

AicE-Bs2025London



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13th Asia-Pacific International Conference on Environment-Behaviour Studies
University of Westminster, London, UK, 29-31 Aug 2025

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

Ikram Douaou1*, Fatima-Zohra Iflahen2

^{1*} Doctoral Student, Cadi Ayyad University, UCA, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Languages and Humanities Laboratory, Avenue Abdelkrim Khattabi, Marrakech, Morocco

² Full Professor, Cadi Ayyad University, UCA, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Languages and Humanities Laboratory, Avenue Abdelkrim Khattabi, Marrakech, Morocco

i.douaou.ced@uca.ac.ma, f.iflahen@uca.ac.ma +212 6 43 74 39 62

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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DOI: https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v10i33.7243

1.0 Introduction

Over the last decade, feminist mobilizations in the Maghreb have been reshaped by the digitalization of public spaces and new forms of activism. In Morocco and Tunisia, feminist NGOs and youth collectives have used social media as both a communication tool and an alternative political space to overcome barriers, build alliances, and develop strategies.

With legal reforms slow, political leaders resistant, and feminist movements divided across generations, digital technology has become a way for women to be seen, heard, and connected. Campaigns against Article 490 in Morocco and for equal inheritance in Tunisia show how social media is used to claim rights, create narratives, and challenge dominant norms.

While studies on digital activism in the Global South have grown, research on feminist digital mobilization in the Maghreb remains limited. Most work focuses on general activism or single-country cases, leaving a gap in comparative, gender-focused analyses of Morocco and Tunisia. This article addresses that gap.

This study aims to explore how feminist NGOs and collectives in Morocco and Tunisia use digital platforms for legal and symbolic mobilization. Its objectives are: to examine strategies of digital appropriation; to analyze narrative construction and the role of emotion and storytelling; and to assess digital legal advocacy and the limits these practices face in postcolonial and intersectional contexts.

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

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2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Digital feminism in the Maghreb: new trends and local challenges

In the Maghreb, tensions persist between patriarchal traditions, unequal legal systems, and demands for equality. Social media has become a key space for feminist action, sometimes complementing and, at others, replacing traditional activism.

In Morocco, studies show that digital tools have supported women's NGOs in significant ways. Belhorma and Yachoulti (2019) note that social media has transformed how activists speak out, influence policy, and promote balance. Amezoirou (2024) stresses that new media give Moroccan women confidence and visibility. Bloggers address issues such as violence, harassment, and gender equality. However, optimism contrasts with resistance: Derdar (2020) found that 10% of students see feminism as unnecessary, reflecting backlash against digital activism.

In Tunisia, campaigns like EnaZeda enabled survivors to share experiences online and turn them into collective claims (Arfaoui, 2020). Sipos (2023) shows that NGOs used digital platforms to debate inheritance rights and link local demands with global feminist discourses, despite political resistance and cultural backlash.

Digital activism still faces limits. Rural areas lack access, language divides persist, and online expression is exposed to censorship such as legal threats or arrests (Zaid et al., 2011).

Overall, the literature shows empowerment and resistance: Amezoirou highlights confidence, and Derdar shows skepticism as Tunisia reveals strong mobilization. Nevertheless, a comparative, critical review of how feminist NGOs in Morocco and Tunisia use digital platforms for storytelling and legal mobilization is still missing. This is the gap this article addresses.

2.2 Theoretical approaches: storytelling, intersectionality, and digital visibility

Several concepts help explain digital feminism. One is connective action, where people engage through personal stories rather than large organizations (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2023). This form of participation brings many individual voices together online.

Intersectionality also provides key insight. Lépinard and Evans (2020) show that it applies beyond feminist movements, capturing how dynamics vary by context. It can create disagreement, but it also adapts to different goals.

Platforms themselves shape activism. Santos (2022) notes that while users shape platforms, platforms also influence user behavior, affecting how feminist messages are shared.

Fotaki & Pullen (2024), drawing on Emmanuelle Vaast, show how women and gender-nonconforming data scientists use social media to challenge inequality, build community, and resist exclusion from traditional environments.

Together, these approaches - connective action, intersectionality, and digital visibility - offer tools for analyzing feminist NGOs in Morocco and Tunisia. They explain both the opportunities for collective action and the exclusions that persist, supporting the article's aim of providing a comparative, critical review of Maghreb digital mobilization.

3.0 Methodology

This article is based on a structured narrative review of 21 sources published between 2015 and 2025. Sixteen were used directly as the most relevant. They include academic articles, NGO reports, and research papers, selected for their focus on feminist activism, legal reform, and digital media in Morocco and Tunisia. The literature search was conducted through Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, NGO repositories, and open-access platforms, using keywords such as "digital feminism," "feminist NGOs," "Maghreb," "Morocco," "Tunisia," "Inheritance Reform," and "Article 490." Sources centered on North African feminist activism were included, while general political activism or studies outside the Maghreb were excluded.

The review is not exhaustive but aims to map digital feminist practices within postcolonial contexts. A thematic grid was built around three axes:

- 1. Digital appropriation (platform usage, media formats, dissemination strategies)
- 2. Narrative construction (emotion, storytelling)
- 3. Legal advocacy (legal claims, reforms, mobilization)

Each document was read, coded, and organized with this grid. A summary table was created to show how often each theme appeared and where gaps were found, especially in legal advocacy.

Table 1. A Coss-Analysis Matrix of The Corpus

References	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
Douida, A. (2023)	YES	YES	YES
El Asmar, F. (2020)	YES	YES	YES
El Issawi, F. (2016)	YES	YES	YES
El Kirat El Allame (2020)	YES	YES	YES

Chahbane, H., & Houssaini, K. (2025)	YES	YES	YES
Karolak, M. (2017)	YES	YES	YES
Mehta, B. (2024)	YES	YES	YES
Moghadam, V. M. (2019).	YES	YES	YES
Ouassini, A. (2021)	YES	YES	YES
Sipos, X. Z. (2023)	YES	YES	YES
Tazi, M. (2021)	YES	YES	YES

The table shows that most sources covered all three axes, especially appropriation and narrative, while legal advocacy appeared less consistently. This imbalance highlights the need to study how feminist NGOs use digital tools for legal mobilization in the Maghreb.

A narrative review was chosen for its flexibility and ability to capture diverse contexts. It reflects the complexity of feminist digital activism while identifying shared patterns. To reduce bias, each source was coded systematically, notes ensured consistency, and reflexive notes were kept to ensure awareness of personal interpretations

4.0 Findings

4.1 Digital appropriation: between local practices and global imaginaries

Feminist NGOs in Morocco and Tunisia use digital tools for local struggles while adapting global feminist ideas. These tools are not only for spreading messages but also shape how activists organize, connect, and fight for rights online.

In Morocco, Facebook and Instagram help activists address two challenges: underrepresentation in traditional media and the need to share their stories more widely. El Kirat El Allame (2020) shows how the Soulaliyates, rural women fighting for land rights, used Facebook to amplify their voices and overcome media silence. In Tunisia, global movements inspired local campaigns such as EnaZeda, led by feminist groups like Aswat Nissa. This campaign invited survivors of sexual violence to share their experiences and grew into an online community of over 32,000 members (Arfaoui, 2020). Through events and media outreach, EnaZeda turned private testimonies into a collective call for change

Beyond violence, NGOs made use of digital tools for inheritance rights. In Tunisia, groups like ATFD launched the campaign "Now is the Time" in 2018 to explain legal issues, encourage action, and involve celebrities (Amezoirou, 2024). Moroccan NGOs such as ADFM followed similar strategies with online talks and articles linking inheritance laws to daily life (Amezoirou, 2024). These actions reached broader audiences and pressured decision-makers.

Digital spaces also brought young people into debates. In Morocco, Instagram became a key platform where youth discuss education, work, and gender equality in more creative and direct ways (Chahbane & Houssaini, 2025). Social media opened discussions once seen as closed, helping young people feel included.

During crises, digital tools kept activism alive. In Morocco, Ennakhil association used WhatsApp groups, helplines, and short audio messages to support women during COVID-19, and organized online awareness events despite lockdowns (Sipos, 2023). In Tunisia, the Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes shared information to support women facing economic and health struggles (Sipos, 2023). These examples show how digital tools became a lifeline when traditional support systems collapsed.

Such practices illustrate what Castillo-Esparcia et al. (2023) describe as connective action, where many individual voices and local practices come together online to build collective momentum. While this expands visibility, it can also create fragmented activism that struggles to become a lasting political influence.

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 stories, videos, and hashtags, they inform and advocate for women's rights.

In Morocco, Facebook pages such as ČEDAW et Droits des Femmes au Maroc helped create communities around women's rights (Belhorma & Yachoulti, 2019). The hashtag #Masaktach ("I will not be silent") encouraged women to speak openly about harassment and violence, breaking the silence and reaching broader audiences (Belhorma & Yachoulti, 2019). Technology also produced new tools: the Union Féministe Libre launched Manchoufouch, an app to report violence safely, especially useful during the pandemic (Asfari Institute, 2023).

In Tunisia, EnaZeda became a major campaign, with more than 500 stories shared in two months (Asfari Institute, 2023). Other initiatives, like those led by Fe-Male and UN Women, showed women as active voices rather than numbers (Asfari Institute, 2023).

Storytelling was also linked to education and protest. The ATFD founded a feminist school in 2008 to teach young women about laws and equality (Moghadam, 2019). In Morocco, online protests erupted in 2015 when two women were arrested for wearing short dresses. The campaign "mettre une robe n'est pas un crime" spread photos on Facebook to show solidarity (Moghadam, 2019).

Regional platforms also tackled deeper problems. Sharika wa Laken argued that North Africa remains unsafe for women, while @Feminicides_Algerie documented femicides and exposed cultures of tolerance toward violence (Mehta, 2024). Yasmina Benslimane, founder of Politics4Her, emphasized how old beliefs still fuel this violence (Mehta, 2024).

Online storytelling also met repression. In Tunisia, the government tried to block Facebook and Twitter, but activists used phones, proxy servers, and international support to stay online (Karolak, 2017). This shows how even telling stories online became an act of resistance.

In Morocco and Tunisia, digital storytelling raised awareness, educated, and created solidarity. Despite its limitations, it remains a strong tool to highlight women's struggles and demand justice. These narratives also reflect intersectional dynamics: campaigns focus on gender but also intersect with class, rural/urban divides, and language, which supports Lépinard and Evans's (2020) point that intersectionality adapts to contexts, but also reveals tensions about whose voices are amplified or silenced.

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 expose injustice, raise awareness, and push for reforms.

In Tunisia, nearly half of women aged 18–64 reported facing violence, mostly domestic (Arfaoui & Moghadam, 2016). This figure pushed organizations to mobilize online. In Morocco, campaigns such as Moroccan Outlaws demanded the repeal of Article 490, which criminalizes consensual sex outside marriage. Activists framed it as a violation of personal freedoms and rallied support for women like Hanae, "Moulat Al Khimar" (Chahbane & Houssaini, 2025).

Legal advocacy also involved state actors. In Tunisia, the Ministry of Women launched Yezzi matoskotch, tkallem ("Stop, do not shut up, speak up") in 2016 to raise awareness about violence (Douida, 2023). That same year, a national committee reviewed inheritance laws to align with international standards (Sipos, 2023). These cases show how digital platforms became arenas where state and civil society actors promoted change.

Some campaigns turned personal tragedies into legal reform. In Morocco, the case of Amina Filali, forced to marry her rapist under Article 475, sparked outrage and online debate that led to the repeal (Ouassini, 2021). The #STOP490 campaign (2021) opposed the criminalization of sexual relations outside marriage and supported victims of online harassment like Hanaa, targeted by revenge porn (Douida, 2023).

Other actions linked personal stories with constitutional debates. In Tunisia, EnaZeda gained momentum after a politician harassed a teenager, with women sharing experiences in a Facebook group supported by Asswat Nissa (El Asmar, 2020). In Morocco, the February 20th Movement created the Feminist Spring for Equality and Democracy, which called for full gender equality in the constitution (Yachoulti, 2015, as cited in Tazi, 2021; see also El-Issawi, 2016). These cases show how online mobilization shaped wider legal and constitutional reforms.

In both Morocco and Tunisia, digital advocacy revealed its strengths and limits. It exposed injustices, pressured authorities, and amplified women's voices. However, it also faced political resistance, social backlash, and digital instability. Legal advocacy online shows both the promise and the limits of digital feminist mobilization: connective action enabled rapid solidarity, but intersectional inequalities meant that rural, older, or non-Francophone women remained underrepresented. This duality reflects the structural limits of digital activism in postcolonial contexts.

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 induces forms of "connective action", where people take part in digital activism by sharing their own experiences and thoughts (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2023), which allows a quick and flexible mobilization, such as the Soulaliyates' use of Facebook to protest land dispossession (El Kirat El Allame, 2020). However, it can also lead to scattered messages, a short-lived and limited impact.

Urban, educated, and tech-savvy voices often shape this form of activism, thus raising 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.

Globally, these findings show how feminist digital activism in the Maghreb is part of wider South-South and South-North conversations. Campaigns such as EnaZeda or STOP490 connect local struggles to global debates on gender equality, illustrating how digital spaces allow ideas, hashtags, and strategies to circulate across borders.

Theoretically, the study adds to feminist media research by showing how concepts like connective action and intersectionality work in practice in North Africa. The findings suggest that while connective action enables flexible participation, its impact is uneven, and intersectionality remains necessary to capture who is excluded from digital activism.

Practically, the analysis highlights both opportunities and challenges for NGOs and activists. Digital tools can amplify voices, mobilize quickly, and put pressure on policymakers, but they also risk reproducing exclusions and relying too heavily on short-lived online attention. For practitioners, this means digital activism should be combined with offline strategies, training in digital literacy, and deliberate efforts to include marginalized groups.

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 and ongoing challenges.

This study has some limitations. First, it is based on a narrative review, which means the sources are limited. Second, the study tackled only 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.

Beyond future research, this study has broader implications. Global feminism shows how local struggles in Morocco and Tunisia connect with broader debates and reshape strategies worldwide. In terms of digital policy, it highlights that while digital activism is powerful, it also risks exclusion and surveillance. Policymakers and NGOs must therefore ensure inclusivity, protect activists, and design safer online spaces. Concerning theory, the findings show that concepts like intersectionality and connective action need to be adapted to local realities. Overall, digital activism is a vital tool, but one that must be critically safeguarded and contextualized.

Acknowledgement

The corresponding author, Ikram DOUAOU, a second-year doctoral student, is a beneficiary of the PhD-Associate Scholarship–PASS, a doctoral scholarship program awarded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation, and the National Center for Scientific and Technical Research (CNRST) in Morocco. This scholarship supports the author's doctoral studies.

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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