

## Working Politically Behind Red Lines: Structure and Agency in a comparative study of women's coalitions in Egypt and Jordan

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How can the international community advance gender equality in politically closed and socially conservative contexts through effective support to women's coalitions? This report presents the findings from a study of how six collective initiatives in Egypt and Jordan have formed and worked politically to advance the gender agenda in a number of key areas. The study involved in-depth interviews with coalition leaders and members, donors and locally based gender and development experts.

The key findings from this study are here presented under the following headings:

- Critical overarching themes regarding women's coalitions in politically closed and socially conservative contexts
  - Factors that facilitate the formation of coalitions
  - Factors that facilitate the relative 'success' of women's coalitions
  - Coalition strategies for greater influence
  - What donors should avoid doing
  - Key elements of effective donor support
- Critical overarching themes regarding women's coalitions in politically closed and socially conservative contexts**
- Coalitions to advance women's equality are rare in the Middle East, challenged by a restrictive and professionalized political culture that discourages collective forms of agency.
  - A constellation of factors, rather than a single factor, accounts for the emergence of coalitions. This constellation includes (but is not restricted to): a cause that touches on people's lives, a politically opportune moment, and local actors that respond by mobilizing to form a collective initiative.
  - Given that the space for influencing policy is restricted to a closed circle of elites, it is not the agency of the coalition alone that leads to policy influence. The key finding is that engaging in informal 'backstage' politics is equally, if not more, important than formal channels of engagement in these 'closed' political spaces. Policy influence heavily relies on informal relationships rather than strictly formal citizen-state engagements. The "formal" faces of advocacy [such as through petitions, conferences and media advocacy] play a secondary role to informal processes in eliciting change, which is often facilitated by informal, backdoor processes of negotiation and mediation between coalition leaders and key players.
  - Moreover, informal networks and, often, prior relationships, are crucial for building the internal cohesion of a coalition; and they also help to reduce their vulnerability to external political threat.
  - Influential coalitions are those that are able to build formal as well as informal links with the appropriate actors, establish the right kind of image locally and secure the right kind of support from international official and civil society actors.
  - In all of the six case studies studied, strong

linkages existed between international and national actors, hence highlighting the importance of understanding how international actors can play an enabling role to support coalitions. In five out of six coalitions studied, donors played a critical role at some point in the life of the coalition, in both positive and detrimental ways.

### Factors that facilitate the formation of coalitions

- Coalitions for advancing gender equality commonly emerge in 'openings' created by some international event or local happening, activity or initiative (including funding).
- Such occasions tend to occur at those times when strict control on participation in political space has been relaxed by the government and hence where women's leaders recognise the urgency of seizing the opportunity before political spaces are closed again.
- Understanding those openings, 'seizing the moment' and defining the realistic limits of the possible is a key political analytical skill required by leaders and donors alike.
- Coalitions sometimes also form in response to perceived threats that are seen to seriously undermine women's choices.
- Organizations join coalitions because of the incentives to increase their visibility, their networks and their sphere of influence. But they also join coalitions because of fear of social or political marginalization if they do not become part of the "in-group". Pre-existing social networks between individual leaders commonly form the basis for successful coalition formation.
- The members of these coalitions are very aware that in order to have policy influence they need to rely significantly on the social and political networks that are often based on their common class, professional and educational backgrounds. Without such political and social clout and protection, they can face difficulties in withstanding the often-harsh realities of unpredictable political conditions.
- The availability of foreign funding has served as a major incentive for the participation of different leaders and organizations in collective initiatives and the formation of some coalitions was either facilitated or driven by available funds

### Factors that facilitate the *relative 'success'* of women's coalitions

- **A legal umbrella:** In the light of the restrictions on freedom of association and freedom on citizen-led collective action in both Jordan and Egypt, having a legal umbrella is crucial for the viability of a coalition's organizational form and the continuation of its activities.
- **Cultural and national authenticity:** As both countries have politically and culturally complex relationships vis-a-vis the West, the question of positionality (or perceived identity) is as important as the cause, framing and the timing. The public perception of the cultural and national authenticity of the leaders of a coalition serves to significantly enhance prospects for its success and to facilitate its ability to mobilize wider support for its work. More importantly, it can help to withstand fierce opposition from those who label the members of the coalition as agents of the West.
- **Official and unofficial support:** Successful coalitions are able to combine official support that openly supports their cause, as well as unofficial, informal support from other key figures in the regime or wider society which - if publicly announced - would be counter-productive for the coalition.
- **Framing or avoiding sexuality:** In view of the conservative culture in both Jordan and Egypt, and the particular sensitivities associated with sexual politics, successful coalitions were either able to avoid choosing issues associated with sexuality altogether or were able to frame them in completely different terms.
- **Outmanoeuvring the opposition:** Coalitions are effective when they are able to outmanoeuvre the opposition by appropriate framing and securing support from politically powerful actors.
- **Internal consensus building:** Coalitions are most effective when they are able to withstand fragmentation and ensure a sense of ownership among their leading members through institutionalized internal mechanisms of consensus-building and conflict mediation.

### Coalition strategies for greater influence

- Strategies to elicit change through collective action need to be tailored from within, and according to the local context.

- Strategies based on international blueprints are awkward to implement and sometimes backfire. However, local leaders do and can borrow strategies from their exposure to international experiences and ideas, and they learn to adapt them appropriately to local conditions.
- Framing an issue involves not only finding an appropriate way of representing the cause to the outside world, but also ensuring that the 'packaging' of the message is acceptable to the collective leadership.
- Having to deploy multiple framings for multiple audiences means that coalitions have often had to frame their campaigns in a variety of ways to ensure the compatibility of their messages with international conventions or with religiously prescribed frameworks or national constitutions.
- Securing effective engagement with the media, which at times requires securing positive coverage while at other times means maintaining anonymity and protecting the coalition and its activities from media coverage.
- Detailed understanding of the local history and politics of gender. Knowing and listening to the key players and organizations, identifying the windows of opportunity.
- This requires donors to have a trained workforce, both local and international, with political analytical skills in the gender field that enables them to 'work politically', with understanding and sensitivity, with women and their organizations.
- The ability to create an enabling environment, mood and momentum for the emergence of coalitions. This might involve promoting and supporting international and especially regional activities and events which often create a ripple effect on an issue locally. Such events need to be carefully 'framed' and positioned so as not to provoke local opposition or antagonise possible allies.
- Brokering and convening opportunities for women's leaders to meet, to articulate and aggregate their aims and agreements.
- Organizational memory within the donor communities about previous experiences, endeavours, relationships and an analysis of their successes and failures.

### What donors and high-level officials should avoid:

- **Creating local coalitions themselves:** When international donors seek to 'create' local coalitions, and are seen to do so, these coalitions can often be perceived by the public as 'creatures' of the donors or as being driven by financial or professional incentives rather than commitment to the cause. Their work and legitimacy can hence be severely undermined by questions regarding their integrity and commitment to the cause.
- **Criticizing gender inequality without careful consideration:** Donors, political spokespersons and officials need to be sensitive to the wording and timing of criticism of gender inequalities locally in order not to undermine local efforts.
- Local and international staff that have developed previous local relationships and networks across a long period of time, amounting to a repertoire of social and political capital.
- Understanding the political constraints but also being able to identify openings for engaging with both government and civil society actors.
- Making sure that any proposal presented by an organization is one that reflects the vision, internal division of roles and planned activities of the key leaders of the coalition, who are likely to come from more than one organization.
- Ensuring that there is a high level of transparency regarding all parties vis-a-vis the budget and its components.

### Key elements of effective donor support for women's coalitions

The international (donor) community plays an important role supporting women's coalitions as a means of furthering gender equality. While some positive support has been provided by donors, there is room for improvement. Below are the key elements this study has identified that can make the contribution of donors more effective.

- When monitoring the work of a coalition, it is important to consult with as many of the coalition's leaders as possible, rather than relying on the feedback given by the member that received the funding.
- During the evaluation of coalitions, attention needs to be given to processes as well as outputs or outcomes, as internal governance and decision making can affect performance on the ground.

Finally, this study has found that successful donor support for emerging coalitions was characterized by a deliberate policy of making a number of important diversions from the typical project cycle. These include:

- Ongoing investment in, and commitment to, the process of building internal cohesion and organizational and political capacity rather than focusing solely on delivery of outputs.
- A recognition that coalitions need time to discuss and debate the division of roles, appropriate strategies, relationships with stakeholders, government and non-governmental actors and consequently do not function well with three-five year funding cycles.
- A conscientious effort on the part of donors to remain low key and neither claim the formation of the coalition as their “success” nor any policy change to which the coalition has contributed as an outcome of their own intervention.
- A willingness to think outside the box and take risks in supporting unconventional forms of collective agency – and nurturing their collective leadership: in other words, a focus on the actors rather than strictly the project.

- **An understanding of the complexity of policy-influencing processes and the fact that while local actors can and do have an impact in many instances, there is no linear causal relationship between a coalition’s actions and the policy change itself.**

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Download the full paper:

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