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# Digital Storytelling and Legal Feminist Struggles in the Maghreb: A critical review of NGO strategies

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#### **Abstract**

This article presents a narrative review of feminist digital activism in Morocco and Tunisia. It focuses on how NGOs use social media to raise awareness, build collective narratives, and advocate for legal reform. Based on a corpus of literature from 2015 to 2025, the analysis highlights strategies of digital appropriation, storytelling, and legal protest. The study shows that digital tools are powerful but unevenly accessible, and that online activism reflects both local struggles and global influences. It offers a critical perspective on feminist mobilization in postcolonial North African contexts.

Keywords: Digital feminism; legal reforms; Maghreb; Feminist NGOs

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#### 1.0 Introduction

Over the last decade, feminist mobilizations in the Maghreb have been reshaped by the digitalization of public spaces and the rise of new forms of activism. In Morocco and Tunisia, feminist NGOs and youth collectives have used social media not only as a communication tool but also as an alternative political space to overcome institutional barriers, form symbolic alliances, and develop new strategies. In a context where legal reforms are slow, political leaders often resist change, and feminist movements are divided across generations, digital technology has become a way for women to be seen, heard, and to reach others. Campaigns against Article 490 of the Moroccan Penal Code and mobilizations for equal inheritance rights in Tunisia show how social media is used to claim rights, create narratives, and challenge dominant norms.

This article examines how feminist NGOs and collectives in Morocco and Tunisia use digital platforms, based on a structured review of literature published between 2015 and 2025. The first objective is to explore how digital tools are used to make legal demands. The second objective is to examine the emotional and symbolic narratives in digital campaigns. The third objective is to analyze the limits of these practices in light of structural, intersectional, and postcolonial inequalities.

Using a critical approach informed by gender studies, postcolonial theory, and political communication, this paper offers a contextual understanding of digital feminist activism in the Maghreb.

## 2.0 Literature Review

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#### 2.1 Digital Feminism in the Maghreb: New Trends and Local Challenges

In the Maghreb, there is a constant tension between patriarchal traditions, unequal legal systems, and the desire for equality. Social media has gradually become a space for feminist action, sometimes supporting and sometimes replacing traditional forms of activism. In Morocco, many studies show that digital tools have supported women's NGOs in significant ways. Belhorma and Yachoulti (2019) explain that the rise of digital technologies, especially social media, has transformed how activists speak out, influence public policy, and promote greater social balance.

Amezoirou (2024) highlights that new media empower Moroccan women to express themselves and gain confidence. Some bloggers use it to discuss a wide range of topics, including violence against women, street harassment, gender equality, love, dreams, and other emotional, social, and political concerns.

However, these dynamics still face resistance. Derdar (2020) found that 10% of students believe feminism is no longer necessary. They argue that women already have rights, enjoy enough freedom, or act as if they are above men.

Digital activism also remains limited by technical and structural barriers. In rural areas, access to technology is uneven, and language can be a challenge. According to the Open Society Foundations, online expression in Morocco often faces indirect censorship, such as legal threats or arrests (Zaid et al., 2011).

#### 2.2 Theoretical Approaches: Storytelling, Intersectionality, and Digital Visibility

Several concepts help explain how digital feminism operates. One of them is "connective action", which describes how people often engage through personal stories rather than through large organizations (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2023). This form of participation relies on many individual voices coming together online (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2023).

The concept of intersectionality also provides important insight. In the book edited by Lépinard and Evans (2020), the authors explain that intersectionality is not just relevant to feminist movements, but also applies to various other struggles. It shows how social dynamics vary by context, and while this can lead to disagreements, it also makes the concept adaptable to different goals (Evans & Lépinard, 2020).

The platforms themselves play an active role in shaping activism. As Santos (2022) explains, users shape social media platforms, but platforms also shape how users behave. This ongoing interaction affects how people engage and share feminist messages online. A study by Emmanuelle Vaast, discussed in Fotaki & Pullen (2024), offers a concrete example. It shows how women and gendernonconforming data scientists use social media to challenge gender inequality in their field (Fotaki & Pullen, 2024). Social media helps them build community and fight exclusion from traditional work environments.

# 3.0 Methodology

This article is based on a structured narrative review of 21 sources published between 2015 and 2025. Out of these, 16 were used directly in the analysis because they were most relevant to the study. The sources include academic articles, NGO reports, and research papers. They were chosen for their connection to the main topic (feminist activism, legal reform, and digital media), their focus on Morocco and Tunisia, their variety of formats, and how closely they relate to real experiences in the Maghreb. The objective of this review is not to be exhaustive. It aims to construct a critical mapping of digital feminist practices within postcolonial contexts. Therefore, a thematic analysis grid was elaborated around three principal axes:

- 1. Digital appropriation (platform usage, media formats, and strategies of dissemination)
- 2. Construction of narrative (usage of emotion, storytelling)
- 3. Legal advocacy (Legal claims, targeted reforms, and mobilization strategy)

Each document was fully read, marked, and organized using this grid. A summary table was then made to see how often each theme appeared, and which sources showed gaps, especially in the legal axis. The matrix is shown below:

Reference	Digital Appropriation	Construction of Narrative	Legal Advocacy
Amezoirou, R. (2024)	YES	YES	YES
Arfaoui, K. (2020)	YES	YES	YES
Arfaoui, K., & Moghadam, V. M. (2016)	YES	YES	YES
Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship. (2023)	YES	YES	YES
Belhorma, S., & Yachoulti, M. (2019)	YES	YES	YES

Table 1 : A Coss-Analysis Matrix of The Corpus

Douida, A (2023)	YES	YES	YES
El Asmar, F. (2020)	YES	YES	YES
El Issawi, F. (2016)	YES	YES	YES
El Kirat El Allame	YES	YES	YES
(2020)			
Chahbane, H., &	YES	YES	YES
Houssaini, K. (2025)			
Karolak, M. (2017)	YES	YES	YES
Mehta, B. (2024)	YES	YES	YES
Moghadam, V. M.	YES	YES	YES
(2019).			
Ouassini, A. (2021)	YES	YES	YES
Sipos, X. Z. (2023)	YES	YES	YES
Tazi, M. (2021)	YES	YES	YES

Given the range of formats and contexts in the sources, a narrative review offered a more suitable and meaningful way to analyze them. This method was chosen for its ability to offer a flexible and critical reading of diverse sources. It enables the reflection of the complexity of feminist digital activism in local contexts, while also identifying shared patterns across the documents.

#### 4.0 Findings

#### 4.1 Digital Appropriation: Between Local Practices and Global Imaginaries

Feminist NGOs in Morocco and Tunisia use digital tools both for local struggles and to adapt global feminist ideas. These tools are not just for spreading messages. They also change how activists organize, connect, and fight for rights online.

In Morocco, studies show that Facebook and Instagram help activists address two primary challenges: being underrepresented in traditional media and seeking to share their stories with a broader audience. For example, El Kirat El Allame (2020) stated in her article that the Soulaliyates are rural women who fight for land rights. They used social media platforms, such as Facebook, to amplify their voices and overcome traditional media's silence (El Kirat El Allame, 2020).

In Tunisia, as explained by Khedija Arfaoui in her article "Women in Action in Tunisia," the global #MeToo movement inspired local adaptations, such as EnaZeda, a digital campaign led by feminist organizations, including Aswat Nissa (2020). This initiative invited both women and men who experienced sexual violence to share their stories and speak out. (Arfaoui, 2020). Over time, EnaZeda has become a growing online community with more than 32,000 members (Arfaoui, 2020). Through regular meetings, press events, and media outreach, the platform turned personal testimonies into a collective call for change and helped bring the topic of sexual abuse into public conversation (Arfaoui, 2020).

Feminist groups in both countries did not only talk about violence against women. They also used social media to ask for equal inheritance rights. In Tunisia, after some important legal documents were shared, groups like ATFD started online actions to help people understand the issue better (Amezoirou, 2024). In 2018, a campaign called "Now is the Time" used social media to explain legal ideas, encourage people to take action, and ask celebrities to support the cause (Amezoirou, 2024). In Morocco, groups like ADFM did something similar (Amezoirou, 2024). They used the internet to hold online talks, write articles, and explain how inheritance laws affect people's lives and money (Amezoirou, 2024). These digital actions helped activists speak to more people and get the attention of decision-makers (Amezoirou, 2024). In both countries, social media became a place to talk about legal demands clearly, spread the message widely, and go beyond usual activist groups.

These online actions also made it easier for young people to join the conversation. In Morocco, Instagram became an important space where young people talk about many issues that affect their lives, like education, work, and gender equality. For young activists, it offers a way to speak out, share ideas, and push for change in a more creative and direct way (Chahbane & Houssaini, 2025). Social media gives young people a way to join discussions that used to feel closed or too serious. This helps them feel included and listened to.

Also, these online spaces became very important during hard times. In Morocco, when COVID-19 started, groups like Ennakhil had to make fast changes to keep working. Instead of stopping their support, they used tools like WhatsApp groups, phone helplines, and short audio messages to stay connected with women (Sipos, 2023). They also organized online awareness events to keep their work going despite the lockdowns (Sipos, 2023). In Tunisia, the Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes followed a similar path (Sipos, 2023). Because many women were struggling financially, especially those in small cooperatives without good healthcare, the organisation used social media to share helpful information and support women (Sipos, 2023). These examples show how digital tools became a lifeline for feminist activism when traditional support systems were disrupted.

#### 4.2 Narrative Construction: Emotions, Activist Stories, and Digital Formats

Feminist NGOs in Morocco and Tunisia use digital storytelling to raise awareness, build emotional connection, and inspire action. Through real stories, videos, and hashtags, they inform and advocate for women's rights.

In Morocco, feminist groups use stories to speak up about violence against women. Belhorma and Yachoulti (2019) explain that Facebook pages like CEDAW et Droits des Femmes au Maroc were created to bring together people who care about human rights and

women's issues. The hashtag #Masaktach ("I will not be silent") helped women talk openly about harassment and violence. These online stories help break the silence and reach more people (Belhorma & Yachoulti, 2019).

Technology also helped feminist work go further. In Morocco, a group called Union Féministe Libre created an app called Manchoufouch. This app lets people report violence in a safe way. During unsafe times, like the pandemic, this tool was very useful (Asfari Institute, 2023). In Tunisia, the #EnaZeda campaign helped women share their stories online, and in just two months, more than 500 stories were shared (Asfari Institute, 2023). Fe-Male and UN Women also ran a campaign to show that women are not just numbers; they have rights and voices (Asfari Institute, 2023).

Some groups also focus on learning and teaching. In Tunisia, the ATFD started a feminist school in 2008 to help young women learn about laws and gender equality (Moghadam, 2019). In Morocco, women protested online in 2015 after two women were arrested for wearing short dresses. The campaign "mettre une robe n'est pas un crime" showed support by posting pictures on Facebook (Moghadam, 2019). These actions used online spaces to support rights and show resistance.

Online pages in the region also talk about deeper problems. An Instagram page called Sharika wa Laken said North Africa is unsafe for women. Another page, @Feminicides\_Algerie, shares stories of women killed by men and says the cause is a culture that accepts violence against women (Mehta, 2024). Yasmina Benslimane, who started the page Politics4Her, says old beliefs still make this kind of violence continue (Mehta, 2024).

In Tunisia, the government tried to block social media like Facebook and Twitter. However, activists used phones, proxy servers, and outside help to stay online (Karolak, 2017). This shows that even sharing stories online is a resistance in difficult times.

In Morocco and Tunisia, online storytelling helps feminist groups raise issues, educate, and support each other. Despite some limits, it remains a strong tool to highlight women's struggles and demand justice.

#### 4.3 Legal Advocacy: Social Media as a Tool for Legal Protest

In the Maghreb, digital tools support feminist legal advocacy. In Tunisia and Morocco, NGOs use social media to raise awareness, highlight unjust laws, and promote reforms.

Both Tunisia and Morocco have seen the rise of digital campaigns that challenge laws seen as unjust toward women. In Tunisia, nearly half of women aged 18 to 64 have reported facing some form of violence, often domestic (Arfaoui & Moghadam, 2016). This alarming figure has pushed feminist organizations to mobilize online. In Morocco, digital campaigns like "Moroccan Outlaws" have demanded the repeal of laws such as Article 490 of the Penal Code. The latter criminalizes consensual sex outside marriage. Activists called this article a violation of personal freedoms and used social media to show solidarity with women like Hanae, known online as "Moulat Al Khimar" (Chahbane & Houssaini, 2025).

Legal advocacy online does not come only from NGOs. In Tunisia, state actors also started using social media to promote reforms. For example, in 2016, the Ministry of Women, Family, and Children started the campaign "Yezzi matoskotch, tkallem" (Stop, do not shut up, speak up). They used digital platforms to raise awareness about violence against women (Douida, 2023). That same year, a national committee was created to look at the laws on inheritance and change them to match international standards (Sipos, 2023). These examples show how the digital space has become a shared arena where state and civil society actors push for change.

Online platforms have helped bring attention to cases that sparked public outrage and pushed for legal reform. In Morocco, the case of Amina Filali, a 16-year-old girl forced to marry her rapist under Article 475, shocked the nation. Her story was shared a lot online and helped start a national debate that ended with the article being removed (Ouassini, 2021). In the same way, the #STOP490 campaign, started in 2021, spoke out against the law that criminalizes sexual relations outside marriage. It also gave support to people hurt by online harassment, like Hanaa, who was a victim of revenge porn (Douida, 2023). These digital actions turned personal tragedies into public demands for legal justice.

Feminist legal advocacy has also taken regional and symbolic forms. In Tunisia, campaigns like #EnaZeda (the Tunisian version of #MeToo) emerged after a politician harassed a teenage girl. The movement encouraged hundreds of women to share their experiences and report abuse in a closed Facebook group supported by Asswat Nissa (El Asmar, 2020). In Morocco, the February 20th Movement led to the creation of the group "Feminist Spring for Equality and Democracy." This group wrote a document asking for full gender equality in the new constitution (Yachoulti, 2015 as cited in Tazi, 2021; see also El-Issawi, 2016). These groups show how online activism can link personal stories to bigger legal and constitutional changes.

In Morocco and Tunisia, digital platforms have become key tools for feminist legal advocacy. Activists use them to expose injustice, pressure authorities, and amplify women's voices. Though these efforts face political resistance, social backlash, and digital instability, they remain vital for advancing legal rights and social justice.

#### 5.0 Discussion

This paper shows how feminist organizations and activists in Morocco and Tunisia use digital tools to fight for gender equality, especially when laws or traditions are discriminatory. The findings show how online spaces have become essential for feminist work in the Maghreb. Using social media platforms shows what is called "connective action", where people take part in digital activism by sharing their own experiences and thoughts (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2023). This allows a quick and flexible mobilization as seen in the Soulaliyates' use of Facebook to protest land dispossession (El Kirat El Allame, 2020), but it can also lead to scattered messages and short-lived impact. This form of activism is often shaped by urban, educated, and tech-savvy voices. This raises concerns about who gets heard and who is left out. It reflects Nancy Fraser's idea of "subaltern counterpublics," where visibility does not always mean inclusion, especially when

more profound inequalities remain unaddressed (Kampourakis, 2016). So, while digital tools offer new ways to speak out, they do not always lead to inclusive or lasting change.

Feminist groups often use emotional storytelling to gain support. Hashtags like #Masaktach and #EnaZeda helped survivors of violence speak out and turn their experiences into shared struggles (Arfaoui, 2020). These stories build emotional connection and help imagine political change.

Recent feminist theory highlights how activism is shaped by shared emotions, postcolonial aesthetics, and collective identities, both human and non-human (Fotaki & Pullen, 2024). In this way, digital storytelling is not just about being seen. It offers a new way to take part in politics, based on lived experience, shared memory, and solidarity. However, researchers explain that social media algorithms tend to boost content that spreads quickly, which we call 'viral', rather than content that is thoughtful or deep (Narayanan, 2023). This raises concerns about how platforms can turn suffering into something to watch rather than understand, and how public support can disappear quickly (Narayanan, 2023).

Still, social media campaigns have shaped legal debates, for example, by challenging Article 490 in Morocco or supporting inheritance reform in Tunisia. These examples show that digital tools can help turn personal experiences into shared calls for change. However, we should not idealize these platforms. As seen in Tunisia's "Yezzi matoskotch" campaign, which was led by a government ministry, the state can also use digital tools, making it harder to tell the difference between government-led reform and grassroots activism (Douida, 2023).

Moreover, digital spaces can empower resistance, but they are also watched, regulated, and used to silence dissent. In Morocco, the #STOP490 campaign faced backlash, trolling, and threats, showing how legal advocacy online remains fragile (Zaid et al., 2011; Karolak, 2017).

The findings also raise equity concerns. Digital spaces may be open in theory, but rural women, older generations, and those who do not speak French or Arabic fluently often remain excluded.

This study contributes to global feminist media research by showing how activists in postcolonial countries adapt global digital protest to local contexts. It also points to the need for better theories that consider how platforms work, who gets left out, and how both governments and civil society participate.

Future research should examine how digital activism affects real legal change over time and how it can become more inclusive. Digital tools are not perfect, but they remain central in the struggle for women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia.

## 6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study examined the use of digital tools by feminist NGOs in Morocco and Tunisia. It used a thematic framework with three parts: digital appropriation, narrative construction, and legal advocacy. The findings highlight how feminist action is changing in the digital world. This change occurs with new opportunities, as well as with ongoing challenges.

This study has some limitations. First, it is based on a narrative review, which means the sources are limited. Second, the study looked only at published and public documents, so it did not include hidden or informal digital practices. Finally, without interviews or direct observation, it might be difficult to fully grasp the intentions, strategies, or impact of digital feminist actions.

To improve future research, it is recommended to include interviews with activists and NGO leaders to compare public messages with internal strategies, compare how different groups use digital tools, such as younger and older people, people in cities and villages, or activists using Arabic, Amazigh, or French, and measure the real impact of online campaigns on public opinion or laws, using tools to check audience reach or engagement.

Future research could also examine activist humor, such as memes or TikTok, as soft forms of protest, and explore how digital tools help preserve feminist memory.

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# Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper adds to feminist media and digital activism research by showing how feminist groups in postcolonial North Africa use social media to call for legal change, share stories, and deal with challenges. By focusing on Morocco and Tunisia, it adds a regional perspective to global discussions on digital resistance, intersectionality, and the evolving role of activism in online spaces.

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