

Decolonizing Women's Rights: A case study of BATIK International's French-Moroccan partnership

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Abstract

In this article, the French NGO BATIK International in Morocco is analyzed as a case study of decolonial approaches to women's rights advocacy, with particular attention to programs addressing violence against women. Set in the historical French-Moroccan postcolonial context, this article examines how the organization navigates power relations, incorporates local voices, promotes intersectionality, and mitigates neocolonial patterns. Using participant observation, internship experience, internal document analysis, and interviews as a basis, the study reflects revealing tensions between administrative control and local autonomy. Results suggest attempts towards culturally relevant partnerships and indicate that strengthening local leadership may help advance decolonial feminist practice in international partnerships.

Keywords: Decolonial feminism, Violence against women, International partnerships, Gender equality.

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1.0 Introduction

Gender-based violence is a continuing global challenge, and particularly in postcolonial contexts, historical as well as structural inequalities help to shape approaches to women's rights. The role of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) involved in violence against women in Morocco presents serious questions of power, representation, and the risk of reproducing colonial hierarchies.

The French-Moroccan relationship adds depth to such circumstances. As Morocco's former colonial power, France occupies a complex position in transnational advocacy. As such, French NGOs in Morocco face the challenge of balancing advocacy for global feminist frameworks with respect for local sociocultural realities.

This paper analyzes the French NGO BATIK International through its KARAMA project on violence against women. It examines how the organization positions its relationship with Moroccan associations, manages administrative and financial coordination, and attempts to integrate intersectional and decolonial perspectives while minimizing neocolonial patterns.

Based on qualitative research conducted during an internship at BATIK International, which included participant observation, interviews, and analysis of internal documents, this study offers a practice-based perspective on how Franco-Moroccan NGO

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cooperation is implemented. It joins broader conversations about decolonizing women's rights advocacy and examines the dynamics of North–South partnerships in postcolonial contexts.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Women's Rights and International Development in Morocco

In the history of the Moroccan women's rights movement, this has occurred through several stages of social, political, and legal action since the mid-20th century. The first few chapters included efforts such as those of Akhawat Assafa in the 1940s and the Progressive Union of Moroccan Women in 1960, which helped orient feminist campaigning towards family law, labor conditions, and gender-based violence (Ryadi, 2021). Women's struggles in the 1970s became more entrenched in human rights discourse, supported by Morocco's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which provided an international normative framework, even as its implementation remained problematic (Ryadi, 2021).

International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have also become active partners in supporting Moroccan feminist efforts through funding, capacity-building, and advocacy (Scaia, n.d.; Women's Learning Partnership, n.d.). Their participation has reinforced institutional responses to violence against women and facilitated engagement with international legal standards. However, these partnerships are embedded in power relations rooted in Morocco's colonial past, calling into question autonomy and decision-making within international partnerships.

2.2 Collaborations between Moroccan and European NGOs: a persistent colonial heritage

Collaboration between Moroccan NGOs and European NGOs is situated in a historical context shaped by Morocco's colonial past, which also influences funding, decision-making structures, organizational dynamics, and hierarchies. The central struggle here concerns the balance of power: international NGOs are often intermediaries in the flow of donor funding and impose administrative and financial structures that reduce Moroccan NGOs' autonomy (Albu, 2020; Hansen, 2019). This reliance often forces local organizations to align with external donors' agendas, which can be problematic for developing community-specific policies to address local needs (Robert, 2008).

Moreover, a victim-centered approach implies that international NGOs' programs must be developed in close cooperation with local NGOs and communities to adapt interventions to the specific needs of survivors of violence and to ensure an integrated approach that includes prevention, mitigation, and response (Bhanja, 2022). International NGOs play a role in capacity building and advocacy support (Sparwald, 2018), but their structural influence is still considerable. Even in settings where more balanced partnerships may be encouraged (Coordination Sud, 2019), funding continues to reinforce international actors as the gatekeepers between donors and local NGOs.

Additionally, most partnership models remain vertical, and project design and implementation are largely in the hands of international organizations (Walters, 2019). These top-down approaches can impede local adaptation of solutions and reinforce inequalities regarding organizational capacity and decision-making power (Hansen, 2019). In some cases, Moroccan NGOs working on sensitive matters such as migration or women's rights may also be seen as aligned with external political issues, undermining their local legitimacy (Abderrahim, 2019). Although there are cases of more horizontal and equitable cooperation (Walters, 2019), effective decolonization of NGO partnerships will entail not only structural changes in fundraising practices, but also a real reallocation of decision-making power. Otherwise, local NGOs risk becoming implementers of externally imposed projects rather than independent, powerful agents of structural change in local communities.

These dynamics are also reflected in broader transformations of feminist activism and advocacy strategies, particularly with the increasing role of digital platforms and transnational networks. Digital feminist activism has expanded through networked forms of engagement that facilitate collective mobilization, alliance-building, and new forms of feminist consciousness across geographical contexts, while also revealing tensions, exclusions, and uneven participation within these spaces (Vachhani, 2024). At the same time, despite growing international advocacy efforts, structural inequalities continue to limit women's participation and influence in decision-making processes, highlighting persistent gaps between formal commitments to gender justice and their implementation in practice (Pettersson et al., 2025).

2.3 Applying a Decolonial Feminist Lens to North–South NGO Partnerships

The theory of decolonial feminism offers an essential critical framework for analyzing these collaborations. It highlights the postcolonial power dynamics that persist in relations between international and Moroccan NGOs. By questioning power hierarchies, this approach criticizes the unequal relations between NGOs in the North and the South, which often perpetuate colonial patterns of domination (Curiel, 2021). Decolonial feminism insists on the need to value local knowledge (Curiel, 2021), recognizing that solutions to the problems of Moroccan women must be designed and carried out by local actresses themselves.

One of the fundamental axes of decolonial feminism is its questioning of the dominance of Western feminist perspectives in international collaborations (Ana, 2023). This approach criticizes the tendency of Northern NGOs to impose universalizing models of gender equality and development that do not always account for the sociocultural and historical realities of countries in the South.

Additionally, applying the principles of decolonial feminism to NGO collaborations involves transforming institutional structures and practices to promote more inclusive and representative organizations (Manning, 2021). This criticism extends to the "NGO-ization" of activism, that is, the tendency to institutionalize and professionalize feminist struggles, often at the expense of grassroots dynamics and

popular movements (Ana, 2023). This phenomenon can lead to a depoliticization and cooptation of feminist demands, aligning militant strategies with the requirements of international donors rather than the priorities of the communities concerned.

In addition, by adopting an intersectional approach, decolonial feminism emphasizes the importance of a global struggle against all forms of oppression (Verges, 2019). Another critical point is "civilizational feminism", where the INGO sometimes imposes a Western and universalist vision of feminism without taking into account local sociocultural realities (Verges, 2019).

However, while existing studies have explored feminist activism and NGO advocacy in the MENA region, limited attention has been paid to how transnational partnerships negotiate power asymmetries and adapt global frameworks within specific local contexts.

Considering these challenges, it is increasingly urgent to rethink these collaborations to overcome colonial legacies and strengthen local NGOs' autonomy.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Case Study Context: BATIK International and the KARAMA Project

Founded in 1998 by two immigrant granddaughters, BATIK International has set itself the mission of developing solidarity projects linked to the countries of origin of its founders.

BATIK International has been promoting women's rights and combating gender-based violence in Morocco for several years through a multidimensional approach that combines direct support, awareness-raising, and local capacity-building.

The KARAMA project, launched in 2018, is one of its main projects, which stands out as an excellent example of such dynamic collaboration. This program is designed to provide comprehensive support to women who are survivors of violence, based on the following axes:

- Access to integrated support services: setting up reception structures, legal and psychological support, and access to medical care.
- Socioeconomic integration: professional training and support for the reintegration of beneficiaries into the labor market.
- Awareness raising and education on rights: setting up women's clubs that promote solidarity and empowerment through information and exchange sessions.
- The involvement of institutional and economic actors: working with local authorities and companies to promote a better understanding of violence against women.

The selection of BATIK International and the KARAMA project is based on the accessibility of the field site and the richness of empirical data available, enabling an in-depth examination of partnership dynamics in practice.

3.2 Research Design and Data Collection

This study employs a qualitative case study approach that relies on primary and secondary data collected during an international research internship at BATIK International. Data sources include:

- Semi-structured interviews with the Director of BATIK International and the KARAMA Project Manager.
- Internal project documents, including partnership agreements, framing notes, reports, and monitoring tools.
- Participant observation of daily coordination and communication processes.

This triangulated strategy was intentionally adopted to strengthen the analysis by combining multiple perspectives and sources, enabling a better understanding of how gender, power, and partnership dynamics are negotiated in practice.

3.3 Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Data were transcribed, translated when necessary, and thematically organized. The analysis followed a qualitative interpretive approach, drawing on thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in partnership roles, administrative coordination, cultural adaptation, and monitoring practices. Particular attention was given to how these elements reflect broader power asymmetries and decolonial dynamics within the partnership.

Cross-referencing between interviews, documents, and observations ensured consistency and strengthened interpretive validity.

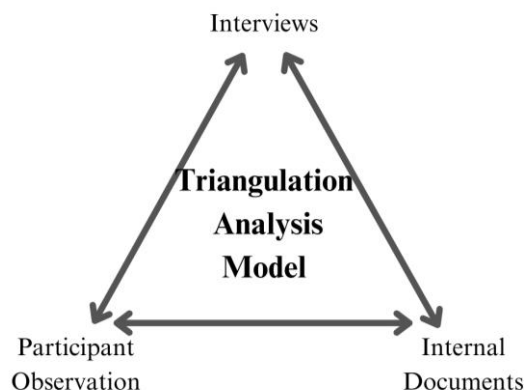


Figure 1: Triangulation Analysis Model

The study was conducted in accordance with strict ethical guidelines. Access to internal documents was authorized, interviews were conducted with informed consent, and confidentiality agreements were respected.

4.0 Findings

The analysis of data from internal documents, interviews, and participant observations enabled the identification of many tendencies and dynamics in the KARAMA project's implementation. This section presents a triangular analysis of the results from each element, highlighting convergence or divergence across the different sources of information.

4.1 Organization and administrative framework of the project

The analysis of the internal documents, notably the partnership agreement, highlights a rigid administrative framework that structures the collaboration between BATIK International and one of its Moroccan partners. BATIK International serves as the facilitator and coordinator, ensuring the project's financial and administrative follow-up. The narrative and financial trimestrial reports sent by the Moroccan partners to the French association are a central tool for guaranteeing transparency and the respect of the engagements.

However, the interviews with the Director of BATIK International and the project manager of KARAMA show that this structure imposes a significant administrative burden on the Moroccan partners, who must systematically adjust and validate their documents. The participant observations confirm this reality: there are frequent back-and-forth emails between BATIK and its partners to validate and adjust their financial documents, which can eventually slow down the implementation of KARAMA project activities.

4.2 Follow-up activities and coordination

Follow-up meetings play a crucial role in project management. The analysis of follow-up activity reports and meeting minutes shows a strong involvement of BATIK International in the follow-up and orientation of activities held in Morocco. Observations indicate that these meetings enable the French association to adapt its endorsement to the expressed needs of the Moroccan partners.

Nevertheless, the interviews indicate that, while these meetings facilitate coordination, they can also be perceived as an intensified monitoring tool that hinders the partners' autonomy. The internal documents strengthen this perception by providing a clear follow-up on performance and spending indicators. This situation can sometimes generate tension, particularly when managing reporting deadlines.

4.3 The role of BATIK International and the perception of its partners

The analysis of strategic documents, especially "The Gender Positioning Statement of BATIK International," demonstrates an intersectional approach that ensures appropriate care for women victims of violence. However, BATIK International does not interfere exclusively in the field, leaving that responsibility to the local associations in Morocco.

Despite this, the French association organized workshops for women who benefit from services provided by local partners, even though these interventions are less frequent than those of the local Moroccan partners. In contrast, BATIK's field engagement primarily focuses on capacity-building for partners through on-site or online training. These activities enable local organizations to develop their skills in project management, advocacy, and intervention in cases of gender-based violence.

The interviews with the project manager and the director indicate that BATIK positions itself as a project leader and a companion, offering its expertise and strategic support. Nevertheless, this posture can sometimes create a gap between partners' expectations and BATIK's actions, notably in funding management and in adapting to field realities.

4.4 Communication and interactions

The internal documents and interviews reveal fluid communication between the Moroccan and French partners, primarily via emails and WhatsApp. The participant observations confirm that the Moroccan partners have direct access to BATIK's French project manager, thereby facilitating dialogue and responsiveness.

However, the triangular analysis shows that, even when communication is fluid, it can still lead to minor misunderstandings due to complex administrative instructions. These misunderstandings, although managed quickly, can cause additional delays in validating some actions.

4.5 The collaboration in the elaboration of the project KARAMA

KARAMA is a project that addresses violence against women in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt. This project's framing note is a key document, collaboratively drafted with all the project's partners, including Moroccan partners. This document provides a detailed overview of the project in each partner country, including activities, objectives, and specific indicators. It serves as a central reference, aligning the actions of BATIK International and its partners with local realities and fostering harmony in practices that respect national contexts.

Overall, the results of this analysis highlight a management model based on rigorous monitoring and strong administrative structure. If BATIK International ensures efficient coordination and guarantees financial transparency, this approach imposes a significant load on local partners. Moreover, the interactions between BATIK and its Moroccan partners are fluid; however, they could be a source of tension, especially regarding the administrative requirements and the validation deadlines. Furthermore, the project is part of a

postcolonial relations context where the management of a project to combat violence against women must adapt to the Moroccan cultural specificities while respecting the international standards of the protection of women's rights.

5.0 Discussion

The analysis of BATIK International's work within the context of the KARAMA project highlights the complex dynamics between local and international NGOs, revealing tensions over the autonomy of local organizations amid transparency and accountability requirements imposed by donors. As noted in Shakti Shalini's study in India (Kumari, 2023), local NGOs develop approaches rooted in the sociocultural realities of the communities they serve, prioritizing participatory strategies tailored to beneficiaries' needs. However, these initiatives often run into administrative requirements and normative frameworks dictated by international funding institutions, which, under the guise of good governance, can limit the flexibility and effectiveness of local NGOs.

The impact of administrative requirements on the operational flexibility of local NGOs is a critical challenge that the study could identify. Funders usually impose complex reporting and compliance procedures through international NGOs, which creates a heavy administrative burden for local NGOs, especially small associations. (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2016) The results confirm that this dynamic affects the efficiency of partners' interventions within the KARAMA project, even when the bureaucratic requirements that ought to mobilize significant human and financial resources remain tight, sometimes affecting the time and energy dedicated to the project's on-site activities.

This constraint is equally observed in other contexts. It also adds to substantial criticism of the bureaucratization of human aid, where Local NGOs have to dedicate a significant share of their resources to the administrative management rather than to the implementation of concrete solutions. (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2016) One might say that this situation may limit their capacity to respond quickly to the emergent needs of survivors of violence and to adapt their strategies in function of the local dynamics.

Moreover, one of the key strengths of the KARAMA project is its integration of a survivor-centered approach, ensuring that interventions are designed to meet the real needs of women rather than relying solely on external models. This approach has avoided the pitfalls of international programs that impose intervention frameworks without meaningful local consultation. However, the findings show that the alignment with local cultural norms is still a critical challenge. Although International NGOs are very well engaged in a logic of protecting human rights, they sometimes introduce approaches that do not align with local communities' perceptions, leading to resistance and minimizing the impact of their actions. (Horga, Nicoara, & Abaszade, 2015)

The findings show that BATIK International's involvement in the KARAMA project strengthened local partners' capacities in project management, advocacy, and the development of intervention strategies. Its expertise is often cited as an essential advantage of international partnerships, as it enables local associations to build the capacity to manage initiatives autonomously in the long term (USAID, 2022). Within the framework of KARAMA, this dynamic will facilitate the structuring of actions related to the combat against gender-based violence.

However, this logic of capacity reinforcement might also disseminate a form of control implemented by international NGOs on local ones. If the latter benefit from technical support, they must reconcile their local priorities with the expectations of funding institutions, which can create a structural dependency. This was observed during this study, where local partners had to adjust their reports to meet donor-imposed criteria, which can limit their capacity for innovation and rapid adaptation to local community needs.

Finally, one of the vital successes of this project lies in the co-construction of the project's framing note, which allows all partners to participate in its elaboration. This approach contradicts the usual descendant practices of international NGOs. BATIK International expressed its desire to advance better recognition of local expertise. However, even if the KARAMA project clearly demonstrates a desire to establish balanced partnerships, the results confirm that local NGOs remain dominated by donors. The latter implicitly showcases a dominance, making international NGOs the medium between them and local associations.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

As a case study, this article explored BATIK International and its role in addressing violence against women in Morocco in a postcolonial context. The study sheds light on both the opportunities and tensions presented by Franco-Moroccan partnerships and cooperation, including administrative control, funding dependency, and the tension between international norms and local conditions. Though BATIK International is making efforts to reconcile intersectional and decolonial concerns, structural asymmetries with donor paradigms and models continue to underlie partnership politics.

Strengthening the autonomy of local NGOs is at the heart of any desire to move towards more equitable collaboration. This may be achieved through funding in new ways and new donors, with fewer top-down constraints and adaptable donor agreements based on local realities (Brehm, 2004; Singh & Ingdal, 2007). On the economic bottom-up, it also recommended strengthening local government structures, encouraging greater societal participation in project design, and facilitating horizontal knowledge sharing between international and local actors to break down hierarchical structures. Real co-constructed programs at every stage of the design process can help reduce neo-colonial dynamics and strengthen local expertise.

This case study not only shows the progress of feminist activism in Morocco but also highlights the international partners involved in this historically sensitive context. A decolonial feminist perspective highlights the importance of redistributing decision-making power and recognizing local knowledge as essential to sustainable change. The role of international NGOs can only be supportive; however, meaningful decolonization will require such structural reforms to funding, governance, and collaboration practices.

There are limitations to this study. The study is primarily drawn from internal documents and interviews with BATIK International and may not reflect the perspectives of Moroccan partners. Future research needs to explicitly explore local actors' experiences and compare implementation dynamics across MENA contexts to examine how postcolonial specificities impact transnational advocacy.

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Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

Through an empirical case analysis of a Franco-Moroccan NGO partnership addressing violence against women, this paper contributes to decolonial feminist scholarship and international development literature. It bridges theory and practice by examining how decolonial and intersectional principles are negotiated within everyday organizational structures and funding dynamics. It also provides practical insights into strengthening local autonomy within North–South collaborations.

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