Embarking on a Quest

By Maie Panaga Babker
In the past decade, feminist movements in the Middle East and North African (MENA) regions have gained attention in studies and funding, especially with the maturation of discourse when it comes to countering patriarchy and its intersection with militarization, fundamentalism, war, gender, and sexual-based violence. These movements have hence embarked on localizing analytical and theoretical frameworks to establish a strong foundation for these developments and everyday battles—to mention some: intersectional feminist theories, reproductive justice, and post-colonialism. Despite these advancements, there is a scarcity when it comes to knowledge about Black and Afro-descendant women’s organizing and struggles.

When research for *Where is the Money for Black Feminist Movements?* began, a stark figure was uncovered about human rights funding to Black women, girls, and trans people: only a single grant went to the MENA regions (see chapter *Through the Philanthropic Lens*). This contrasted with our knowledge of Black feminist contributions and movements in the regions and instigated this chapter that takes a deep dive into the work and thinking of Black feminists in MENA. As the Black Feminist Fund is interested in focusing its efforts on the lived realities of the global and transnational Black and Afro-descendant feminist movements, we expanded our invitation to all those who identify as feminists, activists, organizers, writers, and storytellers in MENA.

This chapter focuses on linking the different threads and contexts that contributed to shaping/weaving the identities and political awareness of Black Afro-descendant women in the regions, and the most used tools in their pursuit to highlight their struggles and relation to other social
movements. In an attempt to map the Black feminist movement in the regions and understand their ways of organizing, we conducted interviews with fifteen Black and Afro-descendent women from ten countries and asked them to share with us their journeys. Their responses gave us insight into the multi-layered and nuanced experiences and meanings of being a Black/Afro-descendant woman in the regions.

**Tyranny of erasure and denial**

Throughout the summer of 2020, various individuals, organizations, groups, and even public figures in and from MENA took to the internet showing solidarity with the “Black Lives Matter (BLM)” movement in the US. Websites were flooding with statements against racism and discrimination, which opened up a conversation that wasn’t the first, but perhaps the most visible, on racism and the situation of Black and Afro-descendant communities in the region. These were met with a spectrum of discourses, from defensive to offensive. There were those who rejected the idea that their culture and countries had racist manifestations, premising their refutation on Islamic religious texts that asserts the equation of white and Black skinned in Islam, and cordially in Arabic cultures. Meanwhile, some others requested ‘proof’ of any legal or societal discrimination towards Black people in the region. Thirdly came those who rendered these ‘accusations’ of racism as ‘unfair,’ claiming they centralize the American ‘western’ history of racism as the benchmark, and stating that even if the culture involved racist actions, they were ‘individual incidents’ that may include jokes, but doesn’t reach hatred for Blackness. All of the prior mentioned arguments had insinuations around the truthfulness of these confrontations, and the ‘americanization’ of those trying to pose the question of historical regional racism, and doubting the intention of Black community members who pose them, that they use a fantasized historical injustice.

In fact, there are various factors that enforce such an ignorant and dismissive discourse, and, concordially, the historical and contemporary state of Black communities and individuals in the region. As a start and most importantly, formal education in its various stages and curricula, that overlooks education on racial, cultural and ethnic diversity and inclusion, and completely disregards the local and regional history of enslavement and the slave trade. Popular culture and media also lack positive representation of Black/Afro-descendent people. Further, it contributes to the normalization and familiarization of an inferior gaze towards Black people.
In shows and movies, Blackness is relegated to comedy: using black face to present stereotypical racist views, mostly as “Sudanese” characters talking in broken Arabic accents. Black women are not represented outside the roles of domestic workers and oversexualized sex workers. Attempts to call for halting these stereotypical racist images are met with dismissive, “you are too sensitive,” responses, exclaiming that such representation does not call for violence against Black people, they are but a mere joke.

The hegemony of such dismissive discourses, ones that override racism as a secondary topic, as opposed to freedom, economic and social rights, that makes it hard to open an effective, profound, and critical debate on race and its various intersections. This moreover burdens the Black and Afro-descendant communities with the full weight of proving, not only their presence and belonging, but also their right to express the ramifications of prolonged structural and institutional oppression.

Black women have tried to explore their histories in the experiences of those before them, of ancestors, in an attempt to understand their present and pick up the pieces of the racial, sexual and gender interweavings in their identities. Rummaging official and alternative historicities of the region, and reading literature fiction and non, falls short to vague mention by historians and academics, and the repulsive stereotyping. Although there is an increasing interest in knowledge production and historicization of figures and stages of feminist movements in the region, it is race and Black feminists contribution, that we fall short in. It is far from an actual reflection of Black women’s voices and causes, on the communities and in various other forms of organizing.
Tracing the past, narrating the present

Part of the impressive maneuverings we noticed while tracing the content of Black and Afro-descendant feminists online in the region is that a lot of the Black feminists took it upon themselves to fill the gaps of knowledge by providing their own version in the narrative. And here they are displaying not only how they make their knowledge production, but how knowledge production is in its own right a tool to develop communities and networks of care.

“It gave me an opportunity to actually link up with Black women, one of my main goals when I started this platform was giving it to Black women specifically and that’s why you will see most of the articles we had on our platform are by Black women because I always felt that with Black men even in the region they tend to have a space where they can speak up it’s not the same case for us and unfortunately they don’t even advocate for our causes and they don’t allow us to share the platforms they have.”
—Nareeman Dosa, Black Pearl

“Black Pearl” is a platform focusing on the stories of Black and Afro-descendant communities from the region, and providing these stories and historicities in the form of written personal narratives, interviews, podcasts, and panels. The founder was given the opportunity to write about her experience as a Black and Afro-descendant woman in Qatar. Through this opportunity, she realized the thirst for more stories, and that she has the capacity to involve more people, more voices of Black and Afro-descendant people, to shed light on the multitudes of layerings, that one or two people alone cannot describe. Black Pearl is evolving with the growth of the feminist consciousness of the people involved in it.

It was their desire to make their stories visible, their identities seen and their views taken into consideration. This is the start of “The Collective for Black Iranians.” The collective is premised on the desire to bring to life the experiences of Black Iranians not only inside Iran but in the relationships of Black Iranians with their identities through various geographies and generations. The collective is committed to two main things: engaging with the linguistic relation to “Blackness” which is used as a
derogatory term, and reclaiming it as an experience. It’s important to note that there is still no actual terminology to refer to “anti-blackness” or to “racism” in Farsi. The second is engaging with the histories of Black communities in South Iran. They do that by involving historians on the one hand, and engaging with the oral history of their own family members on the other. This balance is a mode of disruption in the face of institutionalization of historical narrative. With the collaboration with artists, storytellers, filmmakers, the collective redraws the socio-political imaginaries of the everyday life of Iranians in Black.

“The reason we even share our stories is not to educate, it’s to send an echo, so that Black women and girls in Iran can know they are beautiful.” —Priscillia Kounkou-Hoveyda, The Collective for Black Iranians.

One of the oldest traces of online Black feminist narratives is found in Brownie; a blog that dates back to 2007 by displaced Nubian African Muslim feminist Fatma Emam. Fatma’s blog is her reflection on the constellation of causes she represents but is usually forced to let go of one over the others of her identities. It engages with the rights of return, Blackness in Egypt, African feminisms, literature, and creating a space of solidarity with places that are usually underrepresented in the Egyptian mainstream human rights realm, such as; women living under Muslim laws, and broadening the scope of this realm from the North, to the rest parts of Africa, as a reflection to her own references as a Pan-Africanist, Muslim feminist and land-rights activist. All of which is written in Arabic, and Egyptian dialect.
“The idea of writing a very clear identity disclaimer in the blog is very important, I was writing in English all the time and my readers were foreigners then a friend said to me ‘please write in arabic.’ I started writing in Arabic after the 2011 Egyptian revolution and I do my best to write the posts not in very academic way or activist way, I try to write it in simpler ways to be understood.” —Fatma Emam, Brownie.

In the light of the aforementioned scarcity of spaces, it has led to various forms of online disruptions. While some created separate platforms of their own, others brought their voices to the most famous social media platforms. This is the experience of the Black Arab Collective, which focused on engaging with dismissive discourses of racism in the region. The Black Arab Collective is led by an outspokenly queer woman, who brings to the table not only the experience of race but also the role her queerness plays in shaping her experience of race and gender.

“Sometimes you want a seat at the table; I would rather build my own table and have the ability to talk about the issues and the nuanced experience that we Black women go through.” —Amuna, Black Arab Collective.

Samah Fadl’s Twitter Space, is striking in the way she exhibits Blackness and politics, in a context where Blackness is unfamiliar, Palestine. Based in Canada, Samah is a stateless woman who uses her Twitter account as a family album, and an assemblage of Black Palestinian life, existence, and pasts in audiovisual form.

“Our history is not just struggle we have a beautiful culture, poetry, and food more than just the occupation we are so much more than that, and by using social media I think that has been the way to show it and I’ve been getting a lot of good feedback, it’s so important to document the occupation and what’s happening and it’s equally as important to show the good times, the happiness, the humanity we deserve those things.” —Samah Fadl, Afro-Palestinian writer
The reason we even share our stories is not to educate, it’s to send an echo so that Black women and girls in Iran can know they are beautiful.

Priscillia Kounkou-Hoveyda
The Collective for Black Iranians
Expanding from the margin

In the previous section, we showed the expansion of the MENA feminist discourse; and the blind spots that this expansion reveals. That is Black women are at the margin of the bigger margin of MENA feminist movements. Several organizations have also emerged to organize Black women.

“[...]“The situation here is very difficult and racism is very prevalent, especially with Mauritania’s history of slavery, I come from the Haratines who were enslaved in the past, and of course, this inferiority will continue to follow you wherever you go because of your past, fortunately, the areas we work in are very poor and of the same category as we are, so we find there is more cooperative, but when you try to convince people from other groups, they may not take you seriously for them you are just a Black girl.”
—Salka Hmeida, ONG Taghadom

**ONG Taghadom** works on GBV and its manifestation in the access to education, poverty, FGM, and child marriage in Mauritania with a focus on the Arabic-speaking Black population. In this sense, they face significant pushback: firstly the ostracization in the Black community for trying to combat generations-old practices and economies that are founded on them; secondly, the regional marginalization due to the invisibility of Mauritanian social justice work in human rights and women’s rights in the MENA.

“You fight for BLM but you don’t have Black people in your organizations it’s good and we appreciate they fight for Black lives; but at the same time you should allow us to be part of the movement this is the truth.”
—Banchi Yimer, Egna Legna Besidet

**Egna Legna** works on domestic labor in Lebanon, interacting with one of the most violent labor systems in the MENA, the Kafala system. Migrant women workers, following their homeland exodus from multiple forms of oppression, are subjected to a multitude of violences: sexual, racial, economic, and gender-based. When COVID-19 struck in Lebanon, domestic workers were abandoned by their employers and their embassies, without their wages, and stranded in the streets. Challenging the way humanitarian support and community service interventions are perceived, Egna Legna not only framed their actions as humanitarian support but feminist
intervention. One of their goals is to expand the work against the Kafala system with other domestic workers who suffer under it.

In Tunisia, Khawla Ksiksi co-founded “Voices of Tunisian Black Women,” and is involved in multiple intersectional feminist groups in the country. Khawla was chased out of Tunisia after a parliamentarian mentioned that she and the movement were ‘using’ their colour to push for sexual and reproductive rights, and ‘alleging’ violations that did not exist.

“It was really difficult for us to be part of the activist dynamics; until now we don’t have enough representation even if there are some events that talk about the problems of Black people, they don’t invite Black people.”
—Khawla Ksiksi, Voices of Tunisian Black Women

“The general mentality that anything to do with feminism comes from Cairo does not speak to our issues and our geographical nature and that we do not want the ‘whites’ to show us the way, so it was important for us to say that we the women of this community, we also aim to support the community activists who work in issues similar or intersecting with ours, we help the women’s movement to grow, but in local, grassroots frameworks.”
—Ayat Osman, Ganoubia Hora.

Feminists and activists often feel compelled to work from capital cities, to make their voices more heard. Ganoubia Hora, on the other hand, took a conscious political decision to work on and from Upper Egypt. They focus their work on sexual and reproductive health and rights, GBV, and land rights of Southern Egyptian women. They argue that feminist work is strengthened by diversification of localities and solutions, making the shift from the “savior” approach that organizations and activists based in capital cities acquire.
Daunting norms

Black feminist activists, groups, platforms, and organizations in MENA, as in most regions of the globe, are doing critical work with limited resources and support. This raises a question about the long-term sustainability of their work. There is currently a great deal of voluntarism and free labor involved. The majority of Black feminists interviewed noted having to maintain other jobs to fund their activism work. This doesn’t only hinder the sustainability of their activist work but also affects their quality of life, and the capacity to give more to the causes they fight for.

Despite this, there is hesitation among Black feminists to seek funding opportunities. This is due to the difficulties of funding mechanisms and applications, and the strict terms and conditions of eligibility that, for the most part, do not serve the groups and organizations that apply. For decades, there has been a dire need to amend those policies according to the changes in social movements and mobilizations that are happening. This is also to say that the policies of funding cannot fall back in the face of the changes happening in feminist and social movements.

The following are some of the barriers and biases that prevent Black feminists in MENA from accessing funding:

1. The obligation of institutional registration
   This disregards the contexts where there is a restriction on civil society registration and work, and an impossibility for non-citizens in the same context. This is a part of the systematic reduction of non-governmental social justice work, especially that opposes government violations.

2. The lack of diversity in funding modalities
   Current modalities necessitate projects-based funding, with rigid criteria; as well as less core funding. This limits the capacity that people can work on in regards to the intersections of issues they face.
Lack of funding to enhance capacity building in an array of jobs that are vital for the sustainability and efficiency of the Black feminist movement
This assumes and necessitates individuals desiring work in these forms of organizations come fully equipped with all the needed and fathomed expertise. There is no consideration of the opportunities and needs to improve their capacities, in order to adapt to changes of work environments and economies. In this way, funding, or lack thereof, creates a rigidity in the ways people can innovate and rejuvenate their movements and communities and grow individually.

There is minimal investment in knowledge production
Knowledge production is a process that needs lots of skills and resources for every person involved. The lack of funding dismisses the importance of knowledge production as a break free from the enforced molding of official knowledge portals.

Blind spot to holistic wellness
While funders pay a great attention to the terms and conditions to guarantee the materialization of their funding allocations, the wellness of the people working to produce these services are almost as neglected as the systems oppressing their stakeholders. From health insurances, to medical services, to therapy sessions, to even quality time allocation, none are addressed in the funding process, in a type of labor where chronic stress-related illnesses and disorders are far more common than addressed.
Collective dreams

“When it comes to Black feminist movement I would say plurality. I do not want to see just one movement. People complain about how there is no unity but I want to see thousands of groups popping up representing their own needs. Why not?” —Kawthar, queer Sudanese writer

The visions of Black feminists did not start yesterday and will not wane tomorrow, neither will its momentum decrease anytime soon. On the contrary, we have the ability and potential to create discourses that are fueled by the political imaginary, extending from the ancestral heritage to the generations that will prosper in the change we will achieve. This chapter and the Black feminists who were interviewed remind us of the vitality of creating spaces that transcend borders and localities, to the aspirations of collective dreams.