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African Women and Girls in a Shrinking Civic Space

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Summary

The civic space has always been shrunk historically for women and other marginalised groups. However, it became even more pronounced after the events of 9/11 in the United States of America, the rise of religious fundamentalism, extreme political intolerance and the growth of the internet among others. These gave rise to stringent legal and administrative measures that further curtailed freedoms of assembly, association and expression. Although women form part of civil society, they are affected differently from the broader civil society and from male human rights activists. Women and girls are affected by patriarchal and traditional values and norms. Women are not given equal access and opportunities in the economy. They are further violently treated, sexually harassed and delegitimised. Their reputations are questioned when they take part in civic spaces. Today, cyberspace offers alternative ways through which women challenge political and traditional systems. The need to invest in technology, innovative financing, and building women's solidarity through women-only spaces; recognising women's work and strengthening their movements is more urgent now than ever before.

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Introduction

There has been an increase by governments to shrink the civic space and women's rights movements. Human rights defenders, minority groups and women's organisations have historically been discriminated against. A civic space is defined by CIVICUS (2019) as 'the set of conditions that allow civil society and individuals to organise, participate and communicate freely and without discrimination, thereby influencing the political and social structures around them'. Civic Space Watch (2019) views the civic space as 'the political, legislative, social and economic environment which enables citizens to come together, share their interests and concerns and act individually and collectively to influence and shape policy-making'. The term 'civic space' is used here somewhat differently from 'public space', even though there are moments when civic spaces are embedded in the public space. For example, a gathering of a social movement organising a protest can take place in a townhall. The townhall is a public space while the protest is a civic space.

This policy brief focuses on the shrinking civic space and the extent to which women and girls are impacted and the different strategies that they adopt to counter the violence, discrimination and marginalisation in these spaces.

Shrinking Civic Space: History and Trends

The shrinking of civic spaces gained momentum in the early 2000s in the wake of the 9/11 events in the US. This led to the limitation of civil society through restrictive financing and the closure of political and civic freedoms. The growth of the internet further made global powers circumspect of the power of digital technologies and the threat they posed. Finally, the rise of the 'Islamic state' (Hossain et al. 2018) added to the impetus by governments to tighten stringent administrative, legal and funding mechanisms.

The increasing popularity of civil society and its influence on policies and governments has led to restrictions (Ayvazyan 2019: 6; Moyo 2010; Hossain et al. 2018). Further, the decline in funding, the blurring of lines between the social and private sectors as well as poor economic performance have further shrunk the space. Civil society has also contributed to its demise through its inherent contradictions and contestations.

The shrinking civic space differs from context to context due to civil society size, its mandates, its capabilities and the general environment under which it operates. The space shrinks differently in democratic contexts than in autocratic ones. Minority groups, human rights defenders and women's organisations

are usually the most affected. The space also shrinks differently among groups. For some, it closes while for others it shifts or expands. Naomi Hossain et al. argue that while a wave of closures for civic space has been happening around the world, not all civil society actors are affected equally. The most affected groups are those with liberal and human rights traditions, often donor-funded and with a strong transnational link (2018: 7).

Meanwhile the space has expanded for groups such as government-created NGOs that have been pushed or pulled into closer relationships with political elites or the state so they can continue operating. The rapid growth of the digital space has dramatically reshaped the civic space for all actors, while right wing extremists and neo-traditionalist groups and urban protest movements have occupied more of the civic space in the past decade (2018: 7). Thus, the civic space has both shrunk, expanded and shifted depending on who is participating and on what terms.

The main drivers of these changes include governments' legal and administrative barriers. Restriction on foreign funding is another. In Ethiopia, the 2009 New Organisation of Civil Societies Proclamation states that any NGO receiving more than 10 per cent of its funding from abroad should be considered foreign. The law also criminalises any organisation working on human rights or governance issues. In Egypt in the wake of Arab Spring, the government adopted a law, Case 173, that prevents organisations from receiving foreign funding. Failure to seek approval leads to imprisonment. In 2013, the court imposed jail sentences on forty-three civil society members for failing to meet this requirement (Ayvazyan 2019: 9). The Women Human Rights Defenders, MENA Coalition in Egypt has also faced asset freezes and a travel ban for its members. The law requires cumbersome government approval before project implementation. Patriarchy and the state are behind women's repression (Wassholm 2018: 10).

Governments have also developed policies that shut down the internet and media, and harass journalists. There is an increase in platforms that are financed by the state to troll CSOs and human rights defenders, spread fake news and promote propaganda. The rise of social media has been both an asset and a danger to activists. Governments increase control in fear of what happened in North Africa. The growth of the internet, including the rapid spread of mobile information and communication technologies, have presented new opportunities to address violence against women and girls. At the same time, these tools are being used to inflict harm on women and girls through cyber-violence. According to UNESCO, many girls and women have come forward to expose physical and verbal attacks on them. Teenage girls are driven to suicide by online trolling.

Other measures involve intimidation and violent attacks on human rights defenders by governments, religious fundamentalists and far right extremists through criminalisation, stigmatisation and delegitimisation of human rights defenders. The LBBTQI groups and defenders of sexual and reproductive rights are accused of undermining the family, morality and traditional values (Ayvazyan 2019: 11). There are widespread killings, rapes, mutilations, torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, arbitrary detentions, abductions and physical and mental assaults. In some countries, homosexuality is punishable by death while in others it is a life imprisonment sentence.

Women, Girls and Civic Spaces

Shrinking differently

Due to closed public spaces for women, civil society is the only arena where women and girls can voice their concerns and fight for their rights as well as support each other to reach political decisions (Wassholm 2018: 43). While women are affected by shifts in civil society broadly, they are also impacted in specific ways. Wassholm argues that, beyond the implication that shrinking space has for all human rights defenders, women human rights defenders are subject to attacks simply because they are women (*ibid.*). This was also stated by Thomas Sankara (1983). Threats against women are different from threats against men and 'violations against women are linked to traditions, norms and perceptions about how women should behave in society' (Wassholm 2018). Additionally, women face several problems that are caused by poverty, their second class status in society, lack of access to key resources and the social norms that curtail their freedoms of movement, choice and representation (Jackson and Wallace 2015: 3).

In a survey conducted across thirty-two countries, more than 60 per cent of women respondents said that their space had shrunk due to government fears of political change and because of increased nationalism, including hostility towards foreign funding (*ibid.: 6*). Around 85 per cent believed that women's rights defenders are affected differently, for example, in funding patterns for women's organisations and the increased emphasis on women's traditional roles as caretakers rather than political actors (*ibid.*).

Non-uniform Shifts and Changes

Women are not homogenous in the civic sector. Some are elite with a more feminist agenda, while others are community based activists. There is a tendency to shrink the space for the less privileged and less educated women's rights activists. There are also ongoing tensions between women's rights

veterans and other women who do not get the same attention as the veterans. Younger feminists struggle to actively participate in leadership positions.

The civic space is not shrinking uniformly for all classes, genders and generations in and across countries. For example, the conditions for civic and women's movements in politically volatile states are highly restrictive. In post-conflict situations such as in the DRC, institutional mechanisms are fragile, weak and unable to sustain civic activities. In these contexts, women with capital are affected differently from those without.

In higher education, while a lot still needs to be done, the space has expanded somewhat. Amanda Gouws (2012) shows that in the gendering of social sciences in Africa, gender studies started outside and migrated into the academy. This was done by professional intellectual networks such as the Association of African Women for Research and Development and CODESRIA through several studies and meetings (ibid.: 60) such as the 1991 CODESRIA meeting that tried to integrate gender into its analysis. These meetings culminated in Gender Institutes to 'strengthen the scholarship and analytical skills of young researchers' (Bennett 2007). In 1996, Amina Mama wrote that gender scholarship had increased and African feminists had got an institutional foothold (1996: 6). Pereira (2002) also argued that CODESRIA publications were gender-blind in the beginning because their gender analysis ran parallel to the mainstream intellectual activities, rather than being integrated. Over time women have seen notable advances in higher education by creating this space themselves.

Unchanging Spaces

The advances in the academy have not been seen in other domains like sports and religion. Jimoh Shehu shows that despite sport being global, men and women of different classes and cultures do not experience it the same way. Dominant ideology defines men in opposition to women and declares certain domains such as the home as female and private; and sport as male and public. The naturalisation of sport as a male territory excludes from the sports arena other bodies that are marked, gendered, sexed or classed as female or feminine (Shehu 2010: ix). Women are also subjected to violence and sexual assault when they attend sports events. Molly Manyonganise shows that many women are restrained from full participation in sporting activities due to the social construction of spaces (2010: 13).

In Malawi and Nigeria, women face dilemmas in becoming players, sports managers, spectators and mass media consumers in sport due to their definition as domestic and feminine. In religion, women are the majority that sustain most congregations, yet churches continue to marginalise them through religious

fundamentalism (Kasomo 2010). The increased role of governments in gender policy has also contributed to the stagnation of the space.

Key Issues and Recommendations

Expanding civic engagement in new environments

Cyberspace has created new environments for women and girls, particularly in urban settings that shape civic life and participation in civic processes. Processes of globalisation, migration, technological advancements and post-industrialisation have led to shifts in the structures of family, society and civic platforms, leading to discrimination of women and girls. The uneven and gendered ways in which women and girls participate in civic life lead to a need for an environment where women and young girls feel they belong, and opportunities for active participation are provided (Yvette et al. 2013: 45). Spaces need to be constructed where young girls and adults come together to plan, solve problems, learn and deepen their relationships. Creating this environment requires:

- Addressing barriers such as lack of initiatives, work pressures and the need for women and girls to work more hours to support themselves and their families. Flexi-working hours, remote working, and rewards are recommended;
- Making civic participation 'cool' and attractive to address the perception that civic activities like volunteering are reserved for the lonely, nerds and the rich. This perception leads to young girls only volunteering or travelling in groups for fear of stigma. Online participation and use of sleek and smart technologies are some of the creative ways to make the civic space safe and welcoming. Use of creative art and music can also enhance the popularity and attractiveness of the spaces.

Opening political systems

Women are restricted to participate due to the political system that sees civil society as a threat. Women are utilising ICTs, especially in countries like Morocco and Tunisia in the wake of the Arab Spring, to transform society and politics. The new ways of information flow are assisting women and girls to gain leverage in political systems and socio-cultural contexts that historically marginalised them (Neumark 2017: 15).

In Morocco, there has been increased action and engagement by women using ICTs to demand their rights creatively. According to Neumark, women's use of alternative civic spaces to organise and enact social and political change resulted in global networks of activism that have contributed to the changing climate of the MENA region as well as changing perceptions of women globally (*ibid.*). ICTs have extended women's voices and assisted resistance

against communal norms and helped disseminate critical information on gender equity, resulting in an emphasis on 'women's praxis over their religious affiliations or house labour' (*ibid.*).

Assisting women to fight against patriarchy and oligarchy requires an investment in alternative civic spaces where women can organise to effect change. The digital space has more potential to succeed today than before. Hashtags, Twitter, Facebook and other tools have contributed to political change. These platforms construct and reconstruct discourses that shape the direction of politics and economics. The #RIPAMINA in Morocco was a powerful campaign through which women 'used digital media to extend their voices, protest and dissent' (*ibid.*). Amina Filali was a 16- year-old who committed suicide after she was forced to marry her rapist. According to Morocco's Penal Code, Article 475, prison time could be negated or reduced for rapists on condition that they married their victims. Ordinarily a campaign like #RIPAMINA would have been silenced were it not for the digital media that took it to an international audience. As Neumark (2017) explains, the campaign opened up a conversation on Morocco's Penal Code by bypassing state structures that would have blocked the news. By using innovations like memes, videos and non-activist actions, women exercised dissent and protested without state censorship. In 2013, the government announced plans to revise the article. By 2014 this was passed by parliament.

Women in MENA have used narrowcasting to share information only to a select people or a small network so as to sidestep restraints in culture and behavioural norms (*ibid.: 18*)

Since 2012, women in Morocco have mobilised for constitutional reform, changes to family law and for increased social freedoms. This was possible because a significant number of women have high levels of education and literacy. This is not true of women from communities that face strict gender divisions and can barely read French. Cohorts of activist women and men should be developed to gather information from cyberspace on gender equity and women's rights and transmit it to women who are excluded due to linguistic or education barriers. This can be done through story-telling, word of mouth, or art, especially adult colouring or graffiti.

Developing solidarity by creating women-only spaces

Women appreciate women's spaces where they socialise, learn new knowledge and skills, appreciate the safe environment for learning to speak in public, and for sharing problems (Jackson and Wallace 2015: 3). Donors should support the

creation of spaces where women develop their rules of engagement to build their confidence. Donors, large NGOs and governments need to be flexible towards women's needs and activism. These different actors should understand which women benefit from their created spaces and how these spaces improve their conditions. Governments must create enabling legal and operational environments for consultative processes with women around resource allocations.

Recognising women and their dignity

Women are marginalised through non-recognition, political marginalisation and systemic exclusion. The Kvinna till Kvinna survey found that the most common ways of hindering women in their work are non-recognition and systemic exclusion from political participation through legal and administrative instruments ((Wassholm 2018: 18). Another way of delegitimating women is creating parallel government-organised NGOS (GONGOs) that advance nationalist discourses and traditional patriarchal values. It is important for society as a whole, and civic institutions in particular, to create equal access to dignity for women and men, and recognise women as equals in their own right. There is a need to deal with patriarchal tendencies that treat outspoken women as 'difficult'. Alternative language of affirmation and recognition of women should be developed by activists, writers, researchers and donors, among others.

Strengthening the women's movement(s)

Women and girls find the space to act and demand their rights in civil society. Formal power structures are often closed or inaccessible to women (*ibid.: 23*). If civil society space is closed, women's human rights defenders have fewer arenas to fight for political influence and their rights. The shrinking civic space is directly linked to diminishing chances of addressing women's voices, advocating for their concerns and rights. The shrinking space weakens the support that women would give each other to reach political and economic positions. Strengthening civil society should primarily include strengthening women's movements. A strong women's movement is the single most important factor to address concerning violence against women and girls (*ibid.*).

Women's human rights defenders and their work should be recognised internationally. There is value in increasing diplomatic and political pressure on repressive governments through inclusion of women's rights in foreign policy. There is also need to increase awareness of the gendered dimension of the shrinking space among policymakers and donors. Donors need to exercise flexibility and innovation in funding women's organisations by

paying attention to specific needs of women. Usually, large donors prefer funding international and regional organisations with less funding for local women's human rights organisations. This contributes to shrinking the space (*ibid.: 43*). Finally, investing in technology for tracking sexual violence is crucial.

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