

Imaginings of a Feminist Economic Transformation



Thematic Focus:
The Middle East
and North Africa

Visioning Journey Manifesto
December 2021

Another Day Will Come



Another day will come, a womanly day
diaphanous in metaphor, complete in being,
diamond and processional in visitation, sunny,
flexible, with a light shadow. No one will feel
a desire for suicide or for leaving. All
things, outside the past, natural and real,
will be synonyms of their early traits. As if time
is slumbering on vacation... "Extend your lovely
beauty-time. Sunbathe in the sun of your silken breasts,
and wait until good omen arrives. Later
we will grow older. We have enough time
to grow older after this day..."/

Another day will come, a womanly day
songlike in gesture, lapis in greeting
and in phrase. All things will be feminine outside
the past. Water will flow from rock's bosom.
No dust, no drought, no defeat.

And a dove will sleep in the afternoon in an abandoned
combat tank if it doesn't find a small nest
in the lovers' bed...

Mahmoud Darwish – Translated by Fady Joudah. Reprinted with permission from the author and translator from [The Butterfly's Burden](#), Copper Canyon Press, 2007.

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Background: A Visit to the Future in the MENA Region



On October 8th, 2021, economists, feminists, activists and change-makers from around the Middle East and North Africa came together for a journey. The purpose of our journey was to re-imagine our world through feminist economic transformations. We wanted to collectively vision and uplift economic alternatives that could be transformed into policy changes. We sought to foster connections and inspire movement actors in their change work across the MENA region. We began our journey with a belief in the power of imagining as a way of illuminating and co-creating new ways of being.

Together, we imagined hopping into a time machine, and transporting to the year 2041, where our feminist, transformed economy thrives. We were guided into a solo visioning journey to imagine this transformed world. Then, we reconvened to share our individual visions, connect ideas and create art out of our collective visions. Introduced by an essay on Feminist Economic Issues in MENA and original poetry from our participants, this report is a harvest of the collective visions of our participants.



About the Feminist Economic Transformation Project



COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated the extreme inequalities in our societies. Globally, the pandemic has had disproportionate economic, health, and social impacts on women particularly those who belong to Black, Indigenous or racialized communities, (im)migrant and refugees, women living with disabilities or members of the LGBTQ+ communities. Women workers are bearing the brunt of job losses and increased care responsibilities. “Building a better future” cannot simply be an exercise of rebuilding what was already there. Rather, now is the time to envision a transformative and new economic model that centers the health and wellbeing of our societies, economies and our planet.

The world needs a feminist economic transformation that places gender, economic and climate justice and feminist leadership at the heart and transforms our economic model to one that is equal, equitable, inclusive and sustainable. The purpose of the FET project is to re-imagine our world through feminist economic transformations, fostering connections, inspiring movement actors in their change work, and to support collective visioning and uplifting of economic alternatives that can be transformed into policy changes.

The FET Advisory Group is a global group of feminist organizers, advocates, economists, researchers and thinkers working together to envision a feminist transformed economy. The FET Advisory Group is proposing an inclusive and participatory visioning journey, bringing together feminist and equality-seeking leaders in a series of global conversations to develop key elements of a feminist economic transformation plan that lays the ground for a more equal, inclusive and sustainable economic model.

Throughout 2021-2022, the FET project led a series of visioning exercises with feminist activists in various regions focusing on macro and micro economic realities that would be required for a feminist economic transformation.

The visioning journeys show respect for all beings and multiple truths. They center care, co-liberation and interdependence, and recognize that freedom, belonging, equality and thriving is everyone’s birth right. The harvest reports provide a glimpse into these visions.

Setting the Context

Feminist Economic Futures in the MENA: Post-COVID Transformation Not Recovery

Dr. Rima Majed¹

This essay was presented to participants before the solo visioning journey and small group exercises. This was intended to provide context to the gathering and provide an overview of what is needed for a feminist economic future in the MENA region.

In light of the grim realities and overlapping crises in the MENA region today, expanding our political imaginaries to envision feminist economic futures is a crucial step on our path to social justice and emancipation. This is not simply a question of “recovery” after the pandemic to go back to a previous system that has so clearly failed us. It is a question of transforming the structures of our economies to provide more just and inclusive societies for all. It is, therefore, essential for us to

be able to imagine and realize alternative political and economic systems where human life is valued, our environment is preserved, and social justice is prevalent.

While economic questions are often approached as complex and technical issues that need to be deferred to experts and professionals, a [feminist political economy approach](#) offers another way to look at our current economic realities and to imagine our potential economic futures. [It departs](#)

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[from the traditional approach from two main standpoints](#): (1) first, given that the implications of economic policies on people's everyday lives is much simpler and clearer than we are made to believe, economic discussions should be accessible to all and should prioritize the voices and needs of the more vulnerable groups in society; (2) second, it is crucial to approach economic questions in their relation with the social, environmental, and political spheres since these are inter-related realms that cannot be understood or analyzed separately. In that sense, imagining and working towards alternative economic futures from a feminist standpoint requires thinking beyond the frameworks of neoliberal capitalism, and centering justice and wellbeing over profit and the accumulation of wealth. The challenge would remain in actualizing the necessary shifts to transform our societies in these directions.

Such a feminist political economy approach is important globally, but it is particularly salient in the MENA region given [the alarming economic and political indicators](#). The MENA region scores highest globally when it comes to youth unemployment, in particular female youth unemployment. A recent [UN Women report, published in 2021](#), states that female unemployment in the Arab states is three times higher than the world average, and almost 50% higher than unemployment among young men. Despite women's increased access to education, their labour force participation is still the lowest globally [\(18.4% compared to the global average](#)

[of 48%\)](#). These conditions have been the catalysts for much contestations in the region leading to cycles of popular uprisings and mass movements since 2011. It is therefore no surprise that women have been at the forefront of social movements in the MENA region, given that they bear the heaviest brunt of the unequal and unjust economic system. This inequality is not only in terms of unemployment, but it also takes the shape of unpaid or underpaid care labour, job discrimination and unfair labour laws (a lack of maternity leaves, for example), early marriages, discriminatory citizenship laws, or lack of access to sexual and reproductive health. All these conditions exemplify how the lives of women in the region are shaped by these widespread economic inequalities and social injustices. In addition, the region is home to a high concentration of [dictatorial and authoritarian regimes, settler colonial states, or war-torn countries](#). This has had detrimental effects on the lives of women and marginalized groups that are suffering from [militarization, forced migration, and lack of security or access to basic needs and rights](#). For example, several reports have highlighted how [pregnant women](#) are the "forgotten victims of war." Due to mobility restrictions under war or in cases of occupation, the difficulty of reaching hospitals or healthcare centers for delivery, including the [phenomenon on Palestinian women giving birth at Israeli checkpoint without having access to the adequate healthcare](#), has been well documented.

These already hazardous conditions have further deteriorated since 2020 with the spread of the [COVID pandemic and the ensuing financial collapse in many countries of the region](#). The pandemic, if anything, has exposed the vulnerability of the system and its exploitation of women and minority groups for their care labour. Government decisions to impose lockdowns caused an increase in care work that fell on the shoulders of women, whether family members or domestic workers. This all happened in the context of reduced state welfare or intervention in the care economy, and a general neoliberal approach of investing in private sector recovery as the main catalyst of the economy. Moreover, [recent studies](#) have also documented the rise in violence against women and marginalized groups during the pandemic. Similarly, [studies estimate that, in the aftermath of the pandemic, around a quarter of people in the Arab region are living in poverty](#), and women are likely to suffer more from the consequences of the pandemic on MENA societies. Being seen as more disposable and exploitable than men, women have faced increased [unemployment or underemployment rates](#) the pandemic, and women in the informal sector have been badly hit by the ensuing economic crisis. Similarly, reports show that most [“essential workers” and those on the frontlines](#) in the response to the COVID pandemic are care workers who are predominantly women (nurses, cleaners, etc.), which puts women at higher health risks. In what follows, I will quickly highlight six main areas that can advance our

discussion on ways to envision feminist economic futures in the MENA region, beyond simple recovery. This is in no way an exhaustive list of issues, or a full discussion of the matter; but it rather serves as a pointer to some important areas of exploration in our collective feminist effort to advance our understanding of the economy and to formulate our demands for its transformation.



Transforming Labour Relations and Acknowledging Care Labour

[Labour discussions are back on the table](#) in the MENA region, with a focus on a gendered perspective that centers unpaid [care labour](#) and underpaid or precarious labour in the job market. Such debates are most advanced in the region when it comes to the [Kafala system and the migrant domestic workers](#), given the intersecting class, gender and racial dimensions in the exploitation of these women workers in the care industry. Transforming labour relations in a feminist way would require first the acknowledgement of care labour as work that is still unpaid or underpaid, and that forms the base for the [reproduction of the economic system](#) and for the maintenance of social order. This has become increasingly visible during the pandemic, where women have shouldered most of the crisis. Workers who have become labelled as “essential workers” - including nurses, teachers, cleaners, care givers, etc. – are predominantly women who are generally underpaid. Women have also suffered the most during the pandemic from being easily disposable in the job market given their precarious positions, or more easily exploited through pay cuts and layoffs. While indicators in the region still point to a huge pay gap between genders therefore addressing other entrenched gender inequalities in terms of labour is crucial to imagine a feminist future for labour in the region. If the boundaries

between ‘work outside the household’ and ‘work inside the household’ are to be further blurred by [digitalization](#) and the move to remote schooling (with mothers having an added burden) or jobs, it is urgent for feminists to develop and advocate for an approach that protects women from the added burdens such a transformation would have on their lives and livelihoods. For this reason, [recent reports](#) are arguing for the importance of the feminist movement to focus on the right to form labour organizations and trade unions, and advocate for female workers’ rights as human rights. Moreover, such a discussion on the need for feminist transformations in labour relations should not overlook the fact that there is a high concentration of women in the informal sector, which calls for new ways to think of organizing and struggles for labour rights within a reality of high informality and vulnerability.

Transforming Social Organization, Legal Structures and Family Relations

Much of the economic injustice against women in the MENA region lies in the legal structures and the social organization of society in terms of family relations. This is evident in [inheritance, custody, nationality](#) and personal status laws that discriminate against women in most countries of the MENA region. Such discrimination, in addition to the prevalence of a patriarchal social order

rooted in family and kinship relations, has detrimental effects on women's economic independence. In fact, women's ability to make autonomous and independent decisions when it comes to marriage, reproduction, education and careers, movement and travel, and care labour is heavily limited by the role of males or senior figures in the family structure. Therefore, [women's economic emancipation remains heavily tied to the family and social organization structures](#) that govern their lives and their decisions. Moreover, all countries in the Arab region have maternity leave [legislations below the ILO recommended length of at least 14 weeks of maternity leave](#). This is compounded by no serious regulations in the workplace that provide women with nursing breaks, childcare centers or extended leaves when needed. While the debates today are pointing us to a future where child care is not as gendered as it is today, with discussions about [paternity leaves or parental leaves](#), short-term transformations in labour laws to give women more rights are crucial on the way to the dismantling of the patriarchal structure that governs labour and social relations in the region. This needs to be coupled with a transformation of social norms and family structures to dismantle the patriarchal grip over the lives of women and queer people, and to move beyond the heteronormative family structure that governs our societies.

Defunding Military Operations (or the Police and the Armies), and Putting an End to Arms Trade

Another important area for feminists to address in order to advocate for better economic futures is the [arms trade](#) and [militarization](#) and its effects on women's lives. The MENA is the [least peaceful region of the world](#), with high rates of wars and conflicts, multiple authoritarian regimes, and immense profits extracted from [arms trade](#). This makes the region prone to wars that have enormous impact on the lives of its inhabitants, particularly women, sexual minorities, racialized groups, disabled people, children and the elderly. One of the clearest impacts of war in the region is the high rates of [forced migration and displacement](#) creating the [biggest refugee crisis in the world](#). This has [transformed gender relations and women's labour roles within the family](#) (with many refugee women working in agricultural or care labour, while men are unemployed), while patriarchal norms and care labour still fall heavily on the shoulders of women and girls. Moreover, the [high levels of militarization](#), the spread of toxic masculinity, the increased rates of violence against women and the rise in forced marriages

and child marriage are all the result of war. Such contexts have transformed the economy of many countries or communities to aid-economies based on directed humanitarianism, conditioned aid funding and imposed development frameworks. A feminist economic future needs to address the economic root cause of militarization and tackle the arms industry and its trade market.

Planning Feminist Housing and Transportation: Less Greed, More Green

An additional related topic is the question of feminist approaches to housing and transportation schemes. One of the rising crises in the MENA region is that of [decent and affordable housing](#). This question is a [core feminist concern](#) for three main reasons: 1- the gender division of space between public and private makes the house a crucial element in women's lives; 2- although the house is supposed to be a safe space for women, most gender-based violence happens in this private sphere when many women have no control over their housing conditions or access to autonomous and safe housing; and finally, 3- with the alarmingly high rates of displacement in the region, housing is a key problem for most refugees who flee wars to neighboring countries where they face [racism, discrimination](#) and [poor shelter conditions](#). In that sense, pressure should be put on governments to provide safe and decent shelter as a right. Moreover, with the intensification of the crises in the region, access to basic needs such as clean water,

electricity or internet are becoming a major concern for many communities and are putting disadvantaged groups in danger (for example, access to electricity in housing units is crucial for many people with disabilities or older people, etc.). Therefore, a feminist approach to housing would advocate for shelter as a right rather than a commodity and would center access to clean water, electricity and internet as basic rights. Moreover, imagining and working towards feminist housing plans in urban settings entails the right to green spaces, community centers, communal/neighborhood kitchens, child care support, and elder support, etc. Similarly, the question of access to safe, efficient and affordable transportation, free from harassment, is a central feminist demand. Finally, as previously mentioned, with the fast transformation into digitalization and remote work/schooling, access to high-speed and stable internet connection has become a necessity for many, as part of decent and dignifying housing schemes. Having said that, a feminist future would also be one that works towards eliminating gender-based violence that is very abundant in digital and virtual spaces today.



Free and Easy Access to Healthcare, especially Sexual and Reproductive Health Services

A fifth important area to tackle in trying to imagine a feminist economic future in the MENA region is access to healthcare. Universal health coverage, and easy access to [sexual and reproductive health services](#) are core feminist economic demands. Bodily rights, and issues ranging from gender-based violence to rape and forced marriages, female genital mutilation, reduced mobility, discrimination/violence based on gender and sexual orientation, as well as question of dress code for women, family planning and contraception, and male domination over women's choices and autonomy, have all hugely impacted women's economic and social well-being. In that sense, giving women full control over their bodies, and providing universal health coverage and accessible health services is at the core of economically empowering women. Discrimination in healthcare is even more acute in countries where the sector is highly privatized and access is tied to private insurance schemes that often overlook or do not cover medical procedures related to women health, such as mammograms, pap smear tests, etc. Similarly, the situation is even worse when we think of the discrimination against migrant domestic workers in terms of access to healthcare or refugee women's access to adequate medical care. A [recent study](#) highlights how the humanitarian sector can make gendered

economic decisions that can have detrimental effects on the livelihoods of women and refugee families. For example, with the decrease of funding for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, one of the first products to be removed from aid baskets that were distributed to refugees is menstrual hygiene pads. Similarly, even for families that received cash assistance, women often reported not having control over the family's resources or deprioritizing her needs for the needs of her children, husband, or elderly family members. Therefore, the lack of access to menstrual pads had implications far beyond questions of hygiene – it became a major obstacle for many families' income since most refugee women are the sole breadwinners for their families through their seasonal work in agriculture. With the lack of menstrual hygiene products, many women had to stop going to work and lose their income, which has put whole families in even more precarious financial situations. It is in such intertwined cycles of injustice that women are trapped. There is no feminist economic future without women's access to adequate healthcare and bodily rights.



More Feminist Women in Decision-Making Positions

Finally, a major area to consider for more feminist economic futures is the presence of feminist women in decision-making positions. This will not only benefit women and put their needs on the table, but it would also benefit society as a whole with policies more geared towards justice and well-being, rather than privatization and profit accumulation. This is particularly important in the MENA region since it has one of the [lowest female representations](#) globally, where the roles of women in politics are still very limited.

After all, the main challenges to a feminist agenda for the future economy of the MENA region are not in pure economic debates or technical questions, but are in political decisions. A political will to reduce inequalities and advance more just and green societies, transform labour relations and ownership laws, expand welfare and social protection schemes, and respect all lives as equally worthy is at the core of feminist economic alternatives. 'Humans over profit,' 'green over greed,' and 'rights not privileges' should be the guiding mottos. Hence, the obstacle to more just and emancipated societies is political, not economic.



Foundations for a Feminist Economy



After being guided through a solo visioning journey, participants convened in small groups to share their individual visions and to create art to convey their collective vision of the future. These are the key ideas that came out of small group sessions.

1

Values/Practices:

Our feminist, transformed economy is underpinned by values or practices of love, cooperation, community, joy, care, equality, inclusion, justice, freedom, safety, respect for earth and all beings, peace/non-violence and rest.

2

Peace:

War does not exist here. There are generative ways of navigating conflict that lead to peace, solidarity and interconnectivity. The Arab world is integrated and works cooperatively.

3

Fair & Cooperative Economy:

Our economy is anti-capitalist. Work takes place in a fair and cooperative economy, for collective well-being. There is no binary between productive and reproductive work.

4

Feminist Democracies:

Democracies are actually inclusive. Patriarchy does not control decision-making. There is no need for activism or movements for justice.

5

Sovereign Earth:

We respect, protect and have a deep connection with our lands and environments, which are our teachers. The oceans and air are clean. Trees and green gardens are everywhere. Extractive industries do not exist.

6

Safe Spaces:

Safe, green spaces are abundant, and women, especially, are free. All humans exercise freedom of movement.

7

Equal Rights & Access:

All people have access to the resources and public services they need. There is a universal basic income. Human rights are protected, equally, for all.

8

Communities That Care:

Our communities are human- and nature-centered and are free from conflict. "Family" is expanded beyond the idea of the nuclear unit to the communal family. Care work is a community responsibility, and there are communal spaces to do this work.

9

Local Green Economies:

Local economies flourish, and food is grown locally. The economy is powered by renewable energy.

10

Gender & Sexual Freedom:

All people are free to express themselves on the gender and sexuality spectrum. People feel free and empowered to engage in non-monogamous, non-heterosexual relationships without judgement.

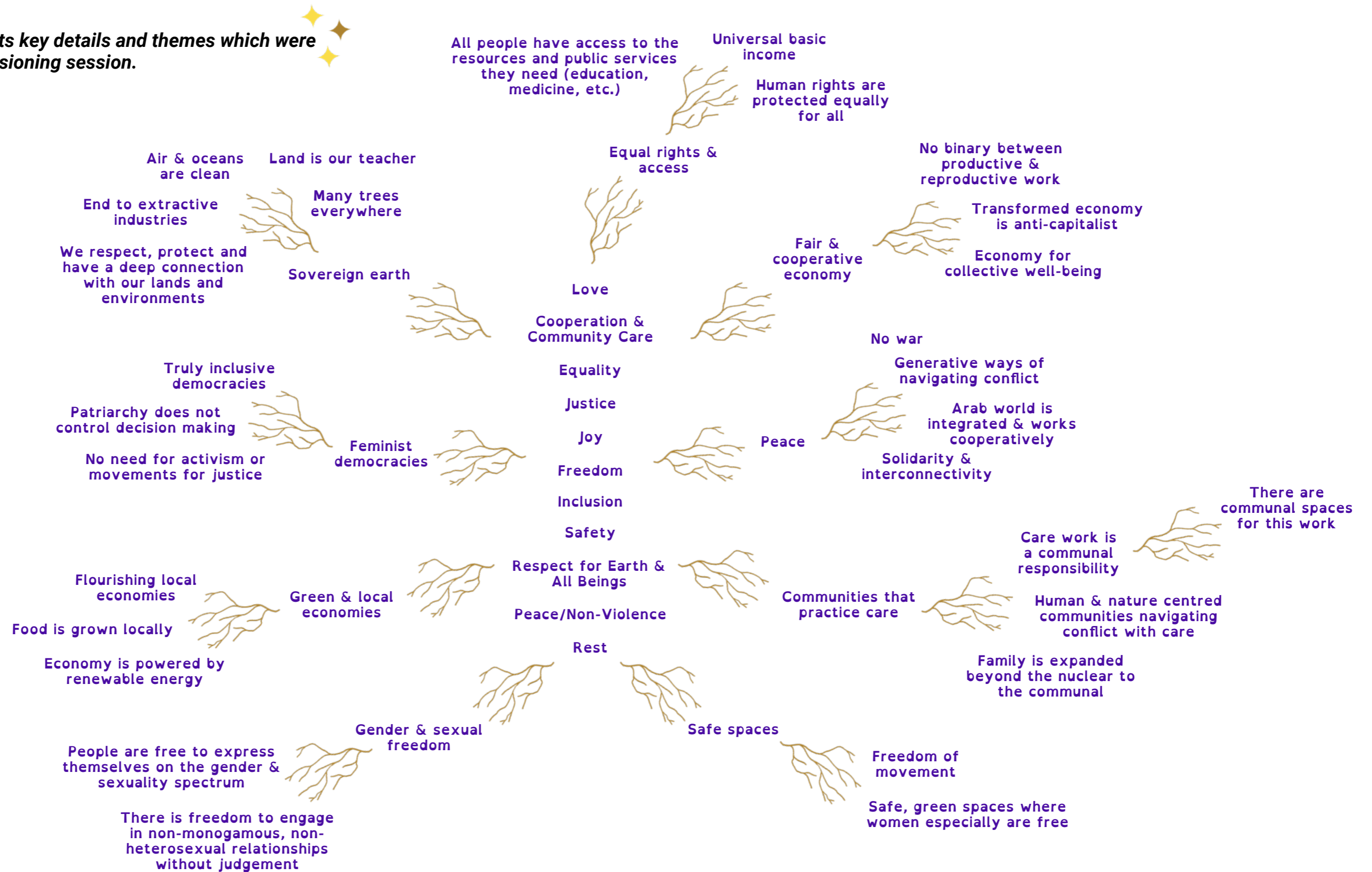
Manifesto for Our Feminist, Transformed World

An innovative, arts-based approach was used to capture the essence of our collective visions during the session.



Artist, Myra Elmir, joined the session to provide a visual summary of our visioning exercise and conversation.

This mind map represents key details and themes which were highlighted during the visioning session.



A Vision

This poem was a collective vision from the MENA Visioning Journey, written in the workshop by Asmaa Abu Mezied with music by Moe Clark. Listen to the story [here](#).

*The breath is not forced
No need to forcefully breathe in and
breathe out,
It all comes naturally.
Flowers, gardens, green scenery is the
norm, it is not a treasure hunt.*

*A group of people wake up
They decide to pack their bags and travel
across the mena
A dream. No, it's a reality.
Traveling is never the dream, never the
goal for those people.
It is easy,
A simple choice.
Travel is not a runaway from the places
they want to live.
It is as simple as that, to change your job
or just the scenery.*

*On the road, the news spreads.
Another wave of reform
To strengthen the democracy, becoming
more progressive and transformative.
The faces of politicians never felt more
representative than now
One of them reads Mahmoud Darwish
poem and thinks – "Oh My God! Those
people in the past – what were they
thinking of?"*



*They are staring at the greenery all along
Across the road and on their journey, they
see people working by hand to grow and
share food locally.*

Everything is local.

Clean streets.

*More job opportunities, particularly where
people care for each other.*

*Kinder faces, more relaxed ones, where
people are working collectively.*

*It is very difficult to identify who makes
the decisions, it is a collective.*

*People wear clothes. It is not like the
latest fashion. It is something that is
needed. Something that makes them feel
comfortable. There is no judgement in
these clothes. It isn't even needed.*

*It is a place where people can travel, can
feel safe.*

*Technology exists. We hear young
people's laughter. Children running away,
playing with technology but also knowing
how to plant a tree.*

*There aren't any police. Aren't any
security. There is no military in this place.*

*People are not thinking on when to turn
their head in fear. They are walking. The
streets are light at night and at day. It
feels the same – that feeling of walking
comfortably in the street.*

*Health centres are empty, but are not
empty because the service is bad, but
because people are healthy enough that
there is no need for that. And those that
need that health come in and get a quality
one, as soon as they need it.*

