



Report from AWID: Reflections from the Delegation

On April 19th to 22nd, Karama & Hivos hosted a delegation composed of six women from the MENA region representing five countries, including Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Libya, to participate in the 12th Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) Forum held in Istanbul, Turkey. The theme of this year's forum, held every three to four years, was women's empowerment through transformation of economic power. The forum, where over 2200 women's rights activists, advocates, and academics convened from around the world, was a center for idea exchange and expertise. As youth activists, the delegation was excited about this participation, looking forward to meeting other activists and women's rights advocates, as well as sharing their own experiences and ideas with regards to development and civilian empowerment issues in the MENA region.

The delegation's joint reflection, as written in their own words:

The delegation was composed of a fantastic group of vibrant ambitious women from the MENA region. As we convened in Istanbul before the forum, we were advised to make the most of the forum and take in as much as we could without restrictions, which proved to be a very empowering strategy.

The conference included sessions that addressed a lot of valuable and fascinating information (a full schedule of the sessions can be viewed [here](#)). One session on the commodification of knowledge sparked interesting discourse on who has an impact on the commodification of information, and how we as activists as well as consumers interact with information.

Another session shared the [Safe Streets Campaign](#) (2011) in Yemen as presented by Ghaaida Al-Asbi, aiming to change the social acceptability of sexual harassment in the streets of Yemen by documenting social harassment cases, encouraging dialogue by Yemeni women about their experiences, and pressuring decisionmakers to legally condemn sexual harassment and patrol—this was particularly interesting. The use of technology in the campaign, including video, text messages, and crisis mapping of sexual harassment is commendable. This initiative is a testament to the increased activism for women's rights in the region, as well as how technology can be used in creating a difference in a country (98 percent of women experienced sexual harassment on the streets of Yemen, according to Safe Streets).

In a conference that brings together multitudes of social actors from different parts of the world, differences are to be expected. In fact, the differences of experience and backgrounds were especially enlightening, and definitely enhanced the experience for the members of the delegation. It is necessary, however, to stress that women's roles in the Arab Spring have been important, and their participation and efforts should not be dismissed nor be limited to 'the victim'.

Women's rights in the MENA region is an important topic in such a time of revolution and change. The idea that women need a revolution of their own flowered from the discussion in the delegation. We discussed the necessary activism to ensure women's rights are not distinguished from human rights amidst the revolutions but sought simultaneously. We agreed that women's rights will become priority, not in spite of, but rather *especially* due to the newly-founded road to democracy paved by the honourable revolutions we have seen, *and experienced*.

The danger of continued civil unrest in the region is a potential reality given the current situations. The entire delegation agreed that the Arab Spring had indeed brought forth a new and different environment to the region, one that can only be nurtured through collaboration and cooperation of all groups, including women, men, youth, Islamists, and secularists. Segregation will not help in moving forward.

Amidst 'change' and 'progress' ignited by the Arab Spring, activists from all over the world met to discuss the looming question of importance: *where do women's human rights fit in?* The forum touched on numerous topics from session after session featuring engaged activists, academics, experts, and advocates, but the underlying factor expressed time after time was that "the realization of democracy cannot be based on a regime that oppresses half the population, therefore democracy without gender equality is not democracy." Regardless of how we define it, the transition to democracy has become a reality that should not be diminished or scoured for flaws. Rather, it should be seen as an opportunity to create space and change for women's rights. It is with this message that the delegation left the forum. In this way, the 2012 AWID Forum proved to be a successful effort, bringing together people from all walks of life for one goal: to promote women's rights in development.

Along the way, we debriefed as a group and wrapped up the experience with several recommendations and feedback for AWID and organizers of related international forums and conferences in general:

- 1) Help make connections among women from various backgrounds to share their rich array of both professional and personal experiences, by instituting a means that highlights the attendees or creates professional spaces for networking.
- 2) Use artistic and cultural expression as a tool to build solidarity amongst participants; art, music, and poetry can cultivate bonds in a more profound way than sessions and would have been a great supplement to the forum.

3) Provide a mechanism for attendees to contribute to the findings of pre-conference regional meetings; increase the number of attendees in the regional pre-meeting sessions.

4) Pair established leaders with youth activists as panelist speakers, to connect them to each other as well as to present additional ideologies, strategies and recommendations for action to the attendees.

5) Provide discussion of the uses and role of social media as a mobilization, organizational, or resistance technique, as it is a medium through which many of the MENA attendees engaged in what was happening on the ground in the revolutions and demonstrated their interest; it was used widely in the Libyan uprising and currently in the Syrian one as well.

Overall, the experience was excellent. The conference exuded positive vibes, professional ambiance and good organization. The planning and preparation displayed by the conference organizers and the staff at the Haliç Congress Center was especially evident. The schedule was incredibly steamlined, as well, and you could tell our Turkish hosts took great care to ensure each event was efficiently executed.

We hope to see Karama's continued participation in the forum, as it continues to develop the space and opportunity for activists like us to make lifelong bonds with wonderful women from around the globe.