegates them to second-class citizens whose rights are incompatible with a seemingly monolithic Moroccan identity. This rejection feeds into nationalist moral anxieties that scapegoat minority groups and leads to further authoritarian crackdowns.

This tension is not simply a generational gap between older and younger generations of feminist organizations; it is a political one that cuts across generational divides. For instance, in 2020, a young emerging feminist group, appropriated LGBTQ slogans while sidelining LGBTQ demands. The "Moroccan Outlaws" feminist collective launched a campaign to repeal Article 490 of the penal code which criminalizes consensual sex between adult men and women outside marriage. The collective coopted the slogan "Love is not a Crime," a slogan used by queer activists for their advocacy campaigns but refused to include a call for the abolition of Article 489 of the penal code. While queer activists were arguing for the strategic importance of advocating for the abolition of both articles and the importance of creating a solid coalition to amend the penal code, they were met with statements that the priority should be decriminalizing sex outside marriage and that the rest will naturally follow.

The most recent and flagrant example of the tensions between emerging feminist movements and LGBTQ politics happened during a sit-in in Casablanca on 25 July 2023, organized by the "Hiya Movement." The organization called for a sit-in to defend women's rights and advocate for amendments to the Family Code. During the sit-in, Malak, a trans-feminist activist who was standing the front line, raised the LGBTQ flag. The organizers immediately asked her to take it down and raised concerns about the security and safety of protestors as passers-by shouted statements like "this is a Muslim country" and not "a rainbow country" and yelled homophobic slurs. Malak refused to take down the flag and stated that "We cannot rank and make a hierarchy out of the struggle for rights." The social media pages of mainstream media shared a video of the incident, showing the face of the activist and exposing her to violent attacks online and offline, defamation, and death and rape threats.

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12 Lamyaa Achary, "Moroccan Feminists: Generational Gaps in Feminist Movements," African Arguments (blog), November 15, 2022, <https://africanarguments.org/2022/11/moroccan-feminists-generational-gaps-in-feminist-movements/>.

## 6 Emergence, Resilience, and Tensions: A Decade of LGBTQ Activism in Morocco

Following the sit-in and the media coverage, the organizers posted a press release,<sup>13</sup> stating that they were not responsible for Malak's action and that while they support "all individual liberties" they do not condone her action. Their ambiguous stance started a tense debate among and between feminist and LGBTQ groups on questions of intersectionality, inclusivity, and queer politics. Many LGBTQ activists, including writer and filmmaker Abdellah Taia, criticized the stance taken by the organizers as cowardly and an illustration of the conditional and fleeting allyship of feminists. LGBTQ activists added that many organizations invite LGBTQ activists to participate in "close meetings and workshops" to prove to their funders that they are inclusive while at the same time refusing to take public stances for LGBTQ rights. In other words, they invite the strategic support of the LGBTQ community while controlling its visibility. This incident is not anecdotal or isolated, it showcases the growing deep tensions about the politics of feminism and the place that LGBTQ rights occupy in feminist discourses and organizing.

Organizers of the sit-in insisted that Malak was putting the protestors in danger, a victim-blaming discourse that makes the activist responsible for the potential transphobic and homophobic assaults that passers-by might commit. They insisted on the fact that they could not be blamed because they protected Malak from the violence of the crowds or a potential arrest by escorting her after the end of the sit-in. Protecting a trans-woman was framed as a brave political statement rather than a duty and an act of ethical solidarity. In the words of Malak, claiming to suddenly care about the safety of a trans woman only when she raises the LGBTQ flag in a feminist protest shows that the real concern is the safety of the organizers: "We were never safe and our lives were and still always at risk."<sup>14</sup> As many queer activists pointed out, while women's rights organizations have the platform and the legal right to protest, queer activists could never benefit from similar legal protection or the right to occupy the public sphere. This benevolent and "charitable" language about the "protection" of Malak shifts the discussion from real political questions about the exclusionary practices within feminist movements that undermine the presence, solidarity, and inclusion of LGBTQ individuals, rights, and demands. It begs the question: what social change is the feminist movement working towards – one that only benefits a certain category of cis-gendered women or a transformative change that includes the rights of all vulnerable communities?

A number of LGBTQ collectives and individuals released a joint "Manifesto for Equality, Recognition, and Solidarity!" to shed light on the events of the sit-in and to reinstate their

political demands: "It is imperative that our struggles are acknowledged, understood, and addressed. We stand united in our pursuit of justice and liberation for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression." They qualified the actions and stance towards Malak's incident as institutional and "comfort-oriented feminism" and highlighted the need for a comprehensive feminist struggle. Claiming that a feminist protest for the amendment of the Family Code is not the right "time and place" to advocate for queer right, suggests that these are "issues" that primarily affect cis-gender heterosexual women. LGBTQ individuals are equally impacted by legal changes and by questions of inheritance, marriage, divorce, and abortion. The othering and alienating of an entire community of people imply that LGBTQ citizens, unlike other Moroccan citizens, are somehow beyond the pervasive rule of law – unaffected by the political, legal, and social changes that the women's movements advocate for.

Prioritizing and creating a hierarchy in the struggle for civil rights has often been used in the past by progressive social movements, such as the independence movement and later on leftist political parties, to dismiss feminist demands from political agendas. Feminist organizations are now complicit in recreating the same power dynamic by relegating LGBTQ rights to a secondary status.

LGBTQ activists also note the changes in official feminist discourse on LGBTQ rights and its evolution in the past few years. Instead of being shunned, denied, or simply relegated as "not a local priority" most women's organizations today can no longer ignore the growing presence of LGBTQ activism and discourses. A lot of organizations have begun initiating collaborative projects with LGBTQ activists and inviting them to discussions and debates. This cannot be simply understood as a change in the politics of established feminist organizations but is indicative of a change in global discourses in feminist politics and in the pressure to restructure lines of alliances within progressive social movements. This has been driven by a growing external pressure to adapt to competitive funding structures and to the rise of concepts such as intersectional feminism which have become central to local and global politics of feminism which funders have begun to demand. Simply put, and in the words of one of the co-founders of Nassawiyat "They are collaborating with us out of obligation because they feel threatened by us and they think we might steal or limit their access to funds."<sup>15</sup> Another member of Trans Dynamique echoes the same sentiment by talking about how this external pressure "to appear more inclusive" has become an urgent discussion on the survival and the continuity of these feminist organizations.

As well as this external pressure there is growing internal pressure led by younger feminists and younger members of feminist organizations who hold more critical and inclusive

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13 The press release has now been taken down by the organization following the debate and the critiques led by LGBTQ activists.

14 This is from a post on the Instagram page of Malak. For safety concerns, I chose to not share the link.

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15 Interview with the founders of Nassawiyat, May 2023.

## 7 Emergence, Resilience, and Tensions: A Decade of LGBTQ Activism in Morocco

definitions of feminism and who challenge the leadership of these organizations from the inside. These individuals seek to bring the lived experiences and political demands of marginalized groups such as migrant women and queer individuals in addition to expanding and redefining the politics of their feminism.

The challenges posed by the increasing visibility of the LGBTQ movement force feminist organizations to question their future, their sustainability, and their very understanding of who a feminist subject is. While 10 years ago they were able to dismiss the social and political presence of LGBTQ individuals, today this is no longer possible. Holding space for intergenerational transmission and self-reflexive critiques of the feminist movement and its exclusionary and discriminatory politics is an urgent need to build alliances and advance the rights of women and LGBTQ communities. However, at present there is a lack of intergenerational discussion and transmission. This weakens the movement by failing to build tactics and approaches from its historical learning, and because it allows the older generation of activists to resist the changes and challenges posed by younger generations of activists who bring new politics, demands, and strategies into focus. There is a lot of hurt and weariness that hinders collaboration.

Recognizing and dealing with the effect of the contentious reality between women's rights organizations and the

LGBTQ movement is an important steppingstone for future, robust and sustainable alliances and an inclusive understanding of gender justice. The current tensions traversing the two movements are a defining moment for the potential of building a comprehensive, inclusive feminist struggle. Without internal mechanisms of recognition, and accountability, and without a will to transform exclusionary discourses and actions upheld by dominant voices within the feminist movement, the gap will continue to grow, and the potential for collaboration becomes scarce.

The LGBTQ movement in Morocco continues to grow, despite the troubling trend towards restricting civil society and the rise in anti-rights politics. Discourse about LGBTQ rights is no longer solely dominated by Western states and NGOs. Local organizations and activists are reshaping and positing the fight against LGBTQ discrimination within the context of Morocco while navigating state repression, local and global rise of backlash and the instrumentalization of LGBTQ struggles in the contemporary geopolitical context. The growing visibility of LGBTQ organizing in Morocco is catalyzing a transformative shift in the landscape of feminism and human rights in the country. As LGBTQ organizations become increasingly visible and vocal, they are broadening the scope of feminist discourse to encompass a more intersectional understanding of gender and sexuality and are pushing the boundaries of human rights advocacy.

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### **About the Arab Reform Initiative**

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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