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**Women and Activism  
in the Arab World**

## ABOUT IWSAW

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) was established in 1973 at the Lebanese American University (formerly Beirut University College). Initial funding for the Institute was provided by the Ford Foundation.

**OBJECTIVES:** The Institute strives to serve as a data bank and resource center to advance a better understanding of issues pertaining to Arab women and children; to promote communication among individuals, groups and institutions throughout the world concerned with Arab women; to improve the quality of life of Arab women and children through educational and development projects; and to enhance the educational and outreach efforts of the Lebanese American University.

**PROJECTS:** IWSAW activities include academic research on women, local, regional and international conferences; seminars, lectures and films; and educational projects which improve the lives of women and children from all sectors of Lebanese society. The Institute houses the Women's

Documentation Center in the Stoltzfus Library at LAU. The Center holds books and periodicals. The Institute also publishes a variety of books and pamphlets on the status, development and conditions of Arab women, in addition to *Al-Raida*. Eight children's books with illustrations, and two guides, one of which specifies how to set up children's libraries, and the other which contains information about producing children's books, have also been published by IWSAW. In addition, the Institute has also created income generating projects which provide employment training and assistance to women from war-stricken families in Lebanon. The Institute has also devised a "Basic Living Skills Project" which provides a non-formal, integrated educational program for semi-literate women involved in development projects. Additional IWSAW projects include The Rehabilitation Program for Children's Mental Health; Teaching for Peace; and the Portable Library Project. The latter project was awarded the Asahi Reading Promotion Award in 1994. For more information about these or any other projects, write to the Institute at the address provided.

## ABOUT AL-RAIDA

*Al-Raida* is published quarterly by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) of the Lebanese American University (LAU), formerly Beirut University College, P.O. Box 13-5053, Chouran Beirut, 1102 2801 Lebanon; Telephone: 961 1 867618, ext. 1288; Fax: 961 1 791645. The American address of LAU is 475 Riverside Drive, Room 1846, New York, NY 10115, U.S.A.; Telephone: (212) 870-2592; Fax: (212) 870-2762.

**PURPOSE AND CONTENT:** *Al-Raida's* mission is to enhance networking between Arab women and women all over the world; to promote objective research of the conditions of women in the Arab world, especially conditions related to social change and development; and to report on the activities of the IWSAW and the Lebanese American University.

Each issue of *Al-Raida* features a File which focuses on a particular theme, in addition to articles, conference reports, interviews, book reviews and art news.

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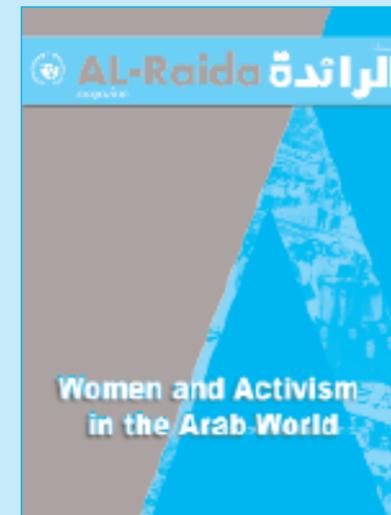
**SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES:** We seek contributions from those engaged in research, analysis and study of women in the Arab world. Contributions should not exceed ten double-spaced typed pages. Please send a hard copy and a diskette. We reserve the right to edit in accordance with our space limitations and editorial guidelines. Submissions will not be published if they have been previously published elsewhere.

# Titles of Issues\*

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- # 63, 1993: Women = Family in 1994
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- # 68, 1995: Women and Education
- # 69, 1995: Arab Women in Management
- # 70/71, 1995: Women in Post War Lebanon
- # 72, 1996: Women in the Media and Sustainable Human Development
- # 73, 1996: Arab Women in the Fine Arts
- # 74/75, 1996: Women's Rights are Human Rights
- # 76, 1997: Women in the Arab Family
- # 77, 1997: Arab Women and Poverty
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- # 93-94, 2001: Marriage Patterns in the Arab World
- # 95-96, 2002: Incarcerated Arab Women
- # 97-98, 2002: Arab Women in Civil Society
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- #101-102, 2003: Non-Arab Women in the Arab World
- #103, 2003: Women and War in the Arab World
- #104-105 2004: What About Masculinity?
- #106-107 2004-2005: Young Arab Women
- #108, 2005: Arab Women and Disability

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# Am I an Activist?

Marguerite Helou

Professor, Lebanese University

When Dr. Paul Salem, former Director of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, called me shortly before the 1996 parliamentary elections to ask if I was ready to write a study on the participation of Lebanese women in politics, my first reaction was, "Paul, I am no woman activist. You know that." He laughed and said, "That's why I'm calling you. I want an objective view."

I asked myself why such a request generated this reaction on my part. I found the answer in the way I was brought up as a child, the personal experiences I had during my adulthood, especially as a student at the Lebanese University in the early seventies when it was the hub of political activism, and a personal definition and understanding of activism resulting from those personal experiences. This answer, however, came later – after conducting extensive research on women's participation in politics. But at the time Dr. Salem made his request I had no interest whatsoever in the topic and used to believe that those involved in activities – including research – demanding gender equality were mostly women who had suffered discrimination at a certain stage in their lives or careers, and even worse were those with an inferiority complex. Was I naïve? Maybe. But here is a brief account of the reasons behind this.

Being the youngest in a family of nine children, eight girls and a boy who ranked second in the count, I never felt discriminated against, nor, at least to my knowledge, did any of my sisters. I remember the days, when as a kid, I used to bring home my report card for my parents' signature and my father refusing to give it back to me on the same day. He used to say, "No, you can't return it tomorrow. I have to take it to the bank first and cash it." He made me believe that by being the first in my class I was contributing to the family earnings. He never failed to give me my share of the hard earned cash. Besides building my self-dependence, this simple fatherly behavior taught me at an early age that the well-being of the family is the responsibility of all its members with no discrimination between males and females, neither in rights nor in duties. It also taught me to judge people by their achievements and personality.

Throughout my years as a university student and professor, both in Lebanon and abroad, I did not witness any experiences of gender discrimination. A few incidents, however, did involve unsuccessful attempts at discrimination on the basis of sect or national origin. This, coupled with the succession of events in Lebanon during the seventies and eighties made me more concerned with broader political and national issues than with issues of gender discrimination. The mediums I chose to work through were first and foremost teaching and research. Although I did participate in conferences and workshops, organize, lecture at, and join in sit-ins, work with

some politicians as a member of unofficial advisory or support teams, my participation was sporadic, more a response to calls from others for my services, rather than being, except in a few cases, a result of personal initiative.

Did all that make an activist out of me then? While some may say yes, I refused to be termed an activist due to a certain personal perception of activism inscribed in my head during my years as a student at the Faculty of Law, involving the use of direct confrontational actions and being synonymous with protest and dissent.

Since that first study on the participation of Lebanese women in politics in 1996, most of my research has centered on this topic and related issues. With this drastic shift in my research interests, from international politics mainly, to women's issues, friends and colleagues were wondering whether I had turned into a women's activist. But for reasons very much different from those mentioned above this term doesn't seem to fit me either.

Not only did my research on the topic over the last decade increase my interest in it and lead me to reconsider some of my earlier positions, especially that regarding the call for a quota for women in elected and appointed public office, it also made me look back at many earlier experiences from a different perspective. The end result was that many of what I used to consider simple aspects or manifestations of natural human relations or problems with a person's personality and character appeared to be the result of a deep-rooted patriarchal, gender discriminatory culture that has to be changed and with it all the laws that consecrate it. How can I contribute to this change? My choice of mediums stayed the same with a small addition: Gender equality, feminist ideology, and related issues became integral parts of some of the courses I teach.

In-depth interviews with women candidates in successive parliamentary and municipal elections (1953-2005) were a major method I used to collect data for my published works on the topic. In an interview conducted with MP. Mrs. Nayla Mouawad in 1996, she asked me if I was a member of any NGO or civil society association, a question raised later by many of the interviewees. The conversation that followed my negative answer made me recognize how far I was from being an activist. The more women candidates I interviewed and the more local and regional conferences I attended, the more jealous I became of those women for having something I still lack: the drive, devotion, and long-term commitment.

Finally, the more I learn about the works of famous Lebanese and Arab women activists the longer I see my road towards activism.

# Welcoming an Abusive Husband back from Jail

## Rabiah ponders her choices and chooses to give him "one last chance"

■ Salpi Simitian

Communication Arts – Journalism student at LAU

In two months Rabiah's husband will be out of prison. He will be returning home, and she hopes that he will keep his word – and that he has really changed, and will no longer abuse her. This is not the first time he has made that promise.

Rabiah, 22, met her husband when her mother was hospitalized with a nervous breakdown, and he too was visiting a relative. Soon she learned that he was raised by an abusive father, and Rabiah sympathized with him. She assumed that coming from similar backgrounds he would be as determined as she was to start a better life. They were soon married. Rabiah dreamed of home sweet home, and of living happily ever after. Only it wasn't going to be, and soon enough she was reliving her childhood, but this time the abuse came from her husband, instead of her father.

At The Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women (LECRVAW) Rabiah nervously wrung her cold and damp hands, and hesitantly and in almost a whisper, confided: "My husband b...beats me, you know." Her father used to beat her mother. The beatings eventually led to the mother's nervous breakdown and finally to her suicide. One day, as Rabiah and her siblings looked on, their mother walked out to the balcony and jumped into the

street and to her death. That image is stuck in Rabiah's memory.

Today, Rabiah is not comfortable discussing her painful childhood and what she sees as her "current shame" with a stranger, particularly with a journalist. She is quick to want to divert the conversation to the fewer, happier moments in her life. Pressed, asked about her memory of the beatings, and the thoughts that rushed into her mind while curled up in a corner, her large black eyes go blank and her face cold and expressionless.

"To revive the details of a painful memory, to have to relive it, and describe feelings in words is extremely difficult," said Ms. Romy Nassif, Rabiah's psychotherapist, who declined to discuss her client's case due to patient confidentiality. She added that women in similar situations will go through different phases; at times they might remember and want to discuss, but at other times they shut out the painful memory. "It is easier for them to think of the happier moments to be able to go on."

A couple of years ago, Rabiah's 28-year-old husband served a one-year sentence, and after getting out for a few months, he was soon back in jail for stealing a car. In

two months, once he serves his year-long sentence, he will be coming home to Rabiaa and their two children; a five-year-old son and a two-year-old daughter.

Rabiaa believes that her husband physically and verbally abused her under the effect of alcohol and drugs. "I love him and pity him. He's everything to me... Deep down he's a nice person, he writes poetry, likes art and music." Rabiaa believes that when treated for alcoholism and abuse, her husband will change. "I want to give him one last chance," she says. She wants to look at his return home positively, unclear as to the alternatives. The children's father was finally returning home to his young wife and family. The alternative, after all, seemed to be a divorce that would separate a mother from her children, and the likelihood that the woman would be blamed. And then she would need to make a living, find a job and support herself and most likely the children. Caught between hope and reality, she preferred to hang on to hope.

The prospects that her husband had actually changed seem doubtful. "He refused treatment in jail by Oum el Nour\*, he gets alcohol and drugs smuggled in, and although he promises to recover when he's out. I highly doubt it," says Ms. Raghida Jhamlouch, one of the social workers at LECRVAW where Rabiaa goes for help. Still Rabiaa wants to give him one last chance. "Women still living with their husbands, deny or more precisely accept their situation to be able to live with this person," said Ms. Nassif.

Ms. Jhamlouch explains the emotional cycle that abused women go through. It starts with hope and bliss between the couple, then as the misunderstandings and anger accumulate, there is a period of violence, when the violent husband feels guilty and the woman loses trust, he apologizes and she has hope again. "Sometimes women go through this cycle for twenty years," said Ms. Jhamlouch. "Rabiaa has to make a decision before she's caught in the cycle and it's too late."

"I would tell all women in similar situations that the law protects them," said Ms. Nassif, "once they overcome feelings of guilt, women seek help. And there are professionals who will help them confidentially." In theory, the law may protect abused women, but in practice, matters are different.

"The law needs to be implemented to protect the women," says Ms. Amira Abu Mrad, Law professor at the Lebanese University, who is also lobbying in the parliament and with the council of ministers to secularize personal status laws. According to Ms. Abu Mrad there are various reasons for the lack of implementation; some women actually don't know they have rights, others who

have complained to the police are sent back home because the police don't want to interfere with personal and familial issues; at times when the police have interfered, the women have faced more severe violence from the husband. In worse cases, a woman is blamed by her family and immediate society for the violence she has to bear. "Ironically, women in abusive relationships raise their children to accept abuse and succumb to the situation," adds Ms. Abu Mrad.

"Psychiatrists follow theories. Realistically speaking a woman (in a similar situation) feels humiliated by society," says Ms. Abu Mrad, hence, she prefers to tolerate the torment and anguish for the sake of her children so that her family won't blame her and society won't disgrace her.

"Clause seven of the Lebanese Constitution states that all Lebanese are equal under the law," says Ms. Abu Mrad, but when it comes to personal issues, every Lebanese citizen has to resort to a religious court which contradicts the core idea of clause seven. This implies that rather than belonging to the nation, citizens belong to their religious sects. Ms. Abu Mrad advocates that women lawmakers take part in the process of secularizing personal status laws, such as civil marriage and a high quality public education be mandatory, and that women have the tools to be economically independent before marriage.

Rabiaa is one of the few who had the courage to report her case. While there are no official statistics, an average estimate of 65 new cases have sought the assistance of LECRVAW in the past six months.

"All I want is stability, just like anyone else. Not to be beaten or humiliated." This is Rabiaa's ultimate wish, but she believes that she should give her husband that one last chance. At least for the children's sake, especially her five-year-old son. "Every time I tell him how much I love him," says Rabiaa, he asks: "dad also loves me too, right?"

Rabiaa has scars from broken glass on her body. But her husband has been away long enough for her to be selective in her memory about him. She is determined to believe that maybe this time when he's out of jail, there will be a happy ending. It should not be long before Rabiaa finds out.

## Endnotes

\* An NGO that provides help for addiction recovery. The interview was given on the condition of anonymity; Rabiaa is not the abused wife's real name.

## Recent Publications

- Antrobu, P. 2005, *The Global Women's Movement: Origins, Issues and Strategies*, London, Zed Books.
- Ricciutelli, L., Miles, A., & Mc. Fadden, M.H. (eds). 2005, *Feminist Politics, Activism and Vision*, London, Zed Books.
- Kerr, J. Spenger, E., & Symington, A. (eds). 2005, *The Future of Women's Rights*, London, Zed Books.

## Call for Papers

**Journal of International Women's Studies  
Special Issue: Women's Bodies, Gender Analysis,  
and Feminist Politics at the Fórum Social Mundial**

Since its inauguration in 2001, the World Social Forum (WSF) has gained increasing importance as a venue for strengthening alternatives to the neoliberal agenda for globalization. The WSF has been described as both a process and an event, following an agreed upon set of principles in its planning and convening in order to foster new forms of organization and movement building. Nevertheless, this is an evolving, fluid phenomenon as the World Social Forums have given rise to several regional, local and thematic social forums.

Many women and some feminists have participated in various ways in these forums: as organizers, workshop presenters, participants and malcontents. Along with the Association for Women's Rights and Development AWID's triennial global conferences, the WSF offers women's organizations predictably scheduled opportunities to network with activists from distant locales and other sectors. However, the experiences of women working in this expansive and sometimes overwhelming environment have been uneven and contradictory, and the roles played by gender analysis and feminist politics often ambiguous.

For this special issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies* we are seeking contributions in a range of genres from women who have direct experience with organizing or attending one or more of the World Social Forums or regional/local forums organized under the auspices and according to the principles of the Fórum Social Mundial. Submissions might include theoretical or analytical essays, reflective narratives, activity reports or evaluations, manifestos, press releases, posters or other ephemera. *JWS's* intention is to collect materials documenting the range of experiences and activities occurring under the tent of the WSF so that feminist practice within the Social Forums can gain in effectiveness. We also

believe it is important to begin to archive this activism as it happens.

With the tri-partite polycentric forums planned for Caracas (Venezuela), Bamako (Mali), and Karachi (Pakistan) in January 2006 and the first US Social Forum scheduled for Atlanta in 2007, the Social Forum process is on the cusp of gaining new visibility in the US media. This, therefore, seems a precipitous juncture for gathering our thoughts and recollections about this evolving phenomenon.

Please submit your contribution to the editors no later than April 30, 2006 following the guidelines posted on the *JWS's* website at [www.bridgew.edu/JIWS](http://www.bridgew.edu/JIWS)  
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The *Journal of International Women's Studies* is an online, open-access, peer reviewed journal that provides a forum for scholars, activists, and students to explore the relationship between feminist theory and various forms of organizing. *JWS* is currently indexed with the Library of Congress, the MLA International Bibliography, The International Bibliography of Social Sciences, Elsevier Bibliographic Databases, Ulrich's Periodicals, the Gale Group, and at <http://webster.bridgew.edu>

## Films

**Afghan Alphabet by Mohsen Makhmalbaf**  
*Iran/ Afghanistan 2001, Documentary, color, 45'*

In this poignant visual diary, Makhmalbaf interviews children in villages near the Iranian-Afghan border, questioning those who are not going to school after the fall of the Taliban. One young female Afghan refugee attending classes held by UNICEF reveals her unwillingness to uncover her face even though she cannot see clearly. What she fears is the horrifying God created by the Taliban, particularly if she were to unveil.

**Cousins, by Lyess Salem**  
*France/Algeria 2003, Short fiction, Color, 32'*  
Driss is to spend a month in Algeria, his native country, which has deeply changed ever since he left. He meets Nedjma, a distant cousin, who is slightly conservative and timid. He awakens in her a desire for independence and freedom, yet her hand is promised to Amran.

Revolutionary struggles, indeed, create "new women" who transgress prescribed gender roles, but these women remain disadvantaged in terms of the gendered division of power and resources when the revolution is over. A spokesperson for the Omani Women's Organization, which was active in the People's Front for the Liberation of Oman in the mid-1970s, put it this way: "Many men had received education and political experience... before they joined the Front, while women had their first education and political experience when as young girls they joined the Revolution." Because women had less formal training than men before the revolution, they were again left out of the picture when military demobilization proceeded. In sum, women are more easily demobilized and sent back home, whereas men assume positions of power in new regimes when revolutions are successful. (*Global Gender Issues: Dilemmas in World Politics*, p. 131)

It is in women's practical gender interests to have the presence of women as state resources exposed and in women's strategic gender interests to increase the presence of women in decision-making bodies that control resource use and allocation. However, in order for women to cease being used as resources and to avoid abusing resources that come into their hands, the human community – perhaps led by individuals with ecofeminist analyses and sensibilities – will have to develop a different relationship with "nature." That is, we must undermine the global gendered dichotomy of culture (or man) versus nature that leads to the growth imperative (at any cost) in the world economy. (*Global Gender Issues: Dilemmas in World Politics*, p. 164)

My mother is not a fighter; all [the other members of] my family are fighters, so my mother lets us do as we want. But when my brother got married, she restricted his wife [for example, from going out to the city with her]. She said, "Now she is my daughter and your brother also said she should not go out, so I won't let her go out now that she is married." We argued, but she did not agree. She knows that we are outside her authority and says we can do as we want, but not our brother's wife. (*The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation*, p. 129)

...women used their entry into public life through that "most honorable door," the nationalist struggle, to push at the boundaries that confined them and to begin to challenge cultural, social, and political norms. By acting at

all, they transgressed these norms; as one observer put it, nationalism had a "releasing effect" on women. Through their involvement in nationalism, they developed over time an internal critique of gender relations that was sometimes muted but often implicit. This involvement could only bring to the fore the contradictions of their multiple identities as women and national subjects or citizens, not to mention other sources of identity such as religion, class, and kin relations. ...A feminist consciousness or "awareness," however, was not necessarily a pre-existing condition in many women who became politically active in the women's movements. Consciousness is developed through experience. The experiences of women – their very act of organizing – constituted feminism, despite a lack of explicit feminist consciousness, which sometimes did or did not develop, depending upon the specific historical circumstances." (*A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East*, p. 92)

I am a feminist because rape victims shouldn't be put on trial, made to defend themselves, or be blamed because of what they wore, what they drank, or where they were. I am a feminist because I want control over my life to decide what is best for me and my family, not what someone tells me my role as a mother should be. I am a feminist because I want access to birth control. I am a feminist because women come in all shapes and sizes and are beautiful even if they do not meet the criteria that society has bestowed upon them. I am a feminist because I want equal representation in institutions that make decisions that affect my life. I am a feminist because I want to be paid equally for the hard work I do whether it be in the home or in the workplace. ... I am a feminist because I want children to have access to health care and adequate child care and parents to have work schedules that allow families to spend time with one another. ... I am a feminist because without equal opportunity legislation and affirmative action, I would not be protected from losing my job because I am pregnant, have as many opportunities for education, and legally be protected from being discriminated against by a company because of my sex. I am a feminist because I have a special needs child, a daughter, who deserves to be treated equally despite her disability. I am a feminist because I have two daughters who deserve better than what women have now. I am a feminist because if I do not teach my son that women are equal, who will? (<http://home.earthlink.net/~rubberjoel/id21.html>)

### From Saudi Arabia

#### Saudi Women Score Twice in First Run at Polls

JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia, November 30, 2005 (AFP) - Two Saudi businesswomen swept to a surprise victory in Chamber of Commerce elections Wednesday in the first polls in which women stood as candidates in the conservative Muslim kingdom. "I'm happy, but I'm still in shock," Lama al-Suleiman, one of the two winners, told AFP.

She was summing up the feelings of many election activists and watchers who had expected, at best, one woman to be elected to the Board of Directors of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry. "It's a big leap for Saudi women, an answer to what people want," said Suleiman, a 39-year-old mother of four. Suleiman and fellow female winner Nashwa Taher ran on a list of heavyweight business people and industrialists which clinched the 12 board seats up for grabs.

With only 100 women among the some 3880 Chamber members who cast ballots, the pair's victory was effectively handed to them by men. "This means there is trust [in women]. Professionalism is very important... And this is my message to Saudi women: Take your work seriously, without forgetting your role as a mother and wife," said Taher, who helps run a group of family companies with interests ranging from foodstuffs to contracting. "We should give them [women] a chance because they have little representation in society," one male voter said Tuesday, adding that he had voted for four women. Taher, 44, attributed her success to the support of her parents and husband, as well as her own perseverance.

The two women's victory came several months after landmark municipal elections across oil-rich Saudi Arabia, from which women were barred. That was credited by many for heightening public interest in the Chamber polls in the Red Sea city and turning them into a hotly contested race.

The fact that women, who previously were entitled only to vote for the Jeddah Chamber's Board, stood as candidates "was also an unusual event which contributed to making this election unusual," said Othman Basaqr, a member of a task force which assisted the elections

committee. "This is what everybody seems to be telling me," Suleiman said when asked if she felt she had made history.

Seventeen women were among the 71 candidates in the elections, which took place from Saturday through Tuesday. Businesswomen cast their ballots on the first two days and businessmen on the following days, in line with traditions whereby Saudi women do not mix in public with men other than relatives. But Taher said she meets with businessmen at the Chamber and there is nothing wrong with that so long as she is covered from head to toe in line with shari'a, or Islamic law, and discusses professional matters. Shari'a gives women full rights, Taher said. "Actually, it was Islamic shari'a which started democracy. We simply call it shura (consultation)," she told AFP.

Some 21,000 members of the Jeddah Chamber, or about half the total membership, were eligible to take part in the polls. Election officials said both the turnout and the number of candidates were a record in the Chamber's 60-year history.

In their campaigns, both Suleiman and Taher vowed to back a center that assists businesswomen and to help women working from home. Victory "means we will have more work... There's a lot for us to learn, but I'm sure we will manage," said Suleiman, who holds a doctorate in nutrition from Kings College, London.

Trade and Industry Minister Hashem Yamani is due to appoint six additional members to the Jeddah Chamber Board. Yamani rescheduled the vote from late September specifically to enable women to stand after the elections committee linked to his ministry had rejected the candidacies of seven women.

Hisham Khoja, a merchant who said he voted for one female hopeful, noted that the Saudi government was giving women more job opportunities. But one businesswoman, who asked not to be named, said she did not think US pressure for reform was helping Saudi women. "In fact, it may be delaying progress... We are moving forward in our own, low-profile way," she said.

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## Workshop

**June 22, 2005, LAU – Beirut:**

On June 22, 2005, a workshop on *Linking Universities and NGOs in the Fight Against Child Labor* project, funded by the Catholic Relief Service (CRS) and conducted by Caritas Lebanon since November 2004, was held at LAU, Irwin Hall. This project linked three NGOs, two universities, and a governmental institution which were all present at the meeting namely, Mouvement Social, L'Association du Foyer de l'Enfant libanais (AFEL), the Higher Council of Childhood in Lebanon, the Lebanese Popular Aid, the Lebanese School for Training of Social Workers affiliated to the University of Saint Joseph, and the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University.



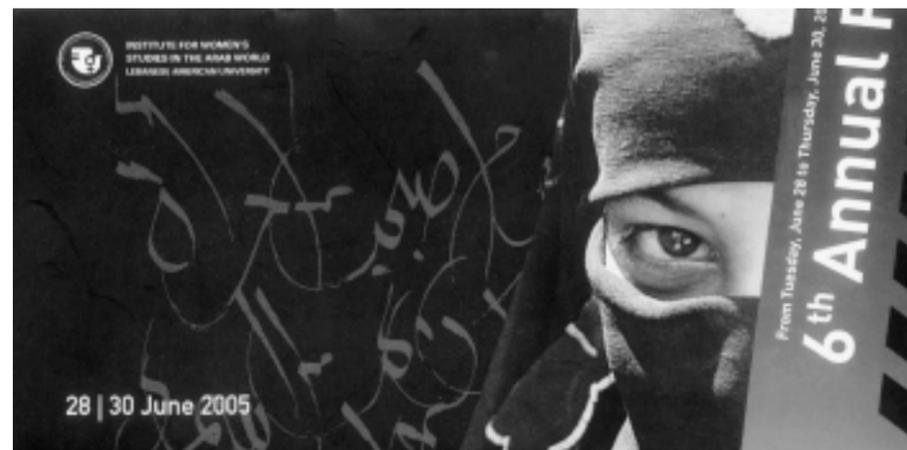
Workshop participants

The Linking Universities and NGOs in the Fight against Child Labor project is concurrently implemented in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Morocco. The workshop marked the end of nine months of cooperation between Lebanon's team members to identify effective ways of tackling the problem in Lebanon, and prepare for the regional meeting to be held in Cairo.

## Sixth Annual Film Festival

**June 28–30, 2005, LAU – Beirut**

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University – in consultancy with Beirut DC – adopted the theme *Veil(s)* for its sixth annual film festival. The festival's program included short films by students from various universities in Lebanon, a feature film from Iran and documentaries from Iran, Egypt and Pakistan.



# Arab Women and Activism

Activism is a term widely used to describe a broad range of activities carried out by individuals, groups and organizations. No single definition of the concept is fully comprehensive or universally accepted. While certain activities may be termed activism by some, they may not be considered as such by others. What constitutes activism is a controversial issue and is likely to remain a culture- and time-bound concept.

In planning for this issue, it was our hope that it would cover as many of the Arab states and of the various types of activism as possible. This proved difficult to achieve. The articles that we received in response to our call for papers covered only six Arab states. Despite this, they provide valuable information and material for comparative research. The issues treated by the contributors, the questions they raise and the information and analysis they provide constitute an important addition to the literature on the topic and an incentive for future research.

The file on women's activism starts with an attempt at defining activism and highlighting some of the issues and questions worth investigating.

Leslie Lewis's article on women's activism in Egypt compares secular-oriented women's activism with Islamist activism within their social and economic, and political contexts. A comparison is made between motivations, goals, obstacles faced, as well as the underlying assumptions and explanatory frameworks guiding their work. The author raises the question of the ability of action-oriented activism to cross class boundaries and affect political change, thus leaving us to wonder whether Islamist action-oriented activism is a form of political activism or not.

In her study on Palestinian women's activism in the post-Oslo period, Sophie Richter-Devroes provides a summarized account of all types of Palestinian activism. She shows that while the original motivations of Palestinian women activists were national-political rather than feminist, the social restrictions imposed on women have led to the rise of a feminist consciousness out of a female consciousness. How much the challenge posed by this to the patriarchal structure, accepted during times of conflict, will continue to be accepted during times of peace is one of the issues raised by the author.

Two important questions are also raised in this article. The first is that concerning the nature of and prospects for the success of joint Palestinian-Israeli peace activism. The provided discussion of the problematic assumptions underlying this cooperation can be helpful in investigating the ability of action-oriented activism to cross class boundaries and affect political change within the same state and culture (raised in the article on Egypt) given the impact of fundamental power inequalities and different socio-economic backgrounds on such ventures.

The second question is one for thought. Is *istishhad* (martyrdom), whether carried out by men or women, a form of activism?

An issue that has had too much bearing on Arab women's activism, mainly secular-oriented activism, is having to deal with accusations of inauthenticity, Westernization and sometimes heresy. This is due to a real or perceived incompatibility between Islam and feminism both in the West and the Arab world. This issue, raised directly or indirectly in almost all the works included in this file, is the subject of the interview with Margot Badran conducted by Azza Basarudin. Emphasis is placed by Badran on the need to distinguish between religion and culture so as not to attribute to Islam the anti-Islamic practices resulting from the patriarchal culture. The change in Western attitudes towards Islamist feminism and the possible contribution of the latter to the elaboration of a universal feminist discourse are discussed reflecting Badran's optimism regarding the narrowing of the gap between secular and Islamist feminism.

Zangana's article on Iraq is an important study. It raises the question of how NGOs can be real or perceived instruments of foreign policy and the implications of this in its work. This question is increasingly raised in international and local politics and in almost all third world countries. It is becoming a weapon by which governments fight NGOs and vice versa.

NGOs are nowadays major recipients of foreign funding. They are considered partners in development. Public perception of their roles, goals and funders determines their chances of success or failure in achieving desired objectives. The issues raised in this article are not restricted to the relation of the inside with the outside. Similar ques-

tions can be raised on how much organizations, especially in the pluralist interest groups system, can become instruments in the hands of local politicians in the struggle for power. This article leaves us wondering whether the Arab world needs more NGOs or a functionalization of, and more cooperation and coordination among, the existing ones. It directs attention to the need for objective research on such issues.

From Jordan, Rana Husseini reports her experience in mobilizing public and political support for bringing crimes of honor to an end. The obstacles faced are highlighted, especially that of working against established socio-cultural norms and values, a problem faced in almost all Arab countries. In her account of her experience Husseini, directly or indirectly, draws attention to the difficulty of enacting change in favor of women's rights in male-dominated decision-making centers.

This falls in line with the interview conducted with Dr. Amal Sabbagh which concentrated on the "quota for women" demands in Jordan. Sabbagh also highlights the need to include more women in the decision making circles as a prerequisite for change in public attitudes towards women as well as in the content of the laws on the rights of women.

The personal status laws, a hot and controversial issue in Lebanon, are the subject of Nisrine Mansour's article. Adopting a broad definition of, and a developmental

approach to activism, linking it with participation and empowerment, Mansour investigates the institutional factors that affect women's participation in personal status issues. She explores the official and nongovernmental discourses as well as the legal and the informal religious and social structures and their implications.

In the study of the women's mosque movement in Cairo Leslie Lewis provides an important perspective on this form of Muslim women's participation. She traces the beginnings of this movement, its social composition and the motivations behind it. The live examples given by the author help highlight the main issues. The author's conclusion raises a question often brought up by scholars in various fields of social sciences: How much did the failure of the secular nation state in living up to public expectations provide the fertile soil for the spread of religious fundamentalism?

The file concludes with a round table discussion which hosted a number of Lebanese women activists. It aimed at investigating the participants' definition of activism, the reasons that were behind their involvement in such activity, and the factors that facilitated or obstructed their work.

It is our hope that this issue of *Al-Raida* will be a valuable addition to the knowledge on the topic and an incentive, not only for further research, but also for real change to ensure gender equality and respect for human rights.

*Marguerite Helou*

# Women and Activism in the Arab World

■ Marguerite Helou

Professor, Lebanese University

Democracy, simply defined as the rule of the people, by the people, for the people, is a term that has dominated political and sociological discourse and literature from ancient times up till now. However, determining who constitutes "The people" was, and continues to be, a culture- and time-bound issue.

Throughout most of human history, women constituted one of the social groups excluded from the category of "The People." They had to wait till the twentieth century, and in some regions the third millennium to acquire equality with the male population in social, political and economic rights. This was brought about by the efforts of many women activists and their male supporters aided by various developments at the social, economic and political levels.

A close look, however, at the scope, nature and levels of this equality and its actual exercise reveals the existence of a gap between theory and practice even in the most developed of nations. It is the width of this gap and the possibility of bridging it that varies among regions and cultures. Unfortunately, the Arab world is the region that possesses the widest gap and is the area where the gap is the most difficult to bridge.

In light of a) the various efforts made by international governmental organizations, local and regional nongovernmental organizations, and foreign governments to enhance gender equality at all levels as a necessary step in achieving sustainable development in the Arab world, and b) the results achieved so far, which can by no means be considered satisfactory, one cannot but wonder why the gap is still that wide.

Is it simply a result of the nature of Arab political systems and/or cultural and religious traditions? Or is it the result of lack of Arab women activists? Do Arab women today display a disinterest or even apathy towards such issues? Is it a result of changes in the perception and definition of activism, its scope and goals brought about by local and external developments at the social, cultural, political and economic levels? Is it the result of lack of coordination, or maybe an inherent conflict among various women's movements? (Secular versus Islamic feminism.) Are the activists of today any different from those of yesterday, and how?

The list of such questions demanding answers can go on and on. This is why an *Al Raida* issue on *Women's Activism in the Arab World* is in order. Though it may not

## Documentary Women in Time

### Profiles of Activists in the Lebanese Women's Movement up to 1975



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be able to provide answers to all the above and related questions, it will shed light on many aspects of Arab women's activism and its status today.

Defining "activism" to determine what can be included in this issue was no easy job. Proposed definitions ranged between the highly restrictive narrow definitions, such as those that make activism synonymous with dissent and protest, and the very broad definitions which consider activism a synonym of participation. This wide range of definitions reveals a lack of consensus among scholars and practitioners over the basic characteristics of an activist, as well as over the components of activism, its scope, means, and the direction of change it seeks to achieve. It also reveals that the definition of activism and the identification of its components is time- and culture-bound.

The issue of defining activism becomes more complex when it comes to defining "women's activism." The starting point in dealing with this issue — and in an attempt at unfolding

its complexities — is drawing the line between three major concepts: exercising one's rights, participation, and activism.

Participation, broadly defined as involvement, engagements, and playing a part in the activities of the community (regardless of the size of the community or the activity concerned) is a concept that encompasses the other two. It is manifested in different forms and at different levels. The major

criteria that can be used to distinguish between the various forms and levels of participation are basically related to the level of awareness, intention, concern, drive, belief in the feasibility of participation and the ability to make a difference, and the nature of the goals desired by the participant.

Using these variables to identify the various levels of participation results in the "exercise of one's rights" being the simplest and lowest level of participation and activism as the highest most complex level. Noteworthy are two major points on this subcategorization and leveling of participation. First the levels and forms of participation are by no means mutually exclusive. The overlap between them may blur the observers' view of the realities of the role played by the participant if all factors are not considered. Second, each of the levels of participation can be

divided into sublevels with some of those sublevels constituting the overlap points with the following level. This suggests that there are different levels and forms of activism.

Exercise of one's rights is not necessarily a form of activism although it is an inherent first step towards it. Such action when resulting from habit, the need to fill one's time or to be accepted by the community (family or broader), the wish of pleasing God and securing a place in heaven or any reason emanating from the self, rotating in its sphere, with serving it being the final goal without any calculated decision to influence the environment cannot be considered a form of activism. As such, the individual — male or female — who is engaged, for example in welfare and social work for the above purposes cannot be considered an activist. The same applies to a person casting a vote in local or national elections or even joining in protest politics in compliance with family or peer pressures and demands. This also applies to a woman going to court or an NGO to report home violence to end her personal suffering. It is only when such actions are intentionally carried out to serve people other than the self that we can consider them a step towards activism — i.e. when the woman in the above example carries her case further by making her experience public for others to benefit from, or exposes lack of impartiality and bias in the judicial system or the discriminatory character of personal status laws and their implementation as evidenced in her case, thus directing attention to the need to act on such issues.

The fact that a) the simple exercise of such rights by women is very much highlighted and labeled activism (especially those called direct-action activism) and b) that they are not, at least not equally, called so when carried out by men raises two important points that one must keep in mind. The first is that the definition and scope of activism is time- and culture-bound sometimes necessitating the use of broad definitions to account for mundane non-compliance actions in daily life or pure exercise of a natural right which may be a major form of activism in some cultural and social settings while not in others. The second is a warning against mixing the instrument with its user when adopting such broad definitions. Women who are filing a case on home violence or involving themselves in social and welfare work etc. are mere cases that are by themselves insignificant until an individual, an organization, an institution etc. decides to add these cases up to show the existence of a social trend or problem, raises awareness about it, mobilizes support, and demands dealing with it for the sake of present and/or future generations. These banner holders (who may be male) are the real activists and not the individual cases. The essence of their final goals is more often than

not a restructuring of power relations in society. This makes activism, regardless of its concerns, a political activity at heart.

The next level of participation (which can also be divided into sublevels, some of which are prone to become activists) is that of the active participants. At this level the participant is characterized by a relatively higher level of awareness, knowledge of, and interest in what goes on around him or her. His or her choice to participate is generally a deliberate calculated one guided by a belief in the ability to make a difference and induce gradual peaceful change through available means and instruments. However, the level of commitment, participation and devotion to work on certain issues is dictated more by convenience than by conviction and devotion. This is why their participation outside the available and necessary is rather sporadic and temporary (attend meetings, participate in discussions but do not go for long-term commitments).

Activism, the highest level of participation, is usually guided by a vision of a better future for a group of people (regardless of the size of the group). Activists working on bringing about such visions set, individually or collectively, precise objectives or goals, draw up action plans the initial steps of which are exposing the issue, its nature, size and scope, raising awareness about it, mobilizing support for it to put it on the agenda of decision-makers or people capable of making the change. An activist's work, which is usually voluntary, is characterized by continuity, devotion, persistence, service to the public not private interest, and readiness to devote time, effort, and resources to achieve desired goals.

As such, activism is one form of participation, but not all forms and levels of participation can be categorized as activism. Regardless of the nature and scope of the issues it may be covering it is in the final analysis a political activity. It tries, directly or indirectly, to restructure power and influence in a society (empowerment of certain groups, spreading a new culture, making specific demands etc.).

After defining activism by identifying its components and the basic characteristics of an activist that sets him or her apart from others, is the issue of defining women's activism, i.e. the criteria that must be used to differentiate women's activism from male activism. Is women's activism only that dealing with women's issues and/or that carried out by women-only organizations?

Adopting these criteria results in a very restrictive definition of the concept which will, among other things, lead to a) the exclusion of major contributions made by women on issues that have nothing to do with exclusive women's

concerns, e.g. women activists demanding the loosening of the royal hold on the judiciary and other institutions in Morocco or women activists in Lebanon demanding legal punishment for inhumane treatment of housemaids or those demanding an end to foreign occupation and meddling in Lebanese domestic affairs.

b) the exclusion of joint concerted male-female activism on women's and non-women's issues (thus excluding many women activists) which have proven to be the most effective in achieving set objectives.

c) raising questions as to why some activities are considered activism when carried out by women (welfare and social work, mosque movements etc.) and not labeled so when carried out by men.

d) the mislabeling of certain types of women's activism due to lack of conformity with cultural and social norms and/or acceptance by the society. i.e. To what extent do social, cultural and religious constraints impact on the definition, nature, scope and goals of women's activism?

e) the difficulty of drawing the line between women's activism on one hand and feminism on the other especially since many Arab woman activists reject being called feminists due to the Western connotations associated with the term and some extremist trends in the history of the feminist movement which are seen, even by women, as a threat to the traditions and culture of the Arab world.

The above indicates that a broader definition of women's activism is more feasible since it will encompass all forms and levels of activism in which activists are involved and will prevent any underestimation of the role of women in pressing for the improvement of their communities and higher levels of democratic practices.

In most cases activism aims at change and improvement of a particular situation. This raises a few questions. First, is change unidirectional moving according to a set course mainly towards progress? Second, improvement towards what? i.e. What is the goal at the end of this course of change?

A significant part of the literature on modernization and development published in the second half of the twentieth century has dealt with the first question and rejected the unidirectionality of change (contrary to Fukuyama's

*... activism aims at change and improvement of a particular situation.*

argument). However, the second question and the answer to it remain subjective, value laden and culture bound. This is best evidenced by the position of the Western-oriented secular feminism and women's activism from Islamic feminism and women's activism and vice versa where what is considered an advancement or improvement by one group is considered a retreat and deterioration by the other. It is also evidenced by the impact of the degree of societal acceptance and conformity of the demanded change and desired goals with the culture, traditions and social structures in determining what is considered activism and what isn't (sometimes labeled hereticism).

Finally, and since most activism is taking place nowadays through NGOs and civil society associations, one cannot but wonder as to the real causes behind, and the implications of the mushrooming of such organizations specialized in women's issues and having overlapping agendas. Is this phenomenon an indicator of democratic practice and good governance? Is it a source of strength for activists or a sign of weakness and manipulation by com-

peting politicians and local as well as foreign funders? Who are the active members of such associations and what are their socio-economic and political backgrounds? What motivates them to become activists? How close or disconnected are they from the wider population? What is the degree of turn-over, rotation of power and networking within such organizations? Does their search for specific skills lead to the exclusion of a large part of their population? What is the degree of commitment among their members? Do we need more NGOs or a functionalization of the existing ones?

It is our belief that an in-depth investigation of such issues and an attempt at providing answers to the above questions will not only contribute to an objective assessment of Arab women's activism today, but may help direct our attention to the possibility of women's activism, same as many other social movements, being in some cases an instrument in the ongoing struggle over power and its restructuring in Arab societies which may have negative consequences not only on the status of women but on Arab societies as a whole.



# Activisms in Egypt

■ Leslie R. Lewis\*

Doctoral candidate, University of California, San Diego

In spite of rhetoric about an incipient citizen's democracy in Egypt, civil conditions are such that they militate against organized change. There is a sustained (23-year) state of emergency which limits public protest, political parties and civil organizations. Depressed economic conditions tend to draw people away from social and political concerns in favor of basic survival. In spite of this, a growing minority of citizens do engage in numerous diverse forms of activism. Women form a large part of this cadre. Contrary to the stereotypical depiction of them as passive victims of patriarchal oppression, women have organized themselves for over a century around various feminist, nationalist and religious causes. They have challenged both state authority, and prevailing gender ideologies and practices that shape their everyday lives (Al-Ali 2003).

In the context of Middle Eastern women's movements, the term "activism" glosses a variety of involvements and activities. Activists of different philosophical and strategic persuasions employ diverse approaches to effecting change. Some attempt to work within the existing social and legal system and political institutions. They work to alter or enforce particular laws or agitate for change through voting and other legal political strategies such as marches, boycotts and sit-ins (in the vein of the women's,

civil, and disability rights movements in the US, all of which pushed legislation before majority public opinion swayed towards their goals). Others want to change the embedded structures of society – not just specific laws and policies, but the very assumptions and institutions upon which the existing system is based. These activists are generally more radical, wanting not just a personnel change within the government, but a different sociopolitical or economic system entirely (as in a shift to a government which embodies the principles of a new political ideology, such as Marxism, socialist democracy, or political Islam).

Women's activism in present-day Egypt encompasses a range of political and ideological frameworks, including numerous Islamic and secular-oriented approaches. Not all activists are political in their goals or philosophy; some activism is characterized by charity and welfare work. This is kind of "direct action activism" which implies hands-on work with women. It is a direct means of addressing the practical, socioeconomic, legal and political problems that individuals face. Asef Bayat (2000) has noted that there has been a move away from demand-making movements towards a direct action model, whether individual, informal or institutional.

The motivations for engaging in “direct action activism” vary. Some activists are spurred by a desire, typically following their own “awakening” to the realities of theirs and other women’s lives, to raise consciousness within society in hopes of fostering positive change in all women’s lives. Typically, they work simultaneously to change policies and laws that unfairly affect women. Other groups are moved by what they consider to be a higher calling. These activists engage in acts of charity and service to others, not for the sake of women as a class of people per se, although they care about individuals and their plight. Rather, they engage in their activities for the sake of God. They devote vast amounts of time and energy to their undertakings by, for example, providing financial support to widows and their children, teaching literacy and through the Qur’an and sunna, and offering care and succor to cancer victims. Given the gradual retreat of the government from social responsibilities over the preceding decades, the poor in Egypt rely considerably on the actions of these charitable groups.

While the grassroots level efforts of all of these activists make a practical difference in individual women’s lives, the different “groups” have distinctive ultimate goals for their activities. This diversity arises out of different explanatory frameworks for why suffering exists. Secular-oriented activists tend to see human misery as resulting from systems, norms and events in particular sociopolitical and historical circumstances. They also see women as disproportionately ill-affected by these circumstances. Consequently, they are interested in interrogating the underlying structural and institutional factors that underlie inequalities in the first place. They want to transform society or at least to expand the field of resources and opportunities for women as a remunerative to present ills and limitations.

The Islamically-oriented activists with whom I work tend not to be interested in social, economic and political root causes. They attribute the suffering they witness (and what they consider to be the negative and failing aspects of society) to a population that has lost its way from a truer and purer Islamic state of being. They believe that by transforming their own lives through prayer, study and particular expressions of piety, they can both become nearer to God and act as models for others. In this way, they might encourage broad spiritual reflection and change. They have the dual goals of fostering correct Islamic practice within themselves and others, and pleasing God by their actions. Social change is a positive effect rather than a driving goal.

#### A Tale of Two Activists

##### Heba

Heba<sup>2</sup> is a writer, a professor and an activist. She has a secular orientation to her activism, although she personally identifies as a Muslim. She is warm and solicitous and has

a wide circle of friends and associates. She is a member of two independent women’s organizations, one that advocates for women’s sexual, reproductive, political and civil rights, and another that focuses on literacy for women. Thus, her work spans both advocacy (“demand-making”) and direct-action. One of the organizations to which she belongs has had some success in its efforts against female ritual cutting (female genital mutilation, FGM), thanks to some international pressure and the (resultant) cooperation on the part of the government.

“On this issue,” she says, “we have to tread lightly. It is controversial. There are religious forces that contend that FGM is Islamic and should not be banned. Our strategy is to be patient and to maintain calm, steady pressure on the government without complicating or escalating the situation by pushing any more incendiary topics right now, like abortion.”

Heba and other secular-oriented activists note that it is critical that they not construct an image of themselves as contrary to Islam. “We try not to use words like ‘secularism’ or ‘feminism’ because these are too associated with the Western world.”

Secular-oriented activists face a constant challenge of accusations of unauthenticity and importation of Western projects and values. According to Al Ali (2003), despite the historical link between the women’s and the nationalist movements, the charge of emulating “Western thought” and thereby betraying “authentic culture” has constituted a continuous challenge to Middle Eastern feminists (221). The accusation of importing Western ideas and concepts weighs heavily on those activists who break social taboos. The denunciation of playing up to Western expectations and being alienated from their own culture is a very powerful weapon in the hands of conservative Islamist and secular nationalist forces. Their accusations work to discredit women’s organizations and to limit their discursive spaces and actual activities.

Heba finds her work around literacy to be stealthy and ultimately the most radical of all of her activities. “Women’s literacy is important because once women can read, they can read about new ideas. We are planting seeds which may later bear fruit.”

Aside from organizing and teaching literacy classes for women, Heba and her cohorts rewrite classical stories from a woman’s perspective and then perform them for groups of women. This never fails to excite and generate discussion among audience members who can relate the narrative to their own lives. It provides a starting point from which to discuss their own difficulties and experiences.

Some of the barriers Heba observes in her activism include rising conservatism in Egyptian society and a hegemonic Islamist discourse.<sup>3</sup> It is critical to accommodate to political realities, she finds, as well as public and social currents. Garnering public support depends as much on strategies used as on what the group is trying to achieve. For example, secular-oriented activists know that goals and programs that are not justifiable within an Islamic framework are likely to be rejected by the rest of society, and are therefore self-defeating.

Religious and nationalist rhetorics both tend to heavily dichotomize the world into “us” vs. “them” categories. This very human tendency can be seen across the world among people espousing a range of religious, ethnic and nationalistic ideologies. In Egypt, the division generally takes one of two forms, though they are frequently conflated. In one case, it is “authentic, traditional culture” pitted against “Western culture” and practices. In the second, “correct” Islamic practice and morality is championed. Its nemesis is anything that is perceived to threaten its expression, whether it be a foreign, secularizing influence or corruption from within (often understood as a succumbing to the immoral, secular influence). The West in both formulations is consistently represented as the evil, corrupting force against which the good (authentic, morally upstanding) society is defined and compared. The West is synonymous with moral corruption, hyper individualism, materialism, and hypocrisy, defensible accusations that nonetheless oversimplify the picture and reinforce dichotomist, categorical thinking. A struggle between opposing forces is generated and fueled through verbal and written discourse. This discourse serves to mute individuals (and secular-oriented activists specifically) who critique any practices associated with either tradition or Islam.

Negative constructions of “the West” are often used to discredit secular-oriented women activists. Typically they are accused of being indoctrinated by Western thinking, adopting Western agendas, and threatening the integrity of Egyptian culture or worse, Islam. This creates a dilemma: If groups want to achieve any kind of success in their activism on behalf of women, they have to be circumspect and extremely careful about their strategic and discursive approach. Heba notes that the need to constantly defend against attack and accusations of unauthenticity and an assault on religion or culture, often causes activists to lose sight of common goals. They succumb to polarization, in-fighting, and sometimes duplicate efforts rather than collaborate and build a stronger front. All of this paralyzes progress, opening the activists up to further attack by Islamists, who now feel vindicated in their claim about the inefficiency of “Western-styled” feminism in the Egyptian (and all Arab-Muslim) contexts.

##### Hind

Hind is a woman whose level of religiosity has risen over the previous ten years, inspired by her daughters’ *sahwaa* or “awakening” to the need to practice Islam more correctly and piously. The family is firmly middle class, educated and well-traveled. Hind raised her five children and now devotes herself full-time to prayer, *dawa’* (proselytizing), charity and other good works. She and her informal group of friends visit orphanages and cancer wards, providing succor, and gifts of toys and money. They travel up to two hours away to poor neighborhoods to deliver food, clothing, medicine, money, and their Islamic message. They aid individuals in getting free medical care, housing and schooling for their children.

Hind and her friends work tirelessly, day after day, collecting money and goods, preparing *durus* or religious lessons and delivering these offerings to people in desperate need. They focus on acts of charity, *dawa’* and aid. Islamic women’s activism, such as Hind’s, is distinctive in that it works within the structures and limitations of the state to achieve its goals. It does not challenge the political and economic status quo, nor does it lay the blame at the feet of the government. For them, activism as a service to others lies at the heart of the process of perfecting the self for the sake of God and salvation. Women hope that through their efforts they will improve as human beings and that their actions will be “accepted” by God.

Karam (1998) found that the Islamist women in her sample considered public activism to be *de rigueur*. Although they confirmed the sanctity and importance of women’s primary duties as wives and mothers, they contended that once women’s primary obligations are fulfilled (i.e. the children are old enough to take care of themselves, and housewifely duties are manageable), women have a religious duty to become publicly active in promoting and spreading their faith. Many believed that it was incumbent on women to be active participants in building a true and strong Islamic society.

There is a diversity of opinion on this topic, as well as practical (economic) factors that preclude many poorer women from devoting their time and energy to its expression. Women who don’t work outside the home and/or can afford to hire help in taking care of domestic responsibilities are more able to partake in this “religious duty.” In my own research I found groups of women who, while they were certainly “active” in spreading *dawa’* through their words, examples and deeds, their conception of women’s public role was more constrained. The women in the Cairo mosque movement<sup>4</sup> tended to demure from politics and public activism, arguing that according to Islamic jurisprudence, such displays are inappropriate for women (whose bodies and voices are an enticement and distraction to

men). Additionally, rulers, regardless of their stripes or the extent of their corruption, ought not to be toppled since any overthrow of the government is potentially bloody and might end in an even worse situation. Rulers should be advised by Islamic scholars (at least in the ideal, and in Egypt there is the appearance of such a relationship since President Mubarak appoints and ostensibly takes advice from the religious leader of the nation, a sheikh from Al Azhar University). Otherwise the most that ordinary citizens should do is to pray that the president be guided towards a more Islamically-principled path.

Whereas the battle cry of much social activism is "resistance" with the ultimate goal of social change, Islamic activists champion such qualities as perseverance and submission toward achieving higher levels of religious attainment. In academic and advocacy circles, the term empowerment typically evokes images of new-found strength and confidence based on autonomy, self-reliance and liberation from social and institutional constraints. In contrast to this, Islamic activist women defined empowerment as an improved state of being based on perfecting the self to gain closeness to God (Hafez 2003).

"Everything we do, we do for God. We pray that He will accept our actions," Hind tells me one day. This is an oft-repeated statement. When I ask her about whether she hopes to change society by her actions she says, "It is not for us to try to forcibly change society. We focus on ourselves, and we hope that our actions and words will encourage others to do the same. Little by little people will begin to see the truth; they will be convinced. Leaders come from the people. When the people improve, society will improve, *insha'Allah*."

Most activism operates on the assumption that norms and public attitudes will follow policy or structural change. Hind's approach makes the reverse assumption: that it is necessary to first alter public thinking and behavior, and that new thinkers, leaders and policies will follow from this positively altered social milieu. This last approach, taken by many Islamic women activists, can be likened to a Gramscian "passive revolution." Such an endeavor focuses on the gradual capture and possession of the society by exerting moral and intellectual leadership over civil institutions and processes. According to Gramsci (1994), true revolution wins not just state power but society itself by institutional, intellectual and moral hegemony. Through *dawa'*, charity and "good works," and the spread of increasingly conservative dress styles and modes of interaction between women and men, women who are part of Islamic Service Institutions (ISIs) and the more informal mosque or piety movement have exerted a steady and gradual Islamicizing influence on society.

Some authors (e.g. Zubaida 1989) have proposed that Islamic activism through various forms of charity is a strategy used to reach broad audiences and build a base of political support across the lower socioeconomic spectrum. Janine Clark (2004) challenges this view. She assesses the work of ISIs such as hospitals and clinics in Egypt and claims that, despite the theory that ISIs build a power base by challenging the authority of the state and luring away potential voters, there was little proof that such institutions had the effect of cross-class mobilization.

Clark found that Islamic activists (e.g. doctors, nurses or managers of the ISIs) might claim to serve the needy but their clientele tended to be other members of the middle or even upper middle classes. Her finding supports the assertion of social movement theory that networks are woven by activists from the same social background rather than from across different classes.

This may be true for the organizations studied. Clark seems to have focused on workers within ISIs, finding that they are not much motivated by an Islamic agenda, nor do they necessarily act with its dictates in mind. My work with (typically middle class) women in the current Cairo mosque movement provides a picture of individuals genuinely forging connections across class boundaries. These are not reciprocal relations to be sure; interclass norms and formality define, color and delimit interactions and relations. However, these women do go to where the poorer people are: to their neighborhoods, public hospitals and clinics, and they spend significant amounts of time (upwards of 30-50 hours/week) and money (collected from friends, family and mosque attendees) in order to provide comfort, medicine, food, clothing, and cash to people in need. The aid is typically accompanied by either formal religious lessons or informal guidance. There are often heavy class overtones to the advice and admonitions given to the aid recipients, however there is also kindness and care and relationships of a limited degree are genuinely formed.

Ironically, as indicated above, these women do not have a specifically political agenda (in the way that ISIs are presumed to be part of a larger strategy to Islamicize the government and society). Rather, they are motivated personally to connect with and aid people less fortunate than themselves, as a way of pleasing, and coming closer to God. Still, their actions have succeeded in effecting some of the cross-class influence that Clark argues ISIs have failed to achieve. Whether this connection and appreciation would translate to a political base is another question. My guess is that some aid recipients genuinely embrace the brand of Islam espoused by the activists, reasoning that Islam is indeed "the answer" to their woes, since its champions are consistently providing support where other channels have dried up. Others might, if called upon by specific individuals through

whom they have received help, vote for or advocate a particular political vision, even though they might not be drawn personally by the specific discourse. At any rate, although as Clark succinctly states, "the poor reach out for any help they can receive" (39), this pragmatism does not preclude that they will be affected or influenced (either negatively or positively) by the acts of groups or individuals. In fact it is such personal connections and influences that often have the strongest effect on people's thinking and world conception.

### Conclusion

The success, and the manner in which these different types of activism are received by the government and by the public alike, depends on a number of factors. Conformity to current social, cultural and political norms positively influences the acceptance of the activism in which women engage. Public opinion is heavily influenced by religious beliefs and institutions. Those strategies and end goals that run contrary to current norms face significantly more roadblocks because they challenge established notions about the world, the "nature" of women and men, and the ways things *should* be, i.e., the correct ordering of society, as ordained by God. They also threaten existing power structures both within families and institutions, which derive their legitimacy from these traditional notions of the roles, structures and morals of society.

Activisms which can be seen as an extension of acceptable

female roles, (e.g. ministering to the sick and the needy) are generally accepted and lauded by broader society. On the other hand, activists who champion issues that problematize gendered power dynamics in society, and who seek to expand women's political, social, economic, and even religious freedoms and opportunities are seen as radical and threatening. They erode the very center of both traditional and Islamic beliefs about the appropriate roles of men and women.

The patriarchal family model in Egypt represents the building block of broader hierarchical structures of power and control in civic life, business and industry, religion, and politics. Many men and women resist change because they rightly perceive that it will upset the rights and authority of individual men within families (their choices and freedoms, their impunity in making decisions and undertaking actions), and threatens women's role and identity as sacrificing mothers and dutiful wives. Many women cling tenaciously to this identity because it is their primary source of a sense of security and worth.

Right now in Egypt there is tension between opposing agendas over the direction that the country should take, its political structure, civic life and guiding moralities. Although there are significant differences in the visions of various activists, they do have one important thing in common: a desire to improve society and the plight of ordinary Egyptians.

### Endnotes

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1. Secular-oriented here refers to a framework that advocates a separation between religion and politics. Secular activists typically refer to civil law and human rights conventions as frames of reference for their struggle, though they are not necessarily anti-religious or anti-Islamic, either personally in their own lives, or strategically in their activism.
2. All names in this article are pseudonyms and represent composites of many individuals.
3. Aside from the political work of Islamist parties, Islamic groups and NGOs provide comprehensive health care, education, finance, and emergency relief services. This creates a growing popularity and social base. By efficiently providing alternative and timely services to the poorest of the poor, these "liberal" Islamists are actually highlighting their ability and viability as an alternative Islamic force to the existing state. As such their activism lends credibility to their discourse, which in turn becomes more popular. The end result is that their Islamist discourse becomes attractive enough to be emulated by other groups in society, which are also competing for popularity. Effectively, other competing political ideologies (including those of the state) Islamize their own discourses in order to gain legitimacy for their own ideas and programs. In such a manner, Islamism becomes the trend setter, and the dominant ideological backdrop for much political activism – both for and against it.
4. See related article, this volume.

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# The Palestinian Women's Movement after Oslo: Peacemakers or Fighters for their Freedom?

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## Introduction

The 1993 Oslo Accords between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Israeli government have had a profound impact on the whole of Palestinian society; more particularly, they strongly influenced the development of the Palestinian women's movement. This paper will portray different forms of women's activism after Oslo; it will research the impact of peaceful female activism, feminist activism and militant female activism on women's status in society.

Such an inclusive approach that treats women's different ways of involvement in the public sphere, including militant ones, requires the dismissal of the idea of a clear public-private split where women are relegated to the private sphere while men arrange public matters (Sharoni, 1997; Waylen, 1996) and further necessitates the rejection of essentialist views which describe women as peaceful and tolerant while men are considered militant wagers of war (e.g. Gilligan, 1983; Golan, 2004; Ruddick, 1989). In doing so, it shows that gender roles are fluid and susceptible to historical change (Kandiyoti, 1988) and that such processes of redefinition of feminini-

ty and masculinity occur especially in times of conflict (Byrne, 1996). Conflict influences gender roles and can either hinder or promote women's advancement in society. In the Palestinian case, as will be argued, the occupation constituted an opportunity for women to enter "the world of men" and thus promoted their liberation in a society dominated by patriarchal structures.

Such an argument is not new; various scholars have established a relation between Palestinian women's political and social struggle. Most of these studies, however, find an, at least temporary, positive relation between women's unarmed liberation struggle in the First Intifada and their empowerment.<sup>1</sup> The impact of women's armed resistance has received critical views.<sup>2</sup> Following Apter (1997), however, it is particularly political violence that destabilizes and recreates social realities. This paper will thus analyze both the impact of women's peaceful and militant activism.

## The Early Palestinian Women's Movement

Palestinian women have historically participated through a multitude of ways in the national strug-

gle. Their activism started in the early twentieth century with relief and charitable work. This concentration on more private matters, i.e. the well-being of family and society, however, shifted during the Intifada. Women, being dominated by the national-political cause, now started to engage actively in the public sphere through political involvement in demonstrations and parties, but also through militant activism. Although women's changed political status and their "intrusion" into the previously male-dominated public sphere meant breaking the traditional public-private split, it would be wrong to assume feminist motivations behind such changes. The national cause superseded all other issues; women's increased freedom was to serve national, not gender liberation.

Nevertheless, women's gender consciousness increased as a result of their engagement in the Intifada. Peteet's (1991) differentiation between female and feminist consciousness in this respect offers valuable analytical insights. Analyzing Palestinian women's activism in Lebanese camps, she finds that their motivation for participating in the Resistance at first stemmed from their female consciousness of defending their community; during their participation, however, some women encountered social barriers to their self-fulfillment as women – these women developed a feminist consciousness and advocated "transformations in gender relations and meanings as ways to achieve autonomy and equality rather than simply integrating women into extant structures" (Peteet, 1991:97). Fighting on the national front thus increased women's feminist consciousness; it opened up a second struggle on the social front where women started to challenge patriarchal structures in their own society.

Yet, these advances took place in the exceptional situation of conflict. Advances during conflict, however, cannot be seen as a guarantee for fundamental, long-term change. The Algerian example in this respect is telling. Algerian women participated actively throughout the national struggle for independence. Despite such an active role, they neither managed to influence the Islamist discourse nor to establish institutional channels for securing their rights. Once independence was given in 1962, they thus had little means to resist the Islamists' installation of the repressive personal status law (PSL) which stripped women of virtually all their rights (Bouatta, 1994).

In Palestine women could have faced an equal fate,

yet the Intifada had created a strong "feminist generation" (Hasso, 2001:1) which could not easily be sidelined.

## Women's Political Participation in Governmental Agencies after Oslo

Sufficient female representation in the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) is a prerequisite for ensuring equal rights in a future state; it is one of the institutional channels that Algerian women failed to establish.

Considering their wide participation in the Intifada, Palestinian women had hoped to receive their share in political representation after Oslo. Yet, the PNA has since marginalized women from the political decision-making process; even most recent figures show that they are still highly under-represented. Women make up only 5.7 percent of the Palestinian Legislative Council, 9.2 percent of the judiciary, 8.3 percent of all ministers, and comprise only a minority on the central committees of the major political parties (5 percent of Fatah, 10 percent of the Popular Front, 19 percent of FIDA and 20 percent of the Democratic Front) (MOWA, 2005). Yet, in their efforts to reverse these trends, women have recently made two important advances.

In November 2003 the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) was established. Such a ministry had been the plan of the women's movement since Oslo, but early efforts were not approved by the PNA (Abdo, 1999). Among MOWA's achievements so far has been the introduction of gender-based programs and women's units in different ministries as well as the introduction of a gender quota of two women per local council. The percentage of women in local councils thus rose immensely from 0.5 percent in 2004 (MOWA, 2004) to 16.9 percent in 2005 (MOWA, 2005).

MOWA's importance lies in the fact that, as a governmental body, it provides institutional support from the state for the feminists of the First Intifada. The fact that MOWA is headed by Zahira Kamal, a former leader of the Democratic Union Party, run predominantly by female activists from the First Intifada (Interview, MOWA, 2005), and characterized by strong cooperation with women's advocacy NGOs, makes clear that it is a truly feminist effort and not merely a "display item to sell politics" for the PNA. With MOWA, an important institutional channel to anchor women's rights in a future Palestinian state has been established.

### Women's Feminist Activism in NGOs for Equal Rights

A legal framework that gives equal rights to men and women is another institutional channel that Algerian women failed to establish before 1962.

In Palestine, just as in Algeria, PSL, which is based on Islamic law and regulates rights in marriage, divorce and inheritance issues, discriminates against women: men are allowed to marry up to four wives, women need a male guardian in marriage decisions, they receive only half of a man's share as inheritance, and they are denied the right of child custody after divorce (Sh'hada, 1999).

In contrast to Algeria, however, Palestinian women have founded strong advocacy NGOs which seek to influence PSL, the most active of these being the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC). WCLAC's lobbying for "gendering" PSL generally works through two main approaches: a secular approach which bases claims for women's equality on human rights and international conventions, mainly the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and finds that Islam is not, or only vaguely, compatible with women's rights; and a liberal religious approach – Islamic feminism – which calls for feminist *ijtihad*, i.e. the reinterpretation of the religious sources from a woman's perspective, to provide equality based on the rulings of Islam.

Although the secular approach seems to be the "safer bet" for many secular feminists, it in fact bears the danger of provoking strong backlashes from more traditional parts of society. In Palestine, for example, WCLAC's advocacy project, the Model Parliament, which brought together women and men with religious, feminist, political or legal backgrounds with the aim of "gendering" Palestinian law, was accused by the Islamists of being part of the "Western conspiracy against Islam" (Sh'hada, 1999).

The second approach, Islamic feminism, although perhaps a "compromise" for secular women, is a less provocative model for women's emancipation. Its potential has been shown with the 1992 divorce amendments in Iran (Mir-Hosseini, 1996) and the 1956 abolishment of polygamy in Tunisia (Barron, 2002) – both results of feminist *ijtihad*. In Palestine the majority of women (85 percent) want PSL to be based on Islamic law, yet 66 percent of the same respondents also find the current Palestinian legal system to be discriminating against women

(Hammami, 2002). Both popular legitimacy for Islamic law and critique of its gender-biased nature thus coexist. Such a seemingly contradictory opinion stems from women's understanding that tradition – and not Islam – is the cause for gender inequality (Hammer, 2000). Most Palestinian women believe that the religion of Islam is a potentially positive model for female emancipation; for them, and for the majority of Palestinian society, the Islamic way is the indigenous and right way to promote women's rights.

### Women's National Peaceful Activism

Women's peace activism is closely related to both post-Oslo developments described above: women's political activism aiming at increasing female participation in governmental agencies, and increased feminist consciousness. Political marginalization was not confined to women's representation in state institutions. Since the Oslo peace negotiations were mainly prepared and held at a level of high diplomacy, women were in a minority here as well.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Palestinian women's peace organizations formed in the immediate aftermath of Oslo were aiming to guarantee women's equal participation and voice in the peace negotiations. Since Israeli women's political activism had also started to grow in the 1990s,<sup>4</sup> these two groups formed alliances and organized dialogue groups, women's peace conferences, and solidarity initiatives.

One such project which began in 1994 is the Jerusalem Link, an alliance between the (Palestinian) Jerusalem Center for Women (JCW) in East Jerusalem and the (Israeli-Jewish) Bat Shalom in West Jerusalem. Although both women's NGOs are also committed to women's empowerment and democracy training within their own societies, they receive most attention and credit for their joint peace-building efforts and are often picked out as a model for civil society's mobilization for peace-making by Western academia and media (e.g. Powers, 2003; Wrege, 2003). Consequently and especially since UN Resolution 1325 called upon all UN member states to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict in 2000 (UN, 2000), these organizations have been well-funded by European and North American donors.<sup>5</sup>

It has been widely acknowledged that "[i]nternational peacemakers have much to learn from women's efforts at peace-building" (Powers, 2003), yet, two of the assumptions on which their cooperation is based prove to be problematic.

The first assumption underlying women's peace-making is the essentialist view that women, because of their mothering sentiments, are more peaceful and tolerant than men.<sup>6</sup> The universal applicability of such essentialist accounts to different times and societies has been questioned (Elshtain, 1995; Naples, 1992); in particular with regard to societies experiencing war and conflict (Scheper-Hughes, 1992). In the Palestinian case, Peteet (1991) finds that, as a result of ongoing conflict, the home cannot be seen as a place where "peaceful mothering" can take place. Palestinian homes are vulnerable to military raids; they are "battlefronts" and sites of resistance and militancy for women just as for men. Essentialist views thus fail to take into account the militarization of Palestinian society.

Secondly, cooperation is based on the feminist visions of global sisterhood (e.g. Morgan, 1996), and more particularly, the belief that Palestinian and Israeli women are united by similar experiences: the notion of motherhood and the common experience of sending one's sons to war is used by the Israeli-Jewish peace movement to establish commonality between Palestinian and Israeli women (Sharoni, 1995). The Palestinian women's peace organizations, however, have moved beyond this traditional image of women. JCW's motivation for joint peace-building is much more political and pragmatic: they want to use UN Resolution 1325 to "gender" peace-building with the long-term goal of ending the occupation (Interview, JCW, 2005). The Israeli women's peace movement thus, by using solidarity and commonality as their rationale for alliances, bears the danger of downplaying fundamental power inequalities between the occupier and the occupied.

Differences exist not only between, but also within the groups. The Palestinian peace movement is characterized by strong social cleavages between women from the Occupied Territories and Israeli Palestinian women. The latter, as Palestinian citizens of Israel, often find that Gazan and West Bank women, referring to themselves as the "true Palestinians," do not seriously value their struggle (Herzog, 2005). JCW's collaborative project with Bat Shalom for a Palestinian state according to the 1967 borders, for example, is viewed suspiciously by the majority, and in particular by the refugees from the *nakba* generation who perceive it as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. While the rationale of non-violence has gained ground among a great number of Palestinians, many, and particularly those most exposed to repressive Israeli policies in the Occupied Territories and refugee camps still consid-

er dialogue between such unequal partners a mere facade.

Commonality (both Palestinian-Israeli and Palestinian-Palestinian) thus might be a "romantic" rather than solid basis for dialogue. The Jerusalem Link is unquestionably a progressive and promising model, yet its rationale of promoting dialogue as the only way to peace risks labeling those who still oppose dialogue on the above mentioned grounds as fanatics or radicals (Abu-Nimer, 1993 quoted in Sharoni, 1995).

So far, this paper has treated women's peaceful activism – a field where Palestinian women have strongly organized themselves since Oslo. Yet, the women involved in these official governmental and non-governmental organizations remain exceptional and are mostly drawn from urban elites. Furthermore, they have difficulties influencing the radical Islamist forces and face major problems reaching huge numbers of women who either do not support their (and the PNA's) peaceful rationale of negotiations for a "compromise peace" or feel alienated by their secular – and thus for many "Westoxicated" – feminist mission.

Opposition to Western influence and the rationale of negotiations is most widely associated with religious-political groups. The following chapter aims to shed light upon their rationale of militant confrontation.

### Women's National Militant Activism The Al-Aqsa Intifada

In comparison to the First Intifada, the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000-5) was much more male-dominated which is partly due to its increased militancy (Andoni, 2001). Seen from a Palestinian perspective, the return to armed resistance is a general response to the failure of the "peace process," corruption in the PNA, and intensified Israeli land confiscation and increased militancy.

The growing popularity of Palestinian militant political-religious groups, which has nearly doubled from 18 percent in December 2004 to 30 percent in June 2005 (PCPSR, 2005) is built on the fact that they are able to unite these various opponents of the peace process in its current form. Furthermore, their religious orientation offers stability to many Palestinians for whom their religious beliefs provide a strategy to cope with the hopeless and untenable situation of consistent loss.<sup>7</sup> Finally, political-religious groups suggest a more committed agenda than the PNA by acting as major social service

providers in the region and by providing transparency in their political proceedings.

Probably the best known resistance activity that is generally associated with political-religious groups is "martyrdom or suicide attacks." The concept of "martyrdom operations," as they are generally referred to in Palestinian and Arab coverage, has often been misportrayed in Western accounts. While *intihar* (suicide) is strictly forbidden in Islam, *istishhad* (martyrdom), i.e. the deliberate suicidal death for the sake of others, particularly Muslims, is greatly admired in Muslim society as an act of self-sacrifice and honor. The term "suicide attack," with its reference to *intihar* (suicide), therefore does not correctly reflect the philosophical background of these acts. To epistemologically reflect this background the terms *shaheed* (m), *shaheeda* (f) and *istishhad* will be used here.

The very concept of *istishhad* is unquestioned in Palestinian society. The bombing of civilians, however, has been criticized sharply as being morally unjustified by the majority of Islamic scholars (Dabbagh, 2003). Yet,

as far as military targets are concerned, *istishhad* attacks are viewed by many Palestinians to be the "smart bomb" of the poor. For them it represents a weapon that can be used effectively against a militarily far superior nation with one of the strongest armies in the world. *Shaheeds* thus are sanctioned by religion and viewed as legitimate militant actors and national heroes who are celebrated with posters and videos after their death.

#### Women's Involvement in Religious Political Groups and Armed Resistance

Muslim women make up great numbers of the active members of Palestinian Islamist groups. They often find that their work with these groups offers them a space in public life where they can gain respect and influential positions through their profound knowledge of Islam (see Hammer, 2001). Generally, Hamas and Islamic Jihad thus are not viewed as a major hindrance for women's emancipation even by secular activists (Interview, WCLAC, 2005). Yet, as far as women's militant activism is con-



Leila Khaled

cerned, Islamists hold a very traditional view. When the First Intifada "heroine fighters" such as Dalal Mughrabi or Leila Khaled,<sup>8</sup> were celebrated as symbols of liberation, the Islamists' counter-image continued to picture women as bearers of traditional culture and mothers who must be protected by a male member of the family and whose task it is to raise their children. The Islamist discourse in Palestine thus either ignored women's fighting role in the Resistance or publicly condemned it.

This is reminiscent of the *moudjahidates*, the Algerian female fighters, whose active fighting role in the liberation struggle was erased from history once the Islamists took over control, because such a female model was not admissible to them (Cherifati-Merabtine, 1994). Both the *moudjahidates* and the Palestinian female combatants of the First Intifada did not challenge, enter or change the Islamist discourse. They were mainly secular and did not counter the mixed responses from society.

#### Female Istishhad Attacks

When Wafa Idris became the first woman to carry out an *istishhad* attack in January 2000,<sup>9</sup> it was not only the West that was shocked but also the Islamists had to struggle to find a united standpoint. In Palestinian society she is, nevertheless, celebrated as a heroine. Since then a total of seven women have become *shaheedas*<sup>10</sup> and 59 failed in their attempt to carry out an *istishhad* attack (IMFA, 2005). The new phenomenon of female *istishhad* has generated a wide debate around what motivated these women to become *shaheedas*. Media and academic coverage usually provides three main responses: religious, feminist or nationalist motivation.



Wafa Idris

Religious considerations and the belief that sacrificing one's life for the sake of the community will gain rewards in paradise can strengthen the desire for *istishhad*. The fact, however, that the first four *shaheedas* were sent out by a non-Islamist militant

group, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, proves that these women were not necessarily religiously motivated. In any case, religious motivation cannot have been the major driving force for these women, because Islamists until then had reserved the "right" to *istishhad* and its rewards in paradise for men; Wafa Idris' death was not considered an *istishhad* by the majority of religious leaders at first. The now deceased Hamas founder, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, stressed that if a woman "goes out to *jihad* and fight, then she must be accompanied by a *mahram* (male guardian)" and that "[t]he woman is the second defense line in resistance to the occupation. She shelters the fugitive, loses the son, husband and brother, bears the consequences of this and faces starvation and blockade" (Isa, 2002 quoted in Hasso 2005). His view reflects the general Islamist understanding that Palestinian women's identity derives from their traditional role as mothers who bear and raise the nation's children. An *istishhad* attack where a woman destroys her own body contradicts this Islamist understanding. Dareen Abu Aisha, a devout



Dareen Abu Aisha

Muslim and Hamas activist, was one of the girls who, having been rejected by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, acted on behalf of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. In a left-behind videotape she criticizes the restrictive Islamist view stating that "women's roles will not be confined to weeping over a son, brother or husband" (Hasso, 2005:11). Her statement kicked off a fierce debate between Islamic leaders and forced them to take up a definite position. While Yassin's and Gaza Hamas leader Rantisi's emphasis on women's roles as mothers and their reluctance to legitimize female *istishhad* attacks provoked women's protests and demonstrations from Cairo to Jeddah, others, such as Fadlallah, a spiritual guide of Hezbollah, had already legitimized women who carry out "suicide bombings" as *shaheedas* (Reuters, 2002).

The final turning point in the Islamic discourse came in 2003 when Hiba Daraghme and Hanadi Jaradat, acting on behalf of Islamic Jihad, became the first *shaheeda* for a religious-political group, and when in 2004 Reem Reyashi was sent out by Hamas' militant wing (Brunner, 2005).<sup>11</sup> Following Reyashi's attack, Yassin officially declared the female attacks as acts of *istishhad*, referring also to still existing organization-

al limitations and to the pragmatic reason that women can reach highly secured locations more easily (MEMRI, 2002; Deutsche Presse Agentur, 2004).

The *shaheedas* thus have managed to start a debate in the Islamist circles, an area that is strongly expanding but yet marginalizing women. They have succeeded in, at least temporarily, changing their discourse. While, of course, neither political violence and the idea of "equality in death" should be seen as a springboard for women's emancipation, nor can such a "success" of influencing the radical Islamic discourse be considered a guarantee for permanent social change, yet the fact that even most conservative parts of society have recognized women's equality in struggle and have, at least temporarily, relaxed their prior rigid traditional image of women and their dogmatic denunciation of *shaheedas* and female combatants, nevertheless, marks an important step.

This, however, is not to say that the *shaheedas* carried out their attacks with the feminist motivations of achieving gender rather than national liberation. The idea of *shaheedas* dying for a feminist cause nevertheless has prevailed, particularly in Western media. In this respect Talbot's (2001) study on "Myths in the Representation of Women Terrorists" is interesting. She finds that "the identity of a woman terrorist is cut into mutually exclusive halves; either the "woman" or the "terrorist" is emphasized, but never together" (Talbot, 2001:1). Such an incompatibility between terrorism and feminism can be found in most accounts dealing with the Palestinian *shaheedas*.

Some sources have shown a tendency to emphasize the *shaheedas'* female characteristics, portraying, for example, Idris as "stern-eyed" and "lush-lipped" (Florio, 2002 quoted in Hasso, 2005; or Akhras as "[a] girl as tender and as beautiful as a rose" (Atwan, 2002). The fact that Abu Aisha received only little media attention might be attributed to her strict religiosity and militancy in which she chose to present herself in her final video and photos. Such an image did not fit well with the romanticized and heroic image of, for example, Idris and Akhras, and

*The Islamist discourse in Palestine ... either ignored women's fighting role in the Resistance or publicly condemned it.*

challenged existing gender norms too drastically (Hasso, 2005). These authors thus negate the compatibility of aggression, brutality and violence with femininity.

Western and Israeli sources, furthermore, have often depicted the *shaheedas* either as “feminists” who, suffering from personal restrictions as women in Palestinian patriarchal society, carried out their attacks to rebel against women’s traditional role as mothers or as mere auxiliaries to men who pressured them into committing the act using their dominant patriarchal position (e.g. Dviri, 2005; Fighel, 2003; IMFA, 2003, 2005; Marcus, 2002; Schweitzer, 2003; Victor, 2004).<sup>12</sup> So Victor finds that Idris had been “a constant target for mocking after her husband divorced her” (2004:41), and Jaradat “was in love with a married man who duped her into believing that by dying a martyr’s death she would achieve equality” (2004:302).

By denying women’s willingness to participate in combat these studies reflect a conservative understanding which defines militancy as a field reserved for men and describes traditional gender roles. While some Palestinian women, in particular those

who are most exposed to Israeli military aggression in the Occupied Territories and in the camps, emphasize that women just as men have to defend their homeland and that women’s *istishhad* attacks are a sign of women’s liberation and equal readiness to die for the national cause (Interview, Ghanem, 2005; Nasar, 2005), the argument that they were also motivated by the feminist aim to initiate

change in women’s status quo seemed very far-fetched to all. Arguing that growing female emancipation has produced women’s striving for equality in militant struggle and for female *istishhad*, as Ghanem and Nasser (Interviews, 2005) and some Arab writers (e.g. Khuttab, 2003; Al-Bar’i on Al-Majd TV, 2004) do, is not a feminist statement. The feminist argument, which reverses this logical order and finds that Palestinian women carry out *istishhad* attacks to fight against female oppression in their own society, is a stereotypical Western prejudice. Palestinian women’s experience during and after

the First Intifada has clearly shown them that women’s militant involvement at best brings short-term advances and that real empowerment must be achieved through working on other levels.

If one follows Münkler’s assertion (2001) that terrorism is a “communication strategy,” it is evident that these women aimed to communicate their message to the outside world, not to Palestinian men or Islamic clerics (Brunner, 2005) and that they were concerned with communicating the Palestinian people’s plight, not women’s subordination in patriarchal society or in fundamentalist groups. The statements of female militants themselves make clear that they “represent Palestinians, not women” (Leila Khaled quoted in *The Guardian*, 2001) and that “every Palestinian, whether man or woman, is a soldier” ( Hamas activist Baid quoted in Dviri, 2005). The fact that the attacks provoked a change in the Islamist discourse is a side effect, the girls’ determination to fight the occupation and to die for their country stemmed from their nationalist feelings as Palestinians and from the despair of the hopeless situation.<sup>13</sup> The rationale of militant resistance and *istishhad* attacks for them, just as for militant men, presents a less humiliating and more promising way to an independent Palestinian state than expedient negotiations.

In sum, *shaheedas* are neither “feminists” nor religious-fanatics but at best nationalists. Palestinian *istishhad* attacks, however cruel and morally intolerable, are a consequence of 50 years of occupation, humiliation and militarization of a people which has become hopeless in its fight against a militarily far superior enemy and has lost trust in their own leaders’ and the international community’s promise to support their quest for self-determination. At least from a Palestinian’s perspective, the Palestinian female – just as male – *istishhad* attacks are defensive, not offensive acts and thus will stop once Israeli aggression and occupation ends (see Fassihi, 2002; Reuter, 2003).

### Conclusion

The Palestinian women’s movement has made important advances, particularly during the last decade. They increased their official political participation, strengthened their lobbying power through the adoption of Islamic feminism, started joint peace-building with Israeli women’s groups and initiated changes in the before-exclusive Islamist discourse.

Despite its increased cooperation with national and

international powers, the movement remains autonomous: NGOs challenge the PNA’s patriarchal nature and discriminatory legal framework and Islamic feminists formulate indigenous gender policies based on the rulings of Islam. Their experiences during and after the First Intifada have made most Palestinian women aware of the fact that national and feminist policies must be tackled simultaneously.

This is true for a great number of Palestinian women, yet some, often those more directly affected by Israeli repressive policies, are marginalized. Their focus on the occupation rather than feminist issues and their resulting support of armed resistance renders them more receptive to the radical Islamist agenda. There is no question that currents of the Islamist discourse are extremely discriminatory against women. Nevertheless, some women feel empowered through their involvement in these groups. Although such choices might contradict women’s long-term interest, it is important not to ignore them because they are

part of women’s strategies and coping systems within their specific social and political context; they are what Kandiyoti terms “patriarchal bargains” (1991:1).

It is important to distinguish between these short-term bargains and long-term strategies. In the Palestinian context Islamic feminism promises to be such a strategy. It does not alienate the majority of society, such as Western-style feminism and, in contrast to the short-term “patriarchal bargain” of female militancy, can change the radical Islamic discourse permanently. Islam thus is a potentially positive model for women’s struggle. In view of the fact that media and academia have preferred to focus on Palestinian women’s secular political, feminist and peace activism – i.e. those areas that are most compatible with Western feminism – current developments, however, rather point to a revival of religious and indigenous responses. Future research that is sensitive to these latter fields is most necessary.

### Endnotes

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1. For such a perception see e.g. Abdo (1994), Al-Rawi (1994), Barron (2002), Galvanis-Grantham (1996), Jad (1990), Kuttub (1991). For an account which finds a negative correlation between the occupation and women’s liberation see Rubenberg (2001).
2. See Peteet’s (1991:142-174) exceptional study on the impact of Palestinian women’s armed resistance in Lebanon and Hasso’s (2005) and Brunner’s (2005) critical discussion of Palestinian women’s militancy in the Second Intifada.
3. Hanan Ashrawi, spokeswoman for the Palestinian delegation at Oslo, and the other two female delegates, Zahira Kamal and Suad Ameri, are rare exceptions and their nomination should not be overestimated. Although they gained their place as a result of their persistent struggle for women’s rights during the Intifada, their appointments can be seen as a “strategy of using women to sell international politics” (Sharoni, 1995:19) as well.
4. Israeli women’s peace organizations include Women in Black, Women for Palestinian Women Political Prisoners, and New Profile. For a detailed study see Emmet (1996) and Sharoni (1995:88-130).
5. JCW and the Jerusalem Link is funded, amongst other donors, by the European Commission (JCW webpage, 2005). Bat Shalom’s list of 33 donors includes US-Israel Women to Women, the German Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Swedish Kvinna till Kvinna (Bat Shalom webpage, 2005).
6. There are tensions within this argumentation between those

- who find that women enjoy such qualities naturally and those who consider them a result of patriarchal structures (Byrne, 1996). Generally, however, such studies find that women are freer to transcend boundaries and build bridges and that their nurturing motherly sentiments enable them to perceive peace in terms of shelter, protection and defense rather than militancy, aggression and warfare (e.g. Gilligan, 1983; Ruddick, 1989; Golan, 2004).
7. In a poll conducted by E. Dabit (2004:45), 76.9 percent of the respondents said they use their religious beliefs in order to cope with the current situation.
  8. Dalal Mughrabi participated in a kidnapping and was killed by Israeli security forces in 1978. Leila Khaled led a group of men to hijack a plane in 1969.
  9. During the resistance fighting in Lebanon, women also carried out *istishhad* attacks. Sana Mehaydali acted on behalf of a non-Islamist Lebanese organization when she detonated explosives in front of a group of Israeli soldiers in 1985 (Schweitzer, 2003).
  10. The Palestinian *shaheedas* of the Second Intifada are Wafa Idris (d. January 27, 2002), Dareen Abu Aisha (d. February 27, 2002), Ayat Akhras (d. March 29, 2002), Andaleeb Taqataqah (d. April 12, 2002), Hiba Daraghme (d. May 19, 2003), Hanadi Jaradat (d. October 4, 2003), Reem Reyashi (d. January 14, 2004), Zeinab Abu Salem (d. November 22, 2004).
  11. Daraghme’s and Reyashi’s attacks were prepared together with the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades (Brunner, 2005).
  12. Blaming Arab patriarchal culture for female *istishhad* attacks ignores the fact that female martyrs have been active worldwide (see Talbot 2001).
  13. See MacMillan (2002) for an exceptional article that reflects the view of girls longing to become *shaheedas* and Chediac (2002) and Foden (2003) for two more sensitive accounts that avoid falling into the trap of blaming only personal problems, patriarchal pressure or fundamentalist fanaticism for the attacks.

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## Colonial Feminists from Washington to Baghdad:

# Women for a Free Iraq as a case study<sup>1</sup>

### ■ Haifa Zangana

Iraqi-born novelist and former prisoner of Saddam Hussein's regime

#### Introduction

In the few months preceding and following the occupation of Iraq, several US-funded Iraqi women's NGOs were established in Washington. Their hastily staged birth was deemed necessary to engage "important voices which were missing from the debate – those of Iraqi women with personal experience of Saddam Hussein's oppression."<sup>2</sup> It was a last minute rush to provide the much-needed moral legitimacy to the immoral invasion.

I will argue that these US-Iraqi women's NGOs are an important part of the US combat team and an arm of the US government in Iraq representing its colonial policy rather than Iraqi people's interests, women in particular. They were instrumental in rallying support for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. They continue to do so. Furthermore, they have played a damaging role affecting the much-needed work by genuine independent women's organizations. Like the occupiers, they underestimated the Iraqi people's feelings against occupation. They confused the need to get rid of a tyrannical regime with imposing a new colonial order. Their "women's rights" claims are often seen by Iraqi women as the second supply-line of US colonial policy

in Iraq. At its best it is seen "cosmetic," as it fails to address the priorities of Iraqi women under occupation.

#### Background to Iraqi Women's NGOs

US policy towards NGOs was reformulated in the aftermath of September 11. President Bush's words, "You are either with us or against us" became the Holy Grail that governs all aspects of the American state's policy, including that toward NGOs. They have not been spared the transformation of many aspects of world politics that ensued from the "war on terror." Former Secretary of State Colin Powell outlined the new vision when, addressing NGOs in 2001, he argued: "Just as surely as our diplomats and military, American NGOs are out there serving and sacrificing on the frontlines of freedom, NGOs are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team."<sup>3</sup>

Andrew Natsios, the Administrator for the US Agency for International Development (USAID), bluntly spelled out the same vision. He told international humanitarian leaders that "NGOs and contractors are an arm of the US government."<sup>4</sup> Women's organizations are obviously included. That explains why the April 2003 State Department magazine featured a signed message from

the Secretary whose title tells it all: "Women's Issues Are Integral to Our Foreign Policy."<sup>5</sup>

How does this redefinition of policy reflect on US-Iraqi women's organization working in Iraq, a country the US government deems vital to its national interests?

#### Establishment of an Iraqi Women's NGO

Several US-funded Iraqi women's organizations were established either immediately before or after the invasion of Iraq. They all described themselves as NGOs and began working in Iraq immediately after "mission accomplished" having accompanied the US troops. They claimed to represent Iraqi people, women in particular. A typical example, and the most prominent of these women's NGOs, is Women For a Free Iraq (WFFI).

WFFI was established in Washington, DC in February 2003, a month before the invasion of Iraq. Two US institutions fathered WFFI: the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD) and the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq (CLI). But the call to establish WFFI came from FDD which is "A non-partisan, non-profit policy institute based in Washington, DC dedicated to winning the war of ideas."<sup>6</sup> Its board of directors are Steve Forbes, Jack Kemp and Jeane Kirkpatrick. Its distinguished advisors are Newt Gingrich and James Woolsey. Its advisors include Bill Kristol, Richard Perle and "members of Congress from both parties, as well as leading political figures from opposite sides of the political spectrum." They are all united in "recognizing the dangers facing the United States."<sup>7</sup>

Among the FDD's celebrated achievements was sending its representatives to the International Court of Justice at The Hague in February 2004 "to defend Israel's right to build a security fence to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks. FDD was the only non-partisan, non-religious, non-governmental organization at The Hague standing up for Israel's right to self-defense."<sup>8</sup>

FDD also twice provided the inspiration and support for the resurrection of the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), in 1950 and 1976, for the robust prosecution of the Cold War. CPD was resurrected recently to "oppose the new present danger: the danger posed by Jihadists – radical Islamists and Islamo-fascists – assisted by rogue regimes."<sup>9</sup>

It is worth emphasizing that FDD did not show any interest in Iraqi women's suffering before the build up the invasion of Iraq by the Bush administration. In fact, their suffering was totally ignored by the US administration and FDD alike over decades. Their timely interest in Iraqi women's suffering was conveniently ballooned for reasons best explained by themselves:

"When President George W. Bush was considering intervention in Iraq, FDD recognized that important voices were missing from the debate – those of Iraqis with personal experience of Saddam Hussein's oppression, brutality and genocide. FDD brought together a group of Iraqi women who could help Americans understand what had been taking place in Iraq – and what was at stake there."<sup>10</sup>

FDD brought together 50 Iraqi women (most of them US citizens) to establish WFFI. Its birth was embraced by Bush's administration in an unprecedented way. It was launched at the Foreign Press Center in Washington, DC on March 6, 2003, by Paula J. Dobriansky, Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs and attended by prominent members of WFFI: Tanya Gilly, Zainab Al-Suwaij, Maha Alattar and Esra Naama, who were received earlier in the day by White House officials.

Gilly, FDD Director of Democracy Programs, read the WFFI statement which made no mention of the administration's systematic silence towards the Iraqi people's plight for many decades, its support for Saddam Hussein's regime especially during the Iran-Iraq war, and imposing economic sanctions on the Iraqi people. "We are women who fled from Iraq to escape persecution by Saddam Hussein's regime. We have come together to speak up about the suffering of the Iraqi people under his regime and their yearning to be liberated,"<sup>11</sup> she read.

She went on: "We were honored to have the opportunity today to share with Vice President Cheney, Congresswoman Price, Dr. Condoleezza Rice, Dr. Wolfowitz, and Dr. Khalilzad the message that we expressed to President Bush in a letter last week."

In their statement, the WFFI sang homilies to the US administration, offered their support "To President Bush for his principled leadership," and applauded "the determination of the American Government to disarm Saddam, and its commitment to help liberate the people of Iraq."<sup>12</sup>

Thus, "Being grateful to the Americans for liberating us" has become the *bismAllah* (Islam's "in God's name" dedication used before the start of anything) of their speeches, media interviews, press conferences and photo opportunities with US officials.

Financially, WFFI was also supported by the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq (CLI) which was set up in late 2002 by Bruce Jackson, a director of the Project for the New American Century and dominated by neo-Conservatives and foreign policy hawks like Jeane Kirkpatrick, Robert Kagan, Newt Gingrich, Richard Perle, William Kristol and James Woolsey.<sup>13</sup>



In an interview with *The American Prospect's* John Judis, Jackson said that acquaintances in the Bush administration asked him if he could replicate the success he had had pushing for NATO expansion through his US Committee for NATO by establishing an outfit aimed at supporting the administration's campaign to convince Congress and the public to go along with a war. He said, "People in the White House said, 'We need you to do for Iraq what you did for NATO'." <sup>14</sup>

### Speaking for the Iraqi People

In its statement, WFFI claims that it speaks for the Iraqi people aiming to put an end to their suffering. What have members of WFFI done to justify this claim before and after the invasion of Iraq?

Since its establishment, WFFI worked relentlessly to echo the US call for war on Iraq. They claimed that the war on Iraq was the only means to liberate the Iraqi people and put an end to their suffering. This was in no way a reflection of the Iraqi people's needs and aspirations. In fact it was exactly the opposite of what the majority of Iraqis, Arabs, Muslims, and the international community were demanding and struggling to achieve. Furthermore, the WFFI chose not to see that it is women and children who bear the brunt of the absence of law and order, the lack of security, and the availability of weapons in the aftermath of war.

To understand how misleading the claims of WFFI are, it is worth listening to a few other Iraqi and non-Iraqi voices who campaigned against the war.

Act Together: Women's Action for Iraq (previously Women Against Sanctions and War on Iraq) warned in February 2003 that "If a new military assault takes place it is highly likely that much of Iraq's infrastructure will again be destroyed, with devastating effects for ordinary Iraqis." <sup>15</sup> Calling for no more bombs on Iraq, it reminded war pundits that "In the Gulf War, Western bombs transformed Iraq from a modern, urban society to a "pre-industrial age."

Iraqis in Exile Against War, a group of professionals, writers, teachers and other responsible and concerned citizens, many of whom have personally experienced the persecution of the dictatorship in Iraq, argued in an open letter <sup>16</sup>: "We are told a war on Iraq is needed to pre-empt a threat to the region and to free the Iraqi people from Saddam Hussein's tyranny. We as Iraqis already free from that tyranny, living outside Iraq and in the Western democracies, say that both these claims are false. We say: no to war; not in our name, not in the name of the suffering Iraqi people."

Like women members of Act Together they believe "that Saddam Hussain's regime is responsible for leading Iraq from a situation of great promise into one of unmitigated catastrophe, and this regime must be held to account for its abject failure and for the crimes it committed against the Iraqi people." But unlike WFFI and other organizations funded by the US administration, they warned that "the remedy must not cause greater damage to the innocent and to society at large."

To build a new, democratic Iraq, Iraqis in exile are convinced "that real change can only be brought about by the Iraqi people themselves within an environment of peace and justice for all the peoples of the Middle East. A change of this kind, combining truth and reconciliation with legal processes of punishing offenders is being espoused all over the world. Why shouldn't that be the case for Iraq?" and as an alternative to the war they called on the UN "to put together a timetable for the lifting of the economic sanctions and do all it can to halt the drive for war that will only plunge the region into the abyss. We also call on everyone to challenge the dangerous and irresponsible war plans of the US administration." <sup>17</sup>

In the wider Arab and Muslim world similar calls were made. Nine women's organizations signed a statement against the war, stating: "We, Arab women say 'NO to the war against Iraq' because we are certain that when armies invade, only destruction will prevail." <sup>18</sup>

At the international level, a joint statement by British aid agencies working either in Iraq or in the wider region, was issued to convey their belief that "Military action could cause a humanitarian catastrophe." The agencies included Action Aid, Cafod, Christian Aid, Oxfam GB, and Save the Children. <sup>19</sup>

Oxfam expressed a general sentiment on February 18, 2003: "The people of Iraq are still suffering the effects of bombing during the 1991 Gulf War. Twelve years of economic sanctions, and their own government's policies, have made things worse," and went on to emphasize that "those who propose war have not yet shown that any threat from Iraq is so imminent that it justifies the risk of so much human suffering." <sup>20</sup>

Human Rights Watch warned on February 13, 2003 that Iraqi civilians could face tremendous hardship if war disrupts their access to food and water.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches stated that "The war urged by Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair will undoubtedly increase the suffering of the people of Iraq and violence in the world rather than achieve a desirable

democratic outcome for the people of Iraq or increase world peace and security. Any war on Iraq will affect the lives of common people gravely. The children, young people, women and men of Iraq have suffered enough, without being subjected to yet another devastation." <sup>21</sup>

Peace movements, US historians, <sup>22</sup> legal experts and internationally recognized archeologists concurred. Millions of people in scores of countries took to the streets to protest against the pre-emptive war on Iraq, none of them defending Saddam Hussein's regime or dismissing his crimes but concerned about the safety of the Iraqi people, women and children in particular, the long term devastating effect on human life, and on the country's cultural heritage. All were proved to be right.

On March 20, 2003, at around 0230 GMT, America launched its first series of air strikes on Baghdad. Iraqis had to live the diary of war and death again. March 23, bombs and missiles began to strike Baghdad, in a massive scaling-up of air strikes that are designed, say the US military, to "shock and awe" the Iraqi people into submission. <sup>23</sup> March 31 – American B-52 bombers continue their heavy raids on Baghdad. Iraq says the last night's raids killed 106 civilians, the Red Cross warns of a humanitarian emergency as water supplies begin to run out in Basra. <sup>24</sup> US troops kill seven women and children at a checkpoint in Najaf, southern Iraq. April 5 – American tanks blasting their way towards the city. "I saw houses totally destroyed, with pieces of children flying in the air," an eyewitness said. Jamal Abd Hassan, the Director of Al-Yarmouk, the city's biggest casualty center, said: "Last night it was carnage," he said, "too many dead, and too many wounded." <sup>25</sup> US-led troops used thousands of tons of depleted uranium, MK77 (Napalm) and cluster bombs in their assault. They also managed to destroy much of what was rebuilt of the Iraqi infrastructure after the 1991 war.

At that very time, members of WFFI made more than 200 media appearances, including an interview with Barbara Walters to "offer their support to President Bush for his principled leadership." <sup>26</sup> With FDD's help, they twice visited the White House for meetings and photo opportunities with the President, the Vice President and the National Security Advisor. While Iraqi women were mourning the death of their loved ones and the destruction of their country, WFFI women were "instrumental in rallying support for the "liberation" of Iraq," as one of them, Esra Naama, put it to the press. "We want to thank President Bush and the troops that are there in the desert. Thank you for helping my people and for going to liberate my country." <sup>27</sup>

### Brands Multiplying

On April 21, a few days after Bush declared "mission accomplished" in Iraq, 19 members of WFFI attended a meeting to form The Women's Alliance for a Democratic Iraq (WAFDI) in order to be eligible for international aid. WAFDI is described as "an international non-partisan and not-for-profit women's rights organization, dedicated to a free and democratic Iraq with full and equal individual rights for women." <sup>28</sup> Basma Fakri was chosen as President, Susan Dakak, Vice President, Zakia Hakki, Administration Director, Tanya Gilly, Steering Committee. Some WAFDI members moved with the troops inside Iraq to develop "projects in advancing women's participation in rebuilding Iraqi Civil Society," examples of which I will highlight later.

WAFDI claims to be "The voice of our sisters by providing other venues of activities such as lobbying elected government officials, media appearances, and fostering awareness through letter writing campaigns. WAFDI will participate in fundraising, project proposals, and lobbying public agencies, funds, and symposiums." <sup>29</sup>

Most of their letters were addressed to US officials with a mantra like "we must all continue to fight evil," and headed with the phrase "the mission of the mothers and the daughters of the new Iraq." <sup>30</sup>

In August 2004, WAFDI helped to select women leaders from inside Iraq for a visit to the US, the highlight of which was a photo call with George Bush. "The Iraqi women were joined in the Oval Office by American soldiers who had just returned from Iraq. They were eager to thank the soldiers for their freedom and for their personal sacrifice on behalf of the Iraqi people. Raz Rasool, the Executive Director of WAFDI, characterized her meeting with the President saying, "We have met the brave soldiers, American soldiers... WAFDI worked closely with Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz, to create a bi-partisan agenda that would showcase the political process from the local level up to the White House." <sup>31</sup>

Another organization closely linked to WFFI is The American Islamic Congress (AIC). AIC was created after September 11, 2001 by an Iraqi-American woman called Zainab Al-Suwaij, herself later a founding member of WFFI. It describes itself as "An organization dedicated to building

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interfaith and interethnic understanding, in the belief that American Muslims should take the lead in fostering tolerance, respect for human rights, and social justice."<sup>32</sup> Zainab Al-Suwaij moved to Iraq with the US forces to be "actively engaged in reconstruction projects in Iraq."

The parent organization of the WFFI, the FDD, moved in again to establish an umbrella body for all women's and non-women's US-funded Iraqi NGOs, called the Iraq-America Freedom Alliance (IAFA).<sup>33</sup> This includes all members of WFFI in addition to WAFDI, the American Islamic Congress, and Iraq Foundation which was established in 1991 by Kanaan Makiya and Rand Rahim Francke.

According to FDD, this development was crucial for two reasons:

1. "When the major US news outlets did not adequately cover the progress in Iraq following liberation, FDD established a grassroots organization, the Iraq-America Freedom Alliance (IAFA), to tell the untold story of Iraq's fight to build a peaceful democracy. The alliance established a website to highlight the good news coming from Iraq. It also invited Iraqis to tour America and tell their stories of oppression under Saddam Hussein's regime, of gratitude for their liberation and of hope for a future as part of the Free World. These courageous Iraqis spoke to audiences and local media in cities across the country, and appeared in print and broadcast media more than 400 times."
2. "To win the war of ideas, FDD has launched a number of allied organizations. They operate under different "brands," but they all adhere to a consistent set of principles. In particular, all believe in defeating terrorism and defending freedom. It is critical that these many voices speak out to a multitude of audiences."<sup>34</sup>

IAFA was exceptionally active in August 2004, before the US general election, organizing speaking tours for Iraqi women and visiting military camps in the US. They thanked the US soldiers for their sacrifices in Iraq and painted a rosy picture of Bush's mission in Iraq.

Although these organizations, and some others based in the UK, are registered under a variety of names, and claim varying objectives and programs, they have, in fact, been established and run by the same handful of Iraqi women. Ala Talabani, a member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) Party, for example, is a co-founder of WFFI, then the Iraqi Women's High Council, in October 2003, then the Iraqi Women's Network in 2004. Rand Rahim Francke, the Executive Director of the Iraq Foundation, moved on to co-found WFFI. Tanya Gilly, Manager of the Democracy Program at the FDD is a founding member of WFFI then WAFDI. Zainab Al-Suwaij, Safia Al-Suhail etc. are in more than three NGOs at the same time.

### Projects in Iraq

US-funded NGOs moved to work inside Iraq immediately after "mission accomplished." Most prominent are WFFI, WAFDI, the Iraq Foundation and AIC. Their funding came primarily from the US State Department, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute, (NDI's President is Madeline Albright), the Independent Women's Forum (IWF).

The budget allocated for women's NGOs was several millions of US dollars. The funds go mainly for organizing conferences, training selected women to be "leaders on democracy, women's rights."

Here is an example of a conference attended by 150 women in the country. "The Heartland of Iraq Women's Conference" on democracy and women's rights in Hilla, was organized by WFFI in October 2003, with support from the FDD, the American Islamic Congress and the Iraq Foundation, and sponsored by the US Agency for International Development's Office of Transition Initiatives and the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in South-Central Iraq.<sup>35</sup>

The conference chair was Ala Talabani who acted as a liaison between women's groups around the country and the CPA and Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) which are perceived by the majority of Iraqis as the occupation authority and its puppet council. Zainab Al-Suwaij, Safia Al-Suhail and Rand Rahim Francke, were the organizers. US Ambassador Paul Bremer delivered the closing remarks, and brought with him a taped address by Condoleezza Rice. The ending was described as "a momentous ending to four very intense days" during which "the participants meticulously read everything we gave them. We distributed the only democratic constitution we could find in Arabic, the Swiss Constitution."<sup>36</sup>

The closing moment was described in an emotional way: "The women stood up and clapped, tears streaming down their faces. We knew something very special, maybe even historical, had taken place – speakers and participants alike were transformed by the experience."<sup>37</sup>

WFFI described the conference as instrumental in orchestrating the cooperation between women "positioned to take leadership roles in the new Iraq. In so doing, we went to the heart of conflict between extremism and freedom, where it is taking place today: in the minds of the Iraqi people."<sup>38</sup>

FDD continue to support and finance WFFI, WAFDI and others, organizing their efforts when needed, in the ser-

vice of US policy. "FDD arranged for Iraqi women to speak at the White House and to members of congress, organized letter-writing campaigns to Ambassador Bremer and the Iraqi Governing Council and built coalitions on behalf of Iraqi women that included liberal and conservative American women's groups."<sup>39</sup>

Here are excerpts from one of their letters dated July 24, 2003:

Dear President Bush,  
We are privileged that two of our representatives have the opportunity to meet with you once again, and convey our deepest gratitude for your leadership in launching Operation Iraqi Freedom and removing Saddam Hussein, a tyrant who endangered the whole world. The last time we had the honor of meeting with you at the White House on April 4, you moved us with your heartfelt commitment to helping the Iraqi people build a new, democratic Iraq.

The ongoing attacks against coalition soldiers remind us that the war to free Iraq is not over. Ba'athists and other anti-democratic forces in the region want to maintain Iraq in a state of chaos, and then use propaganda to turn Iraqis against the United States. They hope their attacks will pressure us to retreat. We must not allow that to happen: If our enemies succeed in Iraq, it will be a victory for tyrants and terrorists worldwide. (...)

The letter goes on to denounce a woman member of the IGC, and a plea to censure the media:

One critical issue is that the CPA continues to retain Ba'athists in positions of power: (...) One of the members of the new Iraqi Governing Council, Aquila Al-Hashemi. (...)

At the same time the CPA is not doing enough to counter anti-American propaganda. The coalition's spotty radio and TV broadcast service and local army newsletters are no match for the disinformation on the two television stations, four radio stations, and dozens of newspapers that Iran operates in Iraq, the Saudi intelligence's radio service and major Gulf TV stations such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya – all of which purposely present the United States in a bad light.<sup>40</sup>

Alongside these efforts and the US election campaign WAFDI hoped "To be able to bring at least three more groups of women through November to visit the United States and take courses before the election. These women are the best exposure to the American public to say thank you and to speak about what is really going on in Iraq."<sup>41</sup>

The US Department of State awarded FDD a grant to run a comprehensive democracy training program for Iraqi women beginning in the fall of 2004. The Iraqi Women's Educational Institute (IWEI) in partnership with the AIC and the IWF also benefited. Paula Dobriansky, US Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs, who announced the \$10 million grant, said, "we will give Iraqi women the tools. We will provide the information and experience they need to run for office, lobby for fair treatment in Iraq's emerging institutions."<sup>42</sup> The fact that the money will go mainly to organizations embedded with the US Administration – such as the Independent Women's Forum (IWF) founded by Dick Cheney's wife, Lynn Cheney, who has worked tirelessly over the years to oppose progress on women's issues in the United States – was not mentioned nor was it mentioned that Paula Dobriansky, who announced the grant, has also served on IWF's board of advisers. Recipients of the grants also include the Bangalore-based Art of Living Foundation, a volunteer organization that promotes yoga and other breathing exercises to "eliminate stress, create a sense of belonging and restore human values" and has been running classes in Tikrit.<sup>43</sup>

These training conferences continue in tandem with the US-designed "political process" in Iraq, i.e. the handing over of sovereignty, the elections, the drafting of the constitution etc. In April 2005, IWEI hosted the "Iraqi women leaders conference," where "150 Pro-democracy Iraqi women leaders from every corner of Iraq traveled to Jordan to participate in a historic five-day conference on the principles and practice of democracy and women's rights sponsored by the IWF and its partners in this endeavor, the AIC and FDD, and funded by IRI and NDI (who are said to have received \$80 million for the Iraqi elections) and IWF."<sup>44</sup> Iraq's official newspaper, *Al-Sabah* reported the conference as organized by the Iraqi Ministry for Women's Affairs.

Other projects inside Iraq are bizarre. WAFDI implemented a multi-phase "Love of Iraq" essay contest. The first phase took place during the 2003/04 school year. They claimed that the prize of \$100 per student per grade level was high for an average Iraqi family, but it was essential to attract the adults to help their children with this contest, so that "The love of the country will then be

*The ongoing attacks against coalition soldiers remind us that the war to free Iraq is not over.*

spread to the larger population much faster if it was approached through their children."<sup>45</sup>

Another WAFDI project was for Cultural Arts Paintings, designed to paint all the old picture murals of Saddam Hussein in Iraq with cultural and historical paintings. They claimed that "will give the Iraqis a constant reminder of how wonderful, beautiful, and historical country they live in."<sup>46</sup> A project with practical help to women in three locations in Baghdad and one in Nasiriyah was to provide women with sewing machines. The budget was exactly \$700.<sup>47</sup> However, no matter how small the project is, the USAID rules for NGOs had to be followed,<sup>48</sup> therefore, the local project managers in Iraq who received the amount on November 3, 2004 collected the names and information on the families that are in need of financial support and hence need sewing machines. To these families they had to explain that "the project is organized by a women's organization called WFDI which is interested in improving the status of women in Iraq."<sup>49</sup>

A more public role for the women's NGOs has been in the political process, including more recently campaigning "to preserve women's rights in Iraq's new constitution". Representatives of two women's groups were in Washington, DC on August 4, to rally support for their cause. Zainab Al-Suwaij, Executive Director of the AIC, and Basma Fakri, WAFDI, appeared at a "Newsmaker" event at the National Press

Club, this time to represent other newly established Iraq-based organizations, the More Than One Source campaign and the Iraqi Women's Network (Amal), respectively. Leaders of the campaign in Iraq include Rand Rahim Francke, the former Iraqi Representative to the US, and Safia Al-Suhail, Iraq's Ambassador to Egypt and known to American audiences for her appearance at the last State of the Union address, where she was personally welcomed by President Bush. The IWEL, a joint project of the AIC, the FDD, and the Independent IWF, supported the efforts by Iraqi women leaders in the Press Club event to establish equal rights for women in the new constitution.<sup>50</sup>

#### Reality of Iraqi Women

What about Iraqi women, their reality and aspirations? And how do they perceive the work of colonial feminists in Iraq?

From the start, the US Administration chose to perceive

Iraqi women as silent, powerless victims in a male dominated society in urgent need of social and political "liberation." That was borrowed from the image they created for Afghan women. The most striking example of this stereotyping comes from the CPA's representative, Joanne Dickow, who began working with Iraqi women in April 2003. Recalling the timid response she received in a meeting from Iraqi women, she says: "There was this incredible sense by the Iraqi women of 'Oh my goodness, what do you mean we are going to get involved in politics?' ...And there was this sense of 'oh, these are doctors, lawyers and engineers'." Dickow explained that women had been largely excluded from the political process, and said: "Getting them to understand that this was their time was probably the hardest job of all at the beginning."<sup>51</sup>

This image fits conveniently into the overall picture of the Iraqi people as passive victims who would "welcome the occupation of their country with flowers and sweets."<sup>52</sup>

The reality is, of course, entirely different. Iraqi women have been actively involved in public life going as far back as the Ottoman Empire. This can be seen in Iraq's public schooling, in the media and in women's participation in political life.

Women were involved in political activity, including combat, going back at least to the 1920 revolution against the British occupation. Feda'aha Al-Ezairjiya of Amara, the "poetess of the twenties revolution," joined the fighters to replace her brother who was killed in battle. Nazik Al-Malaika (b. 1924), the most important poetess and critic in the Arab world, blended Iraqi nationalism and solidarity with the Palestinian and Algerian struggles against occupation as well as broader struggles for freedom and social justice. Women were active in various political parties during the entire period, and, by 1952, there were 150 women political prisoners.<sup>53</sup>

All of this reflected the same principle: Fighting alongside men, women were also liberating themselves. This was proven in the aftermath of the 1958 revolution ending the British-imposed monarchy when, within two years, women's organizations achieved what over 30 years of British occupation failed to: legal equality.

These struggles and achievements, the result of slow organic processes, led UNICEF to report in 1993:

Rarely do women in the Arab world enjoy as much power and support as they do in Iraq. The 1970 Constitution affirmed the equality of all citizens before the law, and guaranteed equal opportunities without discrimination by sex. According to labor law number 71 enacted in 1987, men and women must receive equal pay for equal work.

Women working in the government sector are entitled to a one-year maternity leave, receiving their full salary for the first six months and half salary for the next six months. A wife's income is recognized as independent from her husband's. She has the right to vote, hold office, acquire and dispose of agricultural land. In 1974, education was made free at all levels, and in 1979/80 it was made compulsory for girls and boys through the age of twelve. These legal bases provide a solid framework for the promotion of women and the enhancement of their role in society. They have had a direct bearing on women's education, health, labor and social welfare.<sup>54</sup>

Other developments were also reported by UNICEF in 1998: Women's industrial employment increased from 13 percent in 1987 to 21 percent in 1993; in the same year, female employees constituted 79 percent of the services sector, 43.9 percent of the professional and technical sectors and 12.7 percent of administrative and organizational posts.<sup>55</sup> Iraq also had one of the highest literacy rates in the Arab world, 22 universities, 45 vocational colleges and approximately 14,000 schools. There were more professional women in positions of power than in almost any other Middle Eastern country.<sup>56</sup>

Despite all of this progress, the tragedy was, of course, that women were living under Saddam Hussein's oppressive regime. Members of the National Assembly were not elected but appointed. There was no legal protection for victims of crimes of the regime. It is true that women occupied high political positions, including 27 out of 250 seats in the National Assembly, but they did nothing to protest the injustices inflicted on their sisters who opposed the regime. The same is now happening in "the new democratic Iraq."<sup>57</sup>

After "liberation," Bush had a vision for Iraq that trumpeted women's advancement as a centerpiece of his policy of "democratization." And, indeed, in the White House, Women For a Free Iraq recited what Bush desperately needed to hear, justifying the invasion of Iraq. Those women have been rewarded generously in Allawis' CIA-backed government and the subsequently "elected" interim government. The US political rewards to WFFI included three cabinet ministers, a deputy minister, Iraq's ambassador to Egypt, and Iraq's ex-representative to the United States.

The gap between those women members of the interim government and the majority of Iraqi women widened by the day. While cabinet ministers and the US-UK embassies are cocooned inside the fortified Green Zone, Iraqis are denied the basic right of walking safely in their own streets. Iraqi women's daily lives are marked by this violent turmoil. Lack of security and a fear of kidnapping

effectively preventing them from participating in public life. Occupation troops are immune to prosecution under Iraqi or international law.

The killing of academics, journalists and scientists has not spared women: On October 27, 2004, Liqa Abdul Razaq, a newsreader at Al-Sharqiya TV, was shot with her two-month-old baby in the Aldoura district of Baghdad. Layla Al-Saad, Dean of Law at Mosul University, was slaughtered in her house. Maha Ibrahim, Editor-in-Chief of Baghdad TV, was killed on July 3, 2005. She is thought to have been shot by US military gunfire.<sup>58</sup>

The Iraqi journalist Raeda Mohammed Wageh Wazzan of the regional public TV station Iraqiya was found dead on February 25, five days after she and her son were kidnapped by masked gunmen in the center of the northern city of Mosul. She was shot in the head.

Wazzan was the 21st journalist to be kidnapped in Iraq since the start of the war in March 2003.

It is important to emphasize that the reality of Iraqi women under occupation is that of all Iraqis, the reality of women as citizens. Gender issues are situated in an overall frame, whereby the family, health, education, and survival dominate every minute of the day.

Iraqi women are outraged to see their country's resources robbed while they live in slums, drink water mixed with sewage and have no say in the political process. They witness the looting of their country by Halliburton, Bechtel, mercenaries, contractors, and local subcontractors. According to a study conducted by Iraq's Health Ministry in cooperation with Norway's Institute for Applied International Studies and the UN Development Program, acute malnutrition has doubled among children. This figure translates to roughly 400,000 Iraqi children suffering from "wasting," a condition characterized by chronic diarrhea and dangerous deficiencies of protein.<sup>59</sup> Unemployment at 70 percent is, of course, exacerbating poverty, prostitution, back street abortions and honor killing.

Ediba Nouman, a distinguished Iraqi academic who was dismissed by Saddam Hussein's regime in the eighties, re-applied for her old job as a lecturer at Basra University. In

*... the reality of Iraqi women under occupation is that of all Iraqis, the reality of women as citizens.*

order to start the process she was asked to provide a letter from Al-Hawze (Shia religious scholar authority) to prove her affiliation with one of the sectarian parties controlling the IIG.

House raids and random arrest are features of the new Iraq. Women and children, though they themselves might not be arrested, are obvious victims of these. The raids seem to exhibit a general pattern which was summarized in a February 2004 report by the International Committee of the Red Cross, based on its own investigation of reported incidents:

Arresting authorities entered houses usually after dark, breaking down doors, waking up residents roughly, yelling orders, forcing family members into one room under military guard while searching the rest of the house and further breaking doors, cabinets, and other property. They arrested suspects, tying their hands in the back with flexicuffs, hooding them, and taking them away. Sometimes they arrested all adult males in the house, including elderly, handicapped, or sick people. Treatment often included pushing people around, insulting, taking aim with rifles, punching and kicking, and striking with rifles. Individuals were often led away in whatever they happened to be wearing at the time of arrest – sometimes pajamas or underwear... In many cases personal belongings were seized during the arrest with no receipt given... In almost all incidents documented by the ICRC, arresting authorities provided no information about who they were, where their base was located, nor did they explain the cause of arrest. Similarly, they rarely informed the arrestee or his family where he was being taken or for how long, resulting in the de facto disappearance of the arrestee for weeks or even months until contact was finally made.<sup>60</sup>

Since the nominal handover of sovereignty on June 30, 2004, Iraqis have witnessed an escalation of Israeli-style collective punishment of Iraqi cities. Civilian carnage, coupled with enormous damage to homes and infrastructure, has become a daily reality. Mass punishments have become the language of occupation. Twelve cities were attacked in 2004. Most devastated of all was Fallujah. Camps around Fallujah had been erected to receive displaced women and children. Men aged 15-50 were not allowed to leave the city, so 150,000 waited in anguish for news of fathers, husbands and sons. The execution-style killing of the wounded Iraqi inside a Fallujah mosque by a US marine, captured by NBC television, was one of many, according to an eyewitness interviewed by Al-Jazeera television at the time.

The plight of the people of Fallujah is not unique. In Tall Afar, a city of about 300,000 inhabitants in the north, US

troops cut off water for three days in September 2004 and blocked food supplies to 150,000 refugees. Then in Samarra, residents cowered in their homes as tanks and warplanes pounded the city. Bodies were strewn in the streets but could not be collected for fear of American snipers. Of the 130 Iraqis killed, most were civilians. Hospital access was denied to the injured. Tal Afar was besieged and its people displaced again in September 2005.

The response of US-Iraqi "feminist" women's organizations to the daily violations of human and women's rights in occupied Iraq has been highly selective. The suffering of their sisters in cities showered by US jet fighters with napalm, phosphorus and cluster bombs, the destruction of archaeological sites, the daily killing of civilians by occupation forces, all of this is met with rhetoric about "training for democracy."

#### Iraqi Women and the National Liberation Movement

The architects of the occupation claim that it is Iraqis themselves who are beyond the reach of democracy, hence the need identified by the occupation apologists for running the "training for democracy workshops for Iraqi women" so that in the future they get involved in the peaceful democratic political process.

But Iraqis did and continue to do so, including women, albeit in a different frame than that designed by the colonial feminists. Over the last two years grassroots women's groups have organically grown within new movements or independently, unlike the colonial feminist NGOs. They have identified their own priorities and timing. They have joined protests, appeals, initiatives to set up a reasonable program for elections, the opening of human rights centers, lecturing at universities, even poetry writing. This torrent of activism is still being practiced by a broad variety of political parties, women's groups and individuals who oppose the foreign occupation. And they have been ignored. Newspapers were closed. Editors were arrested. Demonstrators were shot at, arrested, abused and tortured.

The Iraqi National Foundation Congress (INFC), an anti-occupation umbrella of about 20 political, cross-sectarian religious associations, veteran political leaders, and civil society organizations, includes two women's organizations, Iraqi Women's Will (Director Hana Ibrahim), and the Association of Iraqi Women (Director Dr. Maha Al-Hadithi). Individually women also participate in the Jurist Association and other unions affiliated to the Congress. The Popular Campaign to boycott Israeli and American Goods is headed by Dr. Haseeba Shia', a veteran GP at the Sadr City Hospital who is also a Member of the Congress.

#### To Summarize

Colonial feminists were instrumental in lobbying for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. They are also a political card repeatedly used in imposing the timetable of the occupation. They apply US policy by proxy, which has nothing to do with Iraqi people.

George W. Bush repeatedly utilized the colonial feminists at the times he needed justification for his policies or as a cover-up for his failures in Iraq. For his State of the Union address on February 2, 2005, Safia Taleb Al-Suhail was invited. Guests are usually selected by the White House as living embodiments of crucial administration policies. To no one's surprise, Al-Suhail, who had recently voted in the Iraqi election, sat next to Laura Bush, and waved her index finger stained purple to the packed chamber of the House of Representatives below, staged to promote a president whose Iraq policy is increasingly unpopular at home. Bush spoke first of one of the objectives of the war: "Our men and women in uniform are fighting terrorists in Iraq, so we do not have to face them here at home." Then he praised by name Safia Al-Suhail, a founding member of WFFI: "One of Iraq's leading democracy and human rights advocates (...). She says of

her country, 'We were occupied for 35 years by Saddam Hussein. That was the real occupation. Thank you to the American people who paid the cost, but most of all, to the soldiers.' And we are honored that she is with us tonight."<sup>61</sup>

Meanwhile an Iraqi poet and mother, Nedhal Abbas writes:

#### *Sura-Mn-Ra'a*<sup>62</sup>

*On Friday morning  
In Sura-Mn-Ra'a  
A young man lies in pieces  
Torn apart by sniper's fire  
A woman  
In black a'baya  
Passes by  
Holding her toddler by the hand.  
The child  
Stares at the remains,  
At a hand opened to the sky.  
He reaches for a touch,  
Wondering  
Could it be his father's?*

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# Women's Participation and Personal Status Issues in Post-War Lebanon\*

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## Introduction

Women's participation in current debate has been widely used and disseminated through various international development and women's rights forums alike. In the most common and recently used sense, women's participation means actively involving women in decision-making.<sup>1</sup> Transferred to the Lebanese context, the concept has been largely interpreted by state and non-state actors as formal political decision-making and less so as participation in fighting for personal status rights both at the levels of the family or social groups mobilization.

Personal status issues in Lebanon constitute a major area of discrimination. The current 19 religious personal status laws provide uneven and largely unfair rights and liabilities for female and male citizens within one confession and between different religious confessions.<sup>2</sup> Throughout Lebanon's recent history, personal status issues were raised through two overlapping approaches. Rights-based approaches advocated optional civil personal status law proposals since the 1950s. In response, various political and social actors repetitively dismissed the "personal status problem" as too sensitive, controversial or simply nonexistent, perceiving these efforts as destabilizing the Lebanese confessional-based political system. Post-Beijing initiatives

were influenced by the emerging approach of resisting violence against women and included personal status issues within its legal and social dimensions. They thrived to provide legal and palliative assistance to affected women, while continuing to call for legal reforms. Social and political actors were less reluctant to adopt the violence standpoint, despite some gendered, patriarchal and religious counter-arguments. Within this action on personal status issues, the concept of women's participation has not been much used in the general discourse of various actors. Moreover, no grassroots movements outside of formal Lebanese women's NGOs (LWNGOs) have organized to lobby for change, nor did the existing LWNGOs succeed in gaining momentum for substantial change.

This article aims at exploring the institutional factors that affect women's participation in personal status issues. It starts by exploring the emergence of the concept of women's participation from feminist, human rights and development discourses. It then provides a detailed analysis of the role of the official and non-governmental discourses, informal and religious networks in facilitating or hindering possibilities for women's participation in personal status issues. The article ends with a few observations that aim at bridging the gaps around this issue. The primary method

for data collection included in-depth interviews with women and activists. A review of secondary material and participant observation of several forums and activities of concerned LWNGOs and umbrella organizations were also used. Analysis of data can be described as language conscious<sup>3</sup> due to its focus on symbolic meanings behind expressions in an unstructured discourse analysis.

### The Rise of Women's Participation: Feminism Meets Human Development

Women's participation became a prominent concept in the 1990s within international and local civil society actors throughout the world. It was developed as a cross-breed of the two conceptual realms of feminism and human development.<sup>4</sup> The alliance and evolution of these two concepts insured the popularity of the term despite their distinctive traditions.

Around the first half of the twentieth century, the much earlier concept of "women's rights" encapsulated the founding principles of the Western feminist movement by relating primarily to citizenship. The right to full citizenship meant equal – and later on special – legal rights than men in areas as varied as civil political, social and economic rights. Feminist movements were essentially composed of individual activists and non-governmental women's groups advocating their cause to their governments and later on to the newly formed United Nations Organization.

The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights issued in 1948 included broad principles of rights advocated by feminist demands. This international instrument initiated a "rights-based" approach towards addressing inequality issues. The rights approach was further affirmed through the drafting of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1966. However, this approach took prominence in Western contexts in contrast to non-Western ones that were still subjugated to colonialism. Another state-led initiative, Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), was chiefly concerned with non-Western contexts and overshadowed human rights discourses. Building a "development" discourse, ODA was also concerned with winning over post-colonial allies within the fifties and sixties Cold War race era.<sup>5</sup> This assistance targeted economic and social issues through large blueprint structural projects that incurred high costs, inadequate needs assessment of local communities, and total oblivion to women's issues.

The rights-based instruments finally addressed women-specific discrimination by launching the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in the seventies. This instrument was needed after earlier instruments failed to effectively address women-spe-

cific issues.<sup>6</sup> In the same era, the development discourse witnessed the rise of concepts of participation and empowerment as alternative development methods. The appeal as well as criticism of the concept was based on its adaptability to various opposing development schools from both left and right wings. Reformist development experts such as Robert Chambers<sup>7</sup> coined the term "roles reversals" considering local communities as the real "experts" and advocating their involvement in every step of projects design and implementation in a reversal of authority and ownership. Liberation theology led by Paolo Freire<sup>8</sup> in Latin America also relied on participation to release communities from poverty and economic and intellectual oppression. The neo-liberal agenda also promoted participation because it suited their minimalist state-spending approach. In this period, participation was still not directed towards women, and the Women In Development approach initiated by the UN in 1975 included women in a simplistic add-on effect to development processes.

In this way, feminism was mainstreamed within development and still had to reach out for participation. Participation was criticized from a feminist standpoint, since the use of "community" as an analytical unit ignored several power dimensions, and excluded vulnerable groups and mainly women. Women And Development (WAD) drew women as actors in the development process. Women's participation increased with this approach as they became more involved and targeted in specific initiatives.

The eighties witnessed further rapprochement between feminist and development discourses. The gender standpoint moved away from the controversial men/women dichotomy into questioning preconceived socially and culturally defined gender roles and gendered order. In the nineties, human rights and international development discourses further reconciled with the rise of a "rights-based development approach" following Sen's seminal work.<sup>9</sup> Participation was perceived as an essential tool to reach full citizenship and achieve good governance.<sup>10</sup> In addition Gender And Development (GAD) was adopted as a development strategy. The Declaration to Resist Violence Against Women in 1994 and gender mainstreaming, adopted at the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference for Women, sealed the alliance towards gender equality and women's participation and empowerment.

In the following section, I will be tracing the possibilities for effective women's participation in personal status issues in Lebanon. I will use the definition of participation as "a process in which individuals are empowered to take part in decision-making over resources, claim their rights and hold the authorities responsible for ensuring their rights."<sup>11</sup> This definition allows for a broad understanding of participation. First, it includes the individual dimension that is often omit-

ted from other collective community participation notions. Applied to the Lebanese case, it allows us to venture beyond "professional" women's groups towards individual women who are experiencing injustice in the form of personal status issues. Second, it recognizes broader types of participatory activities in addition to formal activism and lobbying, such as possibilities of acquiring their rights and engaging in institutional changes. This specifically applies to the Lebanese case where women are challenged from gaining their basic personal status rights (i.e. fair terms of divorce, custody and alimony) and deprived of holding legal institutions accountable for their commitment to fair law application and treatment. Thus, this article focuses on the ways in which the participation of women experiencing personal status issues is affected by the various institutions (state, civil society, family, religious bodies). It will examine the extent to which these institutions perceive women and their issues, facilitate their claims of individual personal status rights and include them in decision-making and their accountability mechanisms.

### Personal Status Issues and Participation in Lebanon: State Framing of Women's Participation: The Personal is Not Political

Women's participation in Lebanon has been mainly framed within different and sometimes contradictory meanings by various government and non-governmental actors. Official actors shaped these local meanings mainly around a quantitative notion of formal political participation. For example, the "Women's Political Participation" and "Gender Empowerment" measures within UNDP's socio-economic indicators<sup>12</sup> almost exclusively rely on the percentage of women MPs, the dates of women's suffrage and first woman MP election.<sup>13</sup> The meaning of "political" is in this case restricted to the public sphere of representational politics.<sup>14</sup> Discrimination in the private sphere (such as personal status laws) is disregarded and along with it the "personal is political"<sup>15</sup> motto that third world feminists thrived to voice.

As emphasis on political participation grows, personal status issues are subdued, further entrenching the public/private divide. In the recent Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Lebanon report, personal status issues were omitted from the pool of challenges facing Lebanese women and were rather positioned as an exception to a generally favorable legal framework:

Lebanese laws **do not include** articles that discriminate between men and women in terms of rights and obligations, **except** those related to personal status and the right of women to confer their nationality to husband and children... Despite Lebanon's reservations on three basic articles (Article 9 covering nationality, Article 16 on personal status, and Article 29 on arbitration), the ratification of the convention **represented a positive step**.<sup>16</sup>[My emphasis.]

The report's recommendations included general statements advocating the need to remove reservations on the CEDAW and amend all laws accordingly, without specifically mentioning personal status issues.<sup>17</sup> This positioning reduces the intensity of the debate and curbs women's possibilities for rallying public support around this issue.

In state literature, the public and private were described using a broader and less confrontational language. Participation was encouraged as a tool for broader decision making: "Real participation takes shape through mutual conviction – between men and women – in joint and integrated action; contributing to political decision-making; and influencing the decision-making centers at all levels."<sup>18</sup> In contrast, suggestions to address personal status issues included:

To review legislation related to women and the family amending laws that continue to discriminate. It is necessary to amend some prejudiced laws, and reality confirms the profound gap prevailing among the various texts and legislation, and the effective practices vis-à-vis women. Generally, men and women are not adequately aware of women's rights stipulated in the legislation, laws and international agreements. It is thus necessary to follow-up with legal education and awareness in order to amend existing laws and make new ones, as well as to change the traditional mentality.<sup>19</sup>

The milder and broader taxonomy of "women and the family" instead of religious personal status laws is used to dilute the sensitiveness surrounding the issue of legal reform. Also, claims about citizens' legal ignorance masks the severity of legal discrimination and the crucial responsibility that political and religious decision makers have in reforming these laws. Furthermore, these claims block the dissemination of accurate information pertaining to needed legal reforms. One example is the following MDGs statement: "The Lebanese constitution affirms equality among all citizens, irrespective of gender."<sup>20</sup> A legal reading of the constitution contradicts this claim. Article 19 of the amended post-war constitution (i.e. Taif agreement) indicates "the right of referral to the constitutional council is granted to ... religious leaders of legally recognized confessional groups exclusively in relation to personal status, freedom of belief, religious practices and freedom of religious education."<sup>21</sup> This clause indicates that constitutional provisions can indeed halt citizen's participation – including women – in lobbying for personal status laws amendments, by granting extensive powers to religious leaders.

### Civil Society and Personal Status Issues: Women's Participation in the Problem and the Solution

The women-focused civil society scene provides a more comprehensive understanding of women's participation.

The major LWNGOs or women's umbrellas dealing in one form or another with personal status laws (or violence against women) referred in some way to participation. Both the Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering (LWDG) and the Non-Governmental Committee for the Follow-Up of Women's Issues assumed broad notions of participation. Their goals included "activate[ing] women's participation in the economic social and political fields" and "include[ing] women in decision-making [with the LWDG specifying the following] within the family, at work, in general politics."<sup>22</sup> This understanding of participation would fall within the definitions of broad participation within both the private and public spheres.

Other LWNGOs went beyond participation as "inclusion" towards a self-representation as a vehicle for citizens' and women's activism. The "Support Committee for an Optional Civil Personal Status Law" portrayed itself as a popular movement inclusive of various groups of citizens. Their introductory statement read: "Who are we? Regular citizens, students, trade unions, political parties, civil society organizations, human rights activists..."<sup>23</sup> The campaign's slogan is "We are all concerned, men, women, and youth."<sup>24</sup> The Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women (LECRVAW) promoted itself as a platform for women to achieve empowerment: "Through LECRVAW, women can rally support, publicize abuse and get free legal counseling... In order to help and encourage abused women to stand up and fight for their rights, LECRVAW has put at the disposal of these women free legal aid and counseling services."<sup>25</sup>

Civil society's analysis of the obstacles towards women's participation intersects with the official discourse. It considers women as simultaneously part of the problem and the solution in a psychological approach:

LECRVAW is at the front line of the gender battle in Lebanon today... The major obstacle facing women is their passive nature which instigates and encourages more violence, and this is mainly due to the lack of awareness of women's basic human rights... Our group of lawyers will help you understand your rights as well as help you through the different steps that you may choose to take. You must always remember that it is your choice and your rights that determine what you want to do. The last word should always be yours.<sup>26</sup>

In this way, women are represented paradoxically as passive and rational actors and in any case in a separate category than the organization's activists.

#### Women's Realities and Institutional Gaps to Participation

Interviews with women contested this psychological

approach. Broader and external constraints limit their endeavors in solving their issues and reaching out for LWNGO's services and advocacy for change. They are taken by institutional and informal channels within their immediate environment. Unfair custody laws in most cases take away women's custody of their children after divorce. Also, ill-defined alimony laws also deprive women – and their children – of sufficient funds. Many interviewees traded off alimony for custody after tiresome negotiations with husbands, meaning that their economic burden is doubled. Others had to give up assets such as property or money to reach settlement.

Women also tend to be inhibited by the crushing influence of the family. It constitutes women's primary and sometimes only support system and uses this power to restrain them from active participation in solving their issues.

My father agreed to my first divorce on condition that I leave my child to my first husband, because I was still young and would have a better chance of getting married a second time. Then under their [her parents'] pressure I had my second marriage within six months. Since then and over 20 years I have undergone marital violence and there is no way that my parents would accept a second divorce. All they do is mediate and preach him not to do it again.<sup>27</sup>

Women tended to learn about LWNGO's services as a last resort, usually after all other options were exhausted. Respondent 2 benefited from family support at the expense of guiltifying her and restricting her from social interaction and mobility. This restriction drastically limits her from exploring possibilities for participation within local LWNGOs operating in her neighborhood:

Although my parents didn't agree to my wedding, they had no choice. Within six months when things started turning really bad, I went back to them. I delivered my baby there and they supported us throughout. My father had to sell his land to pay for all legal fees and expenses. ... He is very strict and doesn't allow me to go out. I have no friends and don't know of any organization that would provide such support services.<sup>28</sup>

The link between women and LWNGOs is also weakened by another informal channel. Friends, when available, constitute an intimate and safe network that women would rely on for solving their personal status issues. A friend of respondent 3 introduced her to a trainee psychotherapist who provided her with free consultations.<sup>29</sup> She believes that this linkage was only possible through such an informal channel, and she was not able to get this type of assistance despite regularly using the local social care center for other services. Respondent 4, introduced to me by an LWNGO member, preferred to seek her friend's help in getting a

lawyer's legal advice despite the availability of the same services in the concerned LWNGO.<sup>30</sup>

Religious courts are sought by women rather by necessity than choice. These courts reconcile state apparatus bureaucratic rigidity with an informal geographic-sectarian patronage network. This combination minimizes women's chances in advocating fairer terms and reaching greater decision-making. Interviewed women manifested great dissatisfaction with the courts' procedures. Exorbitant charges, delays and corruption in addition to overt sexist preferential treatment are to many women's disadvantage. The crushing power of religious judges transforms court hearings into a personality muscle flexing and favoritism. The courts' proceedings are often undocumented and based on informal pleas and decisions. Religious judges have gained such powers due to the structure of the personal status court system that combines a civil structure and a religious mandate. The legal text organizing these courts includes specific instructions, but the juridical authority of religious judges is derived from the wider unlimited religious mandate.<sup>31</sup>

#### Discourses in Action: Glass Ceiling to Women's Participation

The application of prevailing social gendered norms remains the most detrimental to women's participation. Resulting biased discourses are equally reinforced by various types of actors – sympathizers or antagonists – involved in women's personal status issues.

LWNGOs' daily discourses about women's issues in general and personal status issues in specific suggest essentialist notions limiting women's participation. Written and verbal communication of LWNGOs' activists in formal and informal settings almost exclusively refer to "the woman" in its singular form with little reference to socio-economic, geographic and confessional variables shaping women's conditions in Lebanon. Such portrayal of women into one imagined, abstract and ahistorical archetype segregates them from the concrete category of "activists."

This homogenization and separation is also performed by affiliated professional staff albeit in a modified form. During interviews with lawyers, social workers and psychologists, the term "case/cases" was constantly used when referring to various women. Although initially adopted to preserve confidentiality, it extended to mean a faceless category of "beneficiaries" blurring distinctive needs and potentials. This imagined homogenized category might have been necessary to block heavy emotional involvement by overworked staff but also creates a hierarchical "expert-lay" relationship inhibiting women's participation.

Within their daily interactions, members and professional

staff dropped the formal discourses of neutrality and unconditional support to women. One professional staff member stated that "I try as much as possible to deter women from going for divorce, I try my best not to let her "ruin her life" [Arabic transliteration *tikhrob bayta*], if after much advice she wants to do it, then there is nothing to do."<sup>32</sup> This statement was also repeated by respondent 6 who stated that "she has no income; she has nowhere to go, she's got kids, she'd better remain in her marriage and put up with it."<sup>33</sup> Interestingly the same strategy was also mentioned by women's lawyers as well as religious authorities.<sup>34</sup> These approaches discourage women from breaking the injustice cycle and collectively advocating their issues.

These discourses cannot but be directly linked to a gendered order based on a legitimated vilification of women: "Some women are really unbearable, if I were in their husbands' place I would also be hitting her" or "between us, some women really bring it [violence] upon themselves. They provoke their husbands so much leaving them no choice but to retaliate."<sup>35</sup> Various involved actors such as religious leaders, security forces, LWNGOs members, and professional staff routinely repeated these condemning statements, proving the widening gap between formal and informal discourses.

#### Conclusion

This article started with a brief historical review of the concept of women's participation and its formation as a hybrid from various feminist, human rights and human development discourses. A broad working definition was adopted so as to analyze women's participation in personal status issues in Lebanon. Using this definition, the article then traced the influence of the various institutions surrounding women who are experiencing such issues. Official and non-governmental discourses showed discrepancy in meanings of participation. Official institutions framed participation mainly into public formal representational politics while LWNGOs used the broader meaning of multilayered decision-making. These discourses intersected by emphasizing women's legal ignorance and passivity about the discriminatory legal-social set up. Such a focus decreases the possibilities to critically assess and address the wider inter-related obstacles preventing women from making these choices. This emphasis was then contrasted with women's realities within various networks. Women's participation was curbed by uneven power relations resulting from their dependence on religious courts, family and friends networks. Rather than legal illiteracy, obstacles lie in the unfair legal provisions and proceedings provided by various courts. Finally, the article exposed the ways in which such discourses and hindrances are put in action and reinforce gendered and discriminatory social norms. An essentialized view of "the woman" and "the case" prevailing in governmental and non-governmental discourses reflects

another type of glass ceiling that blocks women from actively participating in solving their own issues. The study has shown that these norms and discourses have been located within various involved actors – including LWNGOs themselves – and were found to clearly be to the disadvantage of women. These discourses generated and reinforced by informal and formal networks create a disabling

environment that does not support women experiencing personal status issues. They discredit women's ordeals and pressure them into shying away from initially disclosing their problems or taking action to stop injustice and mobilize support. Effectively targeting these norms is a priority to enhance women's participation in decision making and gaining fair personal status rights.

## Endnotes

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28. Personal interview with unnamed respondent 2, woman experiencing personal status issues. Beirut July 21, 2005.
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34. Personal interviews with unnamed respondent 8, Shiite religious authority, Beirut August 20, 2005 and unnamed respondent 9, lawyer, Beirut August 23, 2005.
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# Kuwaiti Women and the Right to Vote

■ Kawthar Al-Jou'an

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The adoption of the Kuwaiti Constitution in 1962 and the granting of political rights to Kuwaiti women in 2005 constitute two major turning points in modern Kuwaiti history. These two dates will stay inscribed in the memory of Kuwaiti generations for a long time to come.

Kuwaiti women's participation in the political life of their country has been one of the hot controversial topics on the Kuwaiti political scene since the adoption of the constitution but has grown in intensity in the last 15 years – since the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. The subject of controversy was Article 1 of the electoral law number 35/1962 adopted by the Founding Council, elected in 1961 and trusted with the drafting of a permanent constitution for Kuwait. Divided opinion on this article, conflicting interpretations of it, and disagreements over its constitutionality were existent within the executive and legislative authorities as well as within professional and private interest groups. This article was also a subject of controversy in the religious, constitutional and legal debates that accompanied the early stages of democratic practices in the country.

Article 1 of the electoral law 35/1962, which restricted voting rights to males only, has totally deprived the Kuwaiti woman of her right to political participation. This

deprivation lasted for over 45 years (i.e. since the adoption of the Constitution in 1962 and up till May 16, 2005) despite the leading roles played by Kuwaiti women at all levels in the public and private sectors as well as in civil society associations. This absention and marginalization of the woman's political role was behind the successive demands by women since 1971 for abolishing this article.

The demands were later adopted by some members of the Nation's Council (parliament) who raised this issue repeatedly during more than ten legislative terms. In defending their demands for the abolishment of this article, parliamentarians argued that they are duty bound to establish equality and justice and to ensure equal opportunities for all citizens to assume public office in compliance with the Kuwaiti Constitution, which provides that the collective and concerted efforts of all citizens must be the basis of all national activity. The Kuwaiti Constitution equates men and women in their legal duties and rights, the first of which is that of participation in running the affairs of the state, directly or indirectly, through the exercise of the right to vote and run for public office including parliamentary seats. This is clear in Article 80 of the Constitution which provides that the Council of the Nation is composed of 50 members elected by direct

public, secret ballot. It is also clear in other provisions that, not only does it call for equality among men and women, but makes it mandatory and considers lack of respect for it unconstitutional. Among those other provisions are:

Article 6. Kuwait is a democracy. Sovereignty is vested in the nation which is the source of all authorities.

Article 7. Justice, freedom and equality are the pillars of Kuwaiti society.

Article 8. The state is responsible for preserving the pillars of society, providing security, and equal opportunity for all citizens.

Article 29. People are equal in human dignity. They are equal in front of the law in their public rights and duties without any discrimination on the basis of sex, origin, language or religion.

Article 108. A Member of the Nation's Council represents the whole nation.

Day after day and year after year the unified and concerted efforts of various groups that believe in democracy were increasing in scope and intensity. The devotion and persistence of those groups started to pay dividends, the first of which was the declaration by His Highness the Prince on May 16, 1999 of his desire to empower the Kuwaiti woman to exercise her full political rights including the right to vote and run for public office.

His Highness the Crown Prince and Premier issued Decree 9/1999 which provided for abolishing Article 1 of the electoral law. This decree was submitted to the Nation's Council in a law proposal. This governmental move was the first, during ten successive legislative terms, to publicly admit the unconstitutionality of this article and the need to abolish it. As stated in the speech delivered by Sheikh Subah Al-Ahmad, during the historical session in which Decree 9/1999 was put to the vote, the purpose of this decree is to end the serious violation of the Constitution inherent in this article because democracy,



broadly defined, has no chance of success without a parallel broadening of the popular base to include both men and women and enabling it to exercise its sovereignty in both its legislative and supervisory roles ... Politics today is about democracy and human rights.

Several factors, however, were behind the delay in the Kuwaiti woman acquiring her full political rights. Among them are:

**First: The attitude of the executive authority.**

Successive Kuwaiti governments have failed to take a clear stand on this issue. Ministers in those governments have:

- a. Never submitted any law proposal acknowledging and emphasizing the right of Kuwaiti women to vote and run for elections;
- b. Never invoked the unconstitutionality of Article 1 of the electoral law governing the elections of members of the Nation's Council.
- c. Never declared clearly their support for any of the law proposals on this issue submitted by some members of the Nation's Council during the first eight legislative terms.
- d. Never permitted the inclusion of women on voters' lists.

This neutral governmental position was a major factor behind the delay in women acquiring their political rights and their actual exercise. This continued to be the case despite the governments' support, as reflected in the position of its leadership, His Highness the Prince, for enhancing the role of women in all fields, integrating them in the process of development, and ensuring their access to leadership positions besides praising their contribution to the building and development of Kuwaiti society.

Was this passive governmental attitude able to survive?

The declaration of His Highness the Prince on May 16, 1999 of his initiative concerning the empower-

ment of Kuwaiti women to exercise their full political rights made it difficult for the government to sustain its neutral stand on this issue, especially since this initiative was based on a strong respect for the Constitution and a belief in democracy. As such, Decree 9/1999 was drafted in a law proposal calling for the amendment of Article 1 of law number 35/1962 governing the elections of members to the Nation's Council. The governmental speech, delivered by the first vice-premier, stressed the importance of women's participation in the country's political life, praised the role played by Kuwaiti women and their valuable contributions during the rough times and crises in Kuwaiti history. It acknowledged women's right to full participation, freedom of expression and to providing counsel in accordance with the democratic system. It also highlighted women's competence, professionalism and expertise, prerequisites for enhancing their contribution in the legislative and supervisory processes.

This contribution, which was considered a major goal of the issued decree made it possible for women, though at a later stage, to file administrative suits in front of the administrative court and impeach the latter's decisions in front of the Constitutional Impeachment Committee.

**Second: The legislative authority's attitude towards women's political rights.**

Kuwaiti electoral law number 35/1962 governing elections of the members of the Nation's Council.

It is important to note that the Kuwaiti Constitution did not provide for the exclusion of women from the right to vote nor did it restrict this right solely to men. Constitutional provisions, worded in general terms, delegated to the legislature an unconditional authority to put down the requirements to be met by the voter and the candidate.

Electoral law number 35/1962 and its later amendments was drafted and issued by the legislative authority with its first article restricting the right of voting to the male population by stating:

"Any Kuwaiti male who is 20 years of age has the right to vote." It is apparent that this article does not comply with the constitutional principles and provisions which clearly call for justice, equality, and freedom; vests sovereignty in the nation, the source of all authorities; and provides that the Member of the Nation's Council is a representative of the whole nation (Articles 6, 7, 29 and 108 of the Kuwaiti Constitution).

Moreover, the above-mentioned article clearly deprives the woman completely of her right to vote by specifying the sex of voters. This resulted in the deprivation of about half the population of the right to vote as citizens equal

in rights and duties to the male population. This article constituted a major obstacle that faced Kuwaiti women and kept them out of the political decision-making process and positions.

However, Kuwaiti women refused to surrender to the pressures exerted by opponents, settle for and be satisfied with the rights she was enjoying and the high administrative positions she was assuming. She has worked hard to amend or abolish this article in accordance with the Kuwaiti constitutional provisions.

More than 12 law proposals were submitted to parliament between 1973-99 demanding the abolition of this article. However, the opposing majority, basing its arguments on religious and social grounds, succeeded in blocking such a decision. This opposition did not weaken the Kuwaiti woman and her supporters. On the contrary it increased their power, patience and efforts, which resulted in the above mentioned initiative by the Prince and the issuance of legislative decree number 9/1999.

However, the fate of this initiative proved to be no better than that of the preceding law proposals on this issue. The summer of 1999 witnessed a hot debate among supporters and opponents on whether the Kuwaiti woman is entitled to participate in political activity. The debate increased in intensity when the Prince's decree and supporting law proposals were put to the vote. This heightened debate was accompanied by an unprecedented number of meetings and discussions all over Kuwait. Despite all this, the decree was rejected by a majority vote in the historical session held on November 30, 1999. Only seven members voted in favor. Noteworthy is the fact that some supporters of women's political rights voted against the decree arguing that it did not meet the conditions of urgency or necessity.

However, another law proposal was submitted by supporters of women's political rights (who were expecting the fate of decree 9/1999) during the same session. This proposal was successful in meeting the conditions of urgency and necessity. As such this law proposal was put on the agenda for public discussion despite its rejection by the Defense and Interior Committee.

In a historical session held specially to discuss this law proposal, supporters and opponents discussed it and decided to vote on it in principle. All ministers, except one, participated in the voting. The result was 30 votes in favor, 32 against and two abstentions. As such the proposal failed to pass with only a two vote difference.

In October 2003, and during the tenth legislative term, the government submitted to the Nation's Council a com-

prehensive law proposal on municipalities which had among its provisions one that grants Kuwaiti women the right to vote, to candidacy and to appointment on the municipal council. This law proposal was intended as an amendment of law number 15/1973 which deprived women of these rights by restricting to men the right to vote in municipal elections (Article 2:2).

This law proposal put for a first round of voting during the session held on May 1, 2005 shared the fate of the law proposals discussed above. This prompted the government, in a surprising fast move during the session held on May 16, 2005, to demand putting the law proposal on women's political rights to vote during the same session. This aimed at avoiding a second round of discussions as happened with the article on women's rights in the law proposal on municipalities. This wonderful tactic used by the government, (and praised by many) resulted in the acknowledgment and confirmation of the Kuwaiti woman's political rights which, though granted to her in the Constitution, was confiscated from her by Article 1 of the electoral law.

#### Sixteenth May

On May 16, 2005, the law granting Kuwaiti women their political rights was passed by the Nation's Council by a vote of 35 in favor, 23 against and one abstention. The votes in favor were expected to be more had not health and other conditions prevented two members from participation.

May 16, 2005 witnessed the appointment of the first woman minister and the first two female members of the Municipal Council in the history of Kuwait.

May 16, 2005 crowned with success the Kuwaiti women's 35-year struggle. During this struggle Kuwaiti women had to face and deal with the ever-changing and fanatic attitudes and positions of their opponents.

Women resorted to different means including the holding of lectures and conferences, writing in newspapers, interviews and discussions on various television and radio stations, issuing declarations, meetings with parliamentarians and other public officials. Their struggle came to a head when they filed several lawsuits in February 2000 against the Minister of Interior for refusing to comply with the demand of a number of women, among them the author of this article, to have their names registered on the voters' lists. Despite the judges' refusal to look into it for defects in the form, the Kuwaiti women and patriotic men who believe in real democracy and comprehensive development, including political development, continued demanding and insisting until their demands were met on that historical day of May 16, 2005 which coincided with the sixth anniversary of His Highness's desire for political equality.

May 16, 2005 changed all measures and refuted all claims, confirming the citizen's original right regardless of sex. Today men and women are partners in making decisions and monitoring their implementation. May 16 declared loudly that that day was the day of the Princely initiative, the Kuwaiti woman's day, the exceptional day by all measures, not only in Kuwait but regionally and internationally as well, a day with a special radiance that shall illuminate the whole country throughout history.

Therefore, May 16, 2005 is the entrance to the real participation of all women and men in politics provided they meet the conditions set for the voter, be he man or woman, and can assume a position in the ministry or municipal council, vote, and run for the parliamentary elections. No doubt that this will have far reaching results on the political level, especially since the number of women expected to register for voting in the February 2006 elections is more than 200,000.



# A Perspective on the Women's Mosque Movement in Cairo

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Debarking the plane, with children in tow, we move into the receiving area of Cairo International Airport and find a tearful family waiting for us to emerge from the final baggage check. Every one of our numerous female relatives present is wearing the new Islamic dress, covered head to foot to hand in a dark flowing *abaya*. We embrace them all, but discover someone missing from their welcoming ranks: my husband's sister, Ameena. It is explained that, *mash' Allah*, Ameena has taken the *niqab*, a small sartorial addition (a rectangle of fine mesh material covering the face and eyes) that nonetheless signals a radical change in her life choices and physical movement. Ameena has sent word that she will meet us at home; she prefers to avoid mixing with unrelated men at the airport.

Back at my mother-in-law's apartment we settle in and relax after our long flight. The conversation meanders from topic to topic: relatives, marriages, children, illnesses, local events, world affairs. When the extended family has gone and it is just the immediate family alone together, my husband queries his sister about her apparent escalation of religiosity.

"*Ley, ya Ameena? Ley kidda?*" he asks, "Why do you do

this! Why do you hide yourself away from the world?" Ameena gives her calm explanation, "It is my choice. I do it to please God, because it is preferred."

We find, as we spend months with the family, that everything Ameena does is for God. For everything she receives, ranging from food to gifts to her own natural talents, she gives thanks to God. She offers up words of gratitude even for hardships, illness and want, because she believes Allah's greater wisdom is at work. There is a plan to which she is not privy, but she trusts it because she trusts in God. "*Il-hamdulileh*" is her constant refrain. "I thank God for all."

The extent to which Islam infuses Ameena's life has grown steadily over the years. She gradually put away what she considers *haram* or forbidden: her music collection, her guitar, her occasional attendance at the cinema, the viewing of non-Islamic television, any casual interactions with men, birthdays, and singing. She says, when I ask her if these things were difficult to give up, that they are mere secular distractions which take one's focus away from the appropriate pursuits and behavior. She is happier now, she insists, and it seems that she is.

Ameena undertakes extended prayers through the night, sometimes drifting off to sleep in a supplicatory pose. She memorizes the sonorous lilt and caverns of the Qur'anic arias. Her collection of cassette sermons and Islamic literature is extensive. She fasts on Mondays and Thursdays, as well as the middle of each Islamic month, following the practice of the Prophet. She breaks her fast with dates and milk, according to his advice, drinks only while sitting, yawns with her palms facing outward, sleeps only on her right side, all following Mohammed's words or model.

Are her habits strange? Extreme?

In fact, Ameena is representative of a growing number of women and men who believe that, contrary to trends across the world towards relegation of religion to a private and periodic sphere apart from civil society and one's everyday living, Islam should infuse every aspect of one's life and society at large. One of my informants emphatically stated, "Islam is not something that can be put aside in the corner, no. It is a part of everything." Islam, they say, provides a clear prescription for living

*Islam is not something that can be put aside in the corner, no. It is a part of everything.*

a life that is ordained by God and (thus) the basis of a just and moral society.

Though many people would lump this movement into the broad category of Islamist, the goals of the group are in fact distinct. While Islamism, or political Islam, takes as its focus the transformation of the secular nation-state to an Islamic version of the same (by various means, depending on the philosophy of the particular group), women in what has been called a mosque or piety movement (Mahmood 2001) focus instead on teaching and studying Islamic scriptures and translating them to everyday social and personal practices.

Women in the movement do seek the transformation of many aspects of social life in Egypt, towards greater piety and new (Islamic) moral standards. However, their starting point is the individual rather than institutions, laws or political structures. Explicit social or political change is not their immediate aim. Participants expect that an Islamically-grounded society will evolve gradually. In the end, however, this outcome is more an effect of their efforts than their driving goal.

Participants are motivated by a desire to please God, to be closer to Him. They believe this occurs through self-discipline and by developing Islamic virtues through daily practice and repetition until such virtues become automatic and ingrained in the self. One seeks to learn God's laws and desires, and in following these, an individual pleases and feels closer to Allah.

#### Practices

Women in the movement organize and participate in lessons and discussions about how to live better – more Islamically correct – lives. They try to culture an "ideal virtuous self" through specific forms of prayer, dress and bodily comportment (Mahmood 2001). Beyond developing new habits of the body and mind, women engage in *dawa'*, or proselytizing the faith. They advise others on proper forms of behavior, dress, worship, and interaction. They also undertake "good works," i.e., give of their time and money towards charity (economic and health charity), teaching skills and providing opportunities to other (disadvantaged) women. In some cases, they form groups and even organizations in order to engage in this work more efficiently. They do not march on the streets or lobby the government. On the contrary, they believe that one should not try to force change in either governing structures or specific leaders. They contend that the unknown consequences could be far worse than the present circumstances. In the recent elections almost none of my informants bothered to vote. They expected a Mubarak victory, and believed that this was the proper course of things. They do not typically involve themselves in public politics (though many have strong opinions about local and international affairs). Rather, they focus on the moral and religious state of their society, using themselves as starting points, and moving gradually outward to their own families, immediate social networks, and beyond. They believe that a leader comes from society and thus reflects the values and practices of his/her people. If, they explain, the people are more pious and Islamically adherent, a leader will eventually emerge with that same disposition, and this will be better for all.

"And in the meantime?" I ask.

"We must wait," is the universal response. It is a patient, optimistic creed.

"*Insha'Allah*," they say, "we will all improve with God's help; society will improve."

#### Context

This latest wave of Islamic revivalism, termed *al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya* (or the Islamic awakening) by participants, emerged in the late 1970s, gaining momentum through the eighties and nineties. The Egyptian context within which it has grown has been one of authoritarian political rule, limits on civil liberties and human rights, high

unemployment, increased cost of living and infiltration of Western commercial interests with many negative results for the majority of Egyptians. Popular discourse holds that Western influence has led to rampant materialism and corruption of traditional morality. Linked to this, and fueled by the rhetoric of growing Islamic groups, many people blame political, social and economic woes on the diminution and separation of religion in everyday life and seek to remedy this by re-integrating Islamic principles and practices into civil society. They propose an Islamic social model as the way to improve society and people's lives as an alternative to what is widely perceived to be the unredemptive failure of nationalism, pan-Arab socialism and Western capitalist models. Morality has come to be perceived as the central social problem in society and Islam as its only solution.

Over the past 20 years the number of Islamic books, schools, religious programs, mosques and NGOs has multiplied. Local mosques hold religious lessons for women with 25-500 attendees from across the socioeconomic spectrum (Mahmood 2003). The combined efforts of numerous devout and committed individuals, spreading *dawa'*, combining it with charitable works, teaching and learning and preaching, serves to build an ideological infrastructure and fosters a specific brand of behavior and interpersonal practice and discipline. Islamic influence can be seen and heard throughout the public sphere. Shop windows, lampposts, trashcans, kiosks, and fences carry religious admonitions, and, some even believe, messages from God, as when the name of Allah is perceived in a fallen leaf or in the ornate design of a fence (Starrett 1995).

Fruit stands and taxi cabs broadcast public sermons at decibels so high that transactions are hampered. This amalgam of visual and aural imagery creates an atmosphere in which the discussion and practice of Islam is not merely tolerated but commonplace. Hirshkind (2001) writes of a conversation among an older woman, a teenage boy and a middle age driver riding in a taxi about whether listening to music is *haram* in Islam. Such occurrences are typical; people frequently debate points of Islamic jurisprudence and advise others on proper forms of prayer and comportment.

Early trailblazers rejected liberal (often Western) styles of dress and modes of interaction between women and men that had become more common through the middle of the twentieth century. They adopted a new form of Islamic dress (protesting its historical legitimacy as authentic wear for women at the time of the Prophet, worn most exemplarily by the Prophet's wives). They eschewed casual interaction with unrelated men, arguing that such behavior invited temptation and sin. Today,

three decades of increasing Islamic religiosity have left their mark and the *hijab*, or modern head and neck scarf, is the norm. Certainly there are variations within this larger pool, ranging from the more conservative *khimar* and *abaya* to the basic head covering that young women combine with snug fitting, Western-style clothes. But the baseline standard for modesty and proper dress has been raised. Now it is women who don't cover who stand out and who signify a more questionable morality and religiosity. Despite the Islamic dictum that one cannot judge what is in another's heart, women in particular are scrutinized for their choice of garments, and the strength of their faith (and thus, morality) is presumed based on this superficial evidence. Such a context similarly "ups the ante" for those interested in demarcating a particular brand and level of piety. In order to distinguish oneself as pious beyond reproach, one must not only cover with a headscarf and clothes that cover most of the body, one should wear a garment that conceals all suggestion of bodily form, accompanied by the *niqab*. Growing numbers of women walk the streets in just such a fashion, murmuring recitations from the Qur'an and sunna as they move through the streets.

#### Social Composition

One of the remarkable features of this movement is the extent to which it cuts across class boundaries, traversing levels of income and educational attainment. Contrary to modernist assumptions about the reliance and connection of the poor to religion, the poor do not comprise the majority group in this case. It is the middle classes, many of them high school and university educated, that make up its bulk. But women from all social classes can be counted among its ranks. This is a point of pride since part of the discourse of the movement is that all are equal in the eyes of God. Lila Abu-Lughod (1997) argues that the discourse of morality associated with the "new veil" works to produce a false sense of egalitarianism that distracts from the significant and ongoing problems of class inequality in Egypt (503). Class, though muted as a discourse, does indeed seem to affect the experiences and motivations of individual participants in the movement, as well as society at large.

#### What Draws Women?

The range of motivations for women is broad. There is no doubt that many women are powerfully drawn to this particular expression of Islamic living and for whom mak-

*Morality has come to be perceived as the central social problem in society and Islam as its only solution.*

ing life changes is rewarding psychologically, even empowering. Women report feeling that they are doing something deeply right, and experience a sense of righteousness and inner strength as a result. Durkheim recognized the powerful feelings evoked by such devotion and commitment to God.

The believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is stronger. He feels within him more force, wither to endure the trials of existence, or to conquer them (416).

Participants describe a sense of sureness in their hearts, a "love for all things for the sake of God." They exude this passion and conviction in their words of advice and guidance to others. A number of women describe feeling almost "held" physically within the protective hands of God during times of difficulties. "He smoothes the way for me," one woman reported. The devout believe that their obedience and sacrifice is worthwhile because it will ultimately be rewarded. They may struggle day to day with trying to be better, to rise in the early morning for the *fegr* prayer, to fast, to be calm in the face of anger, to dress as they deem they are commanded to do in layers of black clothing in the pressing heat of Cairo summers.

However, they believe they are on the right path, the "straight path," and they believe that if they are sincere and they live by their understanding of God's will, they may escape the fires of hell and be accepted into paradise.

The women who expressed these moving sentiments were all of comfortable means. They had the time and financial support to engage in extensive prayer and study, to engage in *dawa'*, and to be a part of organized and casual charity work. They had cars and homes with air conditioning. But women's lives, their access to power and economic resources as well as their social and legal standing vary from one community or class to another (Tucker 1993). I did not see the same kind of passion and fervor among my informants in the poorer classes. These were women who worked as maids, vegetable vendors and occasionally factory workers. They struggled financially, and bore the greater burden of legal and bureaucratic institutions (lacking the money for bribes or legiti-

mate services that speed one through the morass of red tape). They pressed into hot, crowded public transportation to travel to work across the city. They were often the recipients of aid from Islamic NGOs or informal mosque charities. In order to collect aid, however, they were scrutinized for worthiness by their benefactors and subtly pressured to adopt the pious, modest practices of the movement, as well as to attend *durus*, or religious lessons. Probably some attended willingly, inspired by the faith and commitment of charity workers who provided help where the government failed to do so. But it is difficult to know the internal psychological landscape of these women, i.e., the extent to which their commitment equaled that of the women with more ample means who had the luxury of being less preoccupied with everyday survival.

It begs the question: Given the economic, social and political conditions in which women live, work and worship, are the choices that they make about levels of expressed and practiced religiosity, gender and sexuality truly "free" in the sense of a completely autonomous subject and an open field of options? The rhetoric of the movement certainly argues so. But actors' decisions and actions are inevitably over determined. They are limited and shaped by modern social practices, institutions and discourses. Economic conditions, family traditions and political and religious pressures and policies influence behavior as well. And yet, in spite of these molding forces, these women are agents; they act, they choose from among multiple subject positions. They affect the very social field that constitutes them. So how do we account for their decisions and actions, and for their attachment to this particular religio-social project?

#### Push and Pull Factors

A range of socio-psychological factors simultaneously draw women towards a particular discourse and form of practice. The women's mosque movement offers a deep sense of connection and purpose. Durkheim (1954) spoke of the importance of social cohesion and solidarity, and believed that these phenomena, when present in people's lives, buffered the blow of personal crises. Researchers Soraya Duval (1998) and Sherine Hafez (2003), in two separate studies of Islamic women's groups, noted that a strong emphasis on sisterhood, community, and shared values contributed to women's sense of well-being. "The sense of solidarity, satisfaction, and bonding that comes from helping others was emphasized by many of the women. They found it was the main reason they kept coming back to the group" (Hafez, 60).

One woman in the movement, named Hala, made a gradual evolution towards greater and greater piety (in

dress, prayer, and everyday comportment) following an incident in which she experienced profound disconnection from her family, her primary source of social and psychological support and intimacy. Years prior, a rumor had been circulated that she was going out during the days while her husband was at work (and thus, by implication, engaging in an extramarital affair). The veracity of the claim was never established, but the damage to her reputation and marriage was done. She became depressed and inward for many months, enduring the wrath of her husband (whose physical violence escalated in the wake of the rumors), and the cool distance of her in-laws.

Slowly she began to adopt more modest dress and pious practices. She prayed with regularity and took solace in the Qur'an. After many months and repeated requests, her husband finally allowed her to leave the house to attend public sermons and religious lessons with his (famously devout) female cousin. Since this was for a valid purpose (Islam), and his extended family was encouraging such behavior in all family members, he found it hard to say no, in spite of his continued bitterness and skepticism. After much time, the acrimony in the marriage dissipated. Hala became more serene. With every new Islamic step (the addition of gloves, the addition of extra fasting and prayer) she felt the warmth of the family opening to her again. It was clear that while she may have sought spiritual redemption or rewards in heaven, there was a very real motivation in her daily life, a relational incentive. Her world changed dramatically and positively from her perspective as a result of her "Islamic awakening."

Such relational rewards are likely a powerful incentive, not only for women starved of connection and companionship, but for ordinary women as well, for whom familial idioms and structures resonate deeply with their cultural models and early experiences. Suad Joseph (1996) describes a particular mode of relating, both within families and in the larger social field, which she terms patriarchal connectivity. It is characterized by gender and age domination, but also by love, protection and distinct roles and expectations which offer comfort and clarity in an often ambiguous, ambivalent world. Women are subordinate to male authority but they also (at least theoretically, and in the imagined ideal) have sacralized, unambiguous spheres of female authority. For example, the education and moral formation of children is the most important task of the family and the mother is the central figure in these activities.

In many ways, the mosque movement mirrors the cultural-familial form described by Joseph. Members refer to one another as "sisters," and there are hierarchical rela-

tionships (with *Haajas* and women who are models of piety in the upper echelons), along with a patriarchal authority figure (sheikh). Such idioms and relations offer a familiar touchstone in a world perceived to be hostile and fraught with enemies, both political and spiritual.

Foucault's concept of self-refinement through technologies of the self (1988) is useful for understanding the sense of power and accomplishment that women report experiencing. Disciplinary technologies work not through repressive mechanisms but rather through comparatively subtle and persuasive forms of control. Disciplinary forms of power are located within institutions (hospitals, schools, religious institutions) but also at the micro level of society in the everyday activities and habits of individuals. They secure their hold not through the threat of violence or force, but rather by creating desires, attaching individuals to specific identities and establishing norms against which individuals and their behaviors and bodies are judged and against which they police themselves. The Islamic Awakening has offered up a new norm of womanhood that appeals to women and acts as an ideal to which they aspire.

In our extended family, the challenge to improve the self is explicit and frequently discussed. Family members often vocalize their desire and efforts to be better, to be more modest, to carry out God's commandments and desires with greater reliability and sincerity. They fast for long hours and engage in acts of charity and kindness, suffer the stifling heat in heavy clothes, and hold all this up to God asking that it be accepted. As they learn larger and larger sections of the Qur'an, come to know the stronger Hadiths by heart, and perfect their posture during prayer and repose they feel a gratifying sense of accomplishment. Family members both self-monitor, propelling themselves to greater piety and virtue, and advise one another on every detail of proper comportment and behavior. Excellence nets internal satisfaction, as well as external kudos and recognition from within the family and mosque circles. The individual is thus spurred on to greater self-refinement.

#### Additional Perspectives

One observer in Egypt, a Muslim and self-described secular women's activist, proposed that some of the women who are adopting this new, extreme religiosity are experiencing personal crises that come to be expressed in

The women's mosque movement offers a deep sense of connection and purpose.

Women face conflicting demands and discourses about what makes (and what ruins) a good Muslim woman.

Islamic terms because religion is the primary conceptual frame through which people perceive and make sense of the world. She described a woman named Heba who lost her brother to cancer and felt the juggernaut of mortality. Following her brother's death, Heba made a sudden and extreme shift toward greater piety, to the confusion and frustration of her husband and children. She spent most of her time in prayer and avoided going out. Her only solace was God and her hopes for the afterlife. She believed herself to have become unforgivably focused on the material world and its distractions, and remiss in her devotions to God. She now sought to right the balance.

At least six other women were known to have similar stories. The ordinary pressures on women in Egypt today are strong enough even without specific psychosocial burdens like death and serious illness. Women face conflicting demands and discourses about what makes (and what ruins) a good Muslim woman. Often the messages are contradictory and irreconcilable. Women are left feeling a failure on all fronts. Arlene Macleod (1991) wrote of some of the tensions lower middle class women face in her study of aspects of the larger Islamic movement.

Middle class women are equally, if not more, plagued by conflicting and impossible expectations. Their work outside the home is often viewed as superfluous, in contrast to that of poorer women which people accept as necessary for survival. As a result, middle class women are criticized for not staying at home and embracing their primary role. Families suffer, it is believed, and morality declines when mothers are absent. With so many discursive, social, economic, and familial pressures operating, it is not surprising that many women would seek spiritual succor and guidance.

#### Conclusion

The women's mosque movement in Egypt offers women many rewards. It provides a guiding purpose, explicit rules for living, a framework for understanding the world, and a social network of like-minded people. There are certainly secular alternatives in the social field where many of women's psychological, social and economic needs might be met. However, as poverty and marginalization grow, and as people's disillusionment and discontent with the secular nation-state grows, more and more people will be drawn to alternative solutions, with religious options foremost among them.

All names in this article have been changed.

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# Re-defining Feminism/s, Re-imagining Faith? Margot Badran\* on Islamic Feminism

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If women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet [Muhammad], nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite.

Fatima Mernissi<sup>1</sup>

Margot Badran is a scholar-activist and specialist in gender studies in the Middle East and Islamic world. She is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. She was recently Edith Kreeger Wolf Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Religion Department and Preceptor at the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa at Northwestern University. She has lectured widely in academic and popular forums in the United States, as well as in Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. She is also the author of numerous scholarly articles on feminism and Islam, and writes on gender issues for *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

I first met Margot Badran at a conference in Oldenburg, Germany, in 2002, where she gave a keynote address on Islamic feminism. Energetic and passionate about her current research on

Islam/s and feminism/s, she spoke on how Islamic feminism is not an oxymoron because it offers a holistic solution for women activists and/or intellectual-activists who are invested in gender justice but who are not interested in separating religion from their struggles. According to Badran, Islamic feminists are self-identified women who are interested in balancing women's human rights claims within the boundaries of their faith. Interested in the topic, and already familiar with her scholarly work, I approached Professor Badran for an interview on the topic of Islamic feminism. Three years later, I caught up with her on the same topic. The following are the original and follow-up interviews.

## Islam and Feminism: An Interview with Margot Badran (2002)<sup>2</sup>

**1. There has been tremendous interest in the West and the Muslim world on the debate on Islam and feminism. Why do you think there is so much interest in this subject? What does this debate mean for Muslim women and feminism/s (as an ideology and movement)?**

If there is now great interest in debates on Islam and feminism this has not always been the case. For a long time "Islam and feminism" has been considered an oxymoron in both the Muslim world and in the West, although for rather different reasons. In the Muslim world feminism has often been considered Western, irrelevant, and invasive, or simply redundant since Islam is acknowledged as giving women all their rights. In the West, feminism is deemed to be beyond the pale of an Islam that is seen to be excessively and irredeemably patriarchal. But more recently in both the West and the Muslim world, as you have observed, this has changed. In the West we must distinguish between society at large and intellectual and academic circles. In terms of the broader society I would put any interest in feminism and Islam within the context of a heightened interest in Islam post-September 11. Having said this, however, by far the greatest interest in Islam (often obsession) has been ignited by concern about peril and danger. If there is anything said about feminism and Islam I have noticed ears prick and eyebrows raise in exclamations of surprise or disbelief.

As for interest in Islam and feminism in the academy and among public intellectuals in the West, a rising increase can be traced to the mid-1990s as debates widened and took new turns in the Muslim world in the context of the continuing spread and ripening of Islamic resurgence and the growing attention to issues of religion and culture. The printed debates of public intellectuals in post-Khomeini Iran in the

1990s on Islamic feminist questions certainly stimulated interest. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the waning of the hold of communism and socialism and the demise of the Cold War, a good number of leftist secular intellectuals and activists in Muslim societies embraced the ideology of feminism that they had formerly eschewed as "a luxury" or as diverting attention from leftist ideologies. Debates on Islam and feminism in parts of the Muslim world and in some circles in the West expanded in the context of a growing consciousness of the limitations of secularism and a critique of secularism that questioned the whole notion of the binaristic thinking that produced the "secular-religious" split in the universe of Islam.

You ask what this new debate and the wide interest in it means for Muslim women and feminism/s. Increased attention paid to debates on Islam and feminism/s provides the opportunity for protagonists to extend the reach of this discourse. At the same time it elicits a counter-attention that challenges these feminism/s. I think, however, that the increased visibility and attention is all to the good: feminist discourses within Islamic frameworks are enormously powerful and far more compelling than the counter-discourses based on limited arguments and tired platitudes. So I see this heightened focus on Islam and feminism as positive and as auguring well for the future.

**2. Many have questioned the interaction between Islam and feminism. Some deny the need for any type of feminism within the Islamic framework as Islam gave women their rights some 1400 years ago, others argue that they are mutually exclusive. What is your opinion? Can you offer a comprehensive definition of the Islamic feminism which you are discussing?**

Islam did give women as human beings (like men) their rights 1400 years ago and it is high time women enjoyed these rights. Feminism, in its simplest definition includes an awareness that some human beings are deprived of rights or are subjected to discrimination and oppression (*zulm*) simply because they are female, a rejection of this thinking and practice, and forms of activism aimed at achieving lost rights. Islamic feminism is an affirmation of the rights Islam gave to women as human beings and an affirmation of the gender equality and social justice embedded in the Qur'an. It is not that feminism and Islam are mutually exclusive but that (rights-depriving) patriarchy and Islam are mutually exclusive.

**3. A very important part of many Muslim women's feminism/s is the process of *ijtihad* (rereading and reinterpreting the Islamic sacred texts). How effective is this strategy when it comes to the reality of Muslim women's lives? Are the reinterpretations of the Qur'an actually being utilized in Muslim societies?**

The connection between a feminist hermeneutics of the Qur'an with Muslim women's actual lives is a frequently asked and extremely germane question. It is precisely because so much oppression (*zulm*) has been committed and "legitimized" in the name

of Islam – and because this oppression has also been linked to notions of honor – that a clear demonstration that oppressive behaviors and attitudes toward women are not only not Islamic but are *anti-Islamic* stands to have some effect. If some people do not mind committing *zulm* against women (or others) these people do not want to be seen to be doing so and certainly do not wish to be seen to be doing this in contravention of Islam; this does not bring honor. Of course, discourse – a new discourse in and of itself, will not change women's lives. Discourse needs to be accompanied by organized collective activism and everyday acts of feminism. But to have a wider understanding of the full amplitude of religion on your side is no small thing.

**4. What does/do Islamic feminism/s have to offer, not only to Muslim women, but also feminist discourse and the larger feminist movement/s?**

I have just given an answer to the first part of this question. As I moved more deeply into Islamic feminism – analyzing the discourse of its major articulators and going myself to the Qur'an and doing my own *tafsir* (*explanation*) – I see more and more its clear declaration of the notion of full equality of human beings. The notion of the absolute equality of all human beings whether female or male alongside the recognition of biological difference and the roles of both sexes in procreation is powerfully stated. It took us as second wave feminists in the US and other parts of the West some time to work out issues of difference cum equality. Human beings are created male and female for the procreation of the species and as partner or *zawj* to the other (the same word is used for each member of the pair); they are biologically different but fully equal. The Qur'an relates that it is only through performance – the achievement of *taqwa* or "God-consciousness" (sometimes called piety), that the practice of the principles of gender equality and social justice into action distinguishes human beings from each other. I think that explicating the way gender equality and social justice are conveyed in the language of the Qur'an can contribute to the ongoing task of the elaboration of a universalist feminist discourse. An examination of the Qur'an can also help to dismantle the notion of the incompatibility of religion (as such) with feminism and can help us grasp the inter-meshing of the religious and secular in Islam and stimulate discussion about how this might work in other religious traditions and what the implications of this are for gender.

**5. The act of naming Muslim women who are working towards women's empowerment within the Islamic framework as Islamic feminists can be a somewhat problematic classification (as the "F" word has been associated with colonialism, imperialism, or just because they are uncomfortable with the term and its implications). Imposing feminist labels and naming people/groups as such can sometimes impede their agency. What is your opinion on this?**

I am glad you raised the question of naming, or labeling. I think it is important not to call women feminists, or Islamic feminists, etc. if they themselves do not assume such a label. As an historian I have tried to be careful in not assigning an identity where it is not self-ascribed. The questions of feminism and feminist identity are so highly charged that it is unfair and irresponsible to foist a feminist label upon persons who reject it. Some women may *act* or *speak* like feminists but do not claim, nor like, the label. We can analyze discourse and behaviors and recognize them as "feminist" but we need to be clear that women whom we may see as speaking or behaving like feminists may not identify themselves as feminists. In a paper I wrote in 1990 on Muslim women and feminism/s when I saw some women behaving in ways that could be recognized as "feminist" but who adamantly refused the label I referred to their thinking and actions more neutrally as "gender activism," indicating that I was simply using this as a descriptive category. At that time I had never heard the term used but later, while in South Africa where I met women from different African countries, I noticed that some referred to themselves as "gender activists." This distances them from association with the term feminist, which for many still holds unacceptable colonialist connotations. Yet, other women refuse to toss out the powerful word feminism or feminist with the colonial bathwater. Indeed, some feminists in Egypt stress, "We had "feminism" before colonialism" and refuse to get bogged down in etymological debates. Women know the environments and historical moments in which they are operating. If they feel a label will be used against them they may prefer not to assume it. Yet, others may believe it crucial to name and claim their feminism and find this is integral to the empowerment process.

**6. You are currently a Visiting Fellow at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) working on Islamic feminism in the Middle East and Africa. Can**

*Discourse needs to be accompanied by organized collective activism and everyday acts of feminism.*

**you elaborate on this project and its importance in contributing to the discourse on Islamic feminism?**

I am finishing up a book on comparative Islamic feminism/s looking at discourse and experience in Egypt, Turkey, Yemen and South Africa. I have spent quite a bit of time in all four countries interacting with feminists and learning from them about Islamic feminism/s. There is, as we know, a universalist Islamic feminist discourse circulating most rapidly on the web that is fed from various local points around the globe. Meanwhile, there are local forms of Islamic feminist activism that surface in response to specific local challenges and priorities. In Egypt for example, (unlike in Turkey, Yemen, and South Africa) where women were barred from being judges and Islamic arguments were used to prevent women from holding these positions, Islamic feminist activism helped win the day. In January 2005, the first three women were appointed judges in Egypt, one to the Supreme Constitutional Court. The call for women to be officially appointed as *muftis* (those who dispense religious readings in response to specific questions posed) is, however, a cause yet to be won.

*Non-Muslim Westerners ... have become aware that Islam and feminism are not contradictory as they had assumed.*

In South Africa there has been a vibrant mosque movement aimed at expanded participation of women in congregational worship. Islamic feminists, who include women and men, have supported the practice of women delivering pre-*khutba* (or pre-sermon) talks at Friday congregational prayer. This has met with success in at least two mosques: one in Cape Town and one in Johannesburg.

There has also been a move for women and men to occupy parallel space in the mosque during congregational prayer, instead of relegating women to the back of the mosque, to mezzanines, or to outside space, and indeed, this has become the practice at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town.

In Egypt, Yemen, and South Africa debates around Muslim personal status law are feminist issues that can and must be argued in the discourse of Islam. At the moment the question in South Africa is whether there should be a separate religious code regulating personal status for Muslims and what form this

should take. In other places, such as Egypt, there has been a long-standing campaign to reform the Muslim personal status law. The still-new *khula'* law in Egypt whereby women may initiate an annulment process to end a marriage which includes relinquishment of financial claims (including any remaining part of the dowry due them) has been acclaimed a success by some feminists but criticized by others as paltry. In Turkey women as committed Muslims and feminists are critiquing various patriarchal assertions advanced in the name of Islam, including the use of *hadith* (sayings about the words and deeds of Muhammad) of questionable provenance that are degrading and oppressive to women. In Yemen, in the context of a vibrant university-based women's studies center, analysis of customary and Islamic gender practices became part of an intellectual feminism without the name. The destruction of the center by hostile forces can be attributed in part to the center's success, which found itself in the crossfire of larger political battles. These examples are just a brief indication of the work of Islamic feminism/s in comparative perspective.

**7. What do you see in the future for Islamic feminism?**

We can say that Islamic feminism is the solution. It is the solution to ridding Islam of gender and related oppressions, or *zulm*, committed in its name. Islamic feminism is the path towards recuperating the rights women are granted in Islam. It is a way to move from mantra to reality – toward the enjoyment in practice of the gender equality and social justice embedded in the Qur'an. Islamic feminism is on the roll. It has met with successes and will continue in this direction. This does not mean that the work ahead will be easy. It will not. But, whether we are Muslims or not in this globe of intermeshed peoples, Islamic feminism bodes well for all of us.

**Follow-up Interview in 2005**

**1. We spoke about three years ago on the topic of Islam and feminism. How do you see things today? What constitutes feminist projects within an Islamic framework?**

I would like to make three observations of change since we last talked.

1. There has been a marked acceleration of interest in Islam and feminism, and particularly in Islamic feminism, a feminist discourse grounded in the re-interpretation of Islamic religious texts, most impor-

tantly the Qur'an. Muslims, both women and men, are increasingly seeing Islamic feminism as a potent transformative force in the lives of their societies and in their own individual lives. Non-Muslim Westerners are showing greater interest in Islamic feminism and have become aware that Islam and feminism are not contradictory as they had assumed.

2. Now, much more than before in Muslim societies, Islamic feminists (and they may or may not explicitly identify themselves as such) and secular feminists (who employ a multi-stranded discourse including secular nationalist, Islamic reformist, and humanitarian/human rights discourses, and who tend to freely announce their identity) are joining forces in promoting the cause of gender-justice. It is striking how the previous wariness that existed in the past between Islamic feminists and secular feminists has been diminishing.

3. Islamic feminist discourse has been, and continues to be, enriched by ongoing Qur'anic interpretive work. *Fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence, continues to be scrutinized from a gender perspective in efforts to reform personal status codes or family legislation based upon the shari'a (Islamic law). Islamic feminism is being taken, especially by the younger generation, into the domain of culture in the broad sense of everyday life practices. And also in the sense of the arts: poetry, song, performance, and painting, drawing, and photography – examples come to mind of young Muslim performance artists in Indonesia and South Africa. The younger generation is carving out new spaces for less constrained lives for themselves within an Islam they are holding on to and insisting on refashioning. Islamic feminism is also expressed through Sufism, which has traditionally transcended or blurred gender categories, and continues to attract huge numbers of adherents around the world.

**2. You have argued that Islamic feminism on the whole is more radical than Muslim secular feminism/s (Al-Ahram 2002). Can you elaborate on this? What are the ways in which Islamic/Muslim feminist and secular discourses of feminism can be placed in dialogue with each other?**

Islamic feminism from its inception (at the end of the twentieth century) articulated a strong stand on gender equality, enunciating the full equality of women and men in public and private realms – posited as a continuum rather than sharply divided

spheres. Muslims' emergent secular feminism/s (first formulated in the early twentieth century) called for gender equality in the public sphere but acquiesced in the notion of gender complementarity in the private or family sphere.

Secular feminism located its notion of gender equality in the ideals of liberal democracy including the full equality of citizens. Secular feminism/s, articulated by Muslims together with Christians, emerged during national independence movements in the early and middle decades of the last century. The focus was on "public" gender equality within a secular nationalist framework enunciating the equality of all citizens, whatever their religion, ethnicity, or gender, and asserting the equality of all human beings, rejecting the hegemonic colonial model and its blatant human inequalities. Secular feminism/s articulated by Muslims went along with the model of the prevailing patriarchal family, concentrating on the reform of laws governing the family and the reform of men's behaviors as husbands and fathers without challenging the fundamental paradigm. Toward the end of the last century, secular feminists, becoming increasingly impatient with the gender inequalities in Muslim family law and practice, began to join forces with the new Islamic feminists who could bring to bear the power of their re-interpretation of the Qur'an and re-thinking of *fiqh* in the struggle to effect reform.

Although Muslims' secular feminism/s called for full equality of women and men in the public sphere, including equal rights in work and the professions, secular feminism/s did not take up issues of women's equal access to the religious professions and equal ability to perform communal religious functions, a last bastion of public inequality – this would become the concern of Islamic feminism. In arguing for advances on this front Islamic feminist discourse continued the elaboration of the doctrine of full gender equality. In ways just mentioned, Islamic feminism is radicalizing secular feminism, or we can say, pushing it beyond its previous limits and limitations. Islamic feminism and secular feminism are porous and indeed from the start Muslims' secular feminism/s included an Islamic reformist strand and Islamic feminism/s are also situated in the real world. In strategic and practical ways,

*Islamic feminism is radicalizing secular feminism, ... pushing it beyond its previous limits and limitations.*

both need to take into account the realities of the particular mundane worlds that they inhabit.

**3. Many scholars have argued about the limitations of working within a religious framework to empower women, citing problems when religion is not only personal choice or belief but is legislated at the state level and has the possibility to be co-opted by the state in the service of politics (i.e. Iran and Egypt).<sup>3</sup> What are your thoughts on this?**

It is important to point out the practical and political problems posed by working within a religious framework, i.e. within an Islamic feminist paradigm, and this critics can do, even hostile critics. But why toss out Islamic feminism simply out of fear that it can be co-opted by the state or exploited by conservative political movements? Secular feminism/s, historically and in contemporary times, have not escaped co-optation by the state. The whole point, as I see it, is to re-define Islam, along the lines Islamic feminists are doing and not simply let patri-

archalists continue their centuries long hi-jacking of Islam and casting it in their own misogynist image. If states and political movements were to take up the Islamic feminist vision of Islam and apply it for its own sake that would be excellent. But the possibility for states to use Islamic feminism, or bend it to their ends, as I have mentioned, is something to be rightly concerned about. States have done this in

the past with secular feminism/s but no one proposed dumping secular feminism because of it. States need to be monitored and made accountable. Islamic feminism does not need to be jettisoned – this I see as another form of capitulation.

**4. The debates on Islam and feminism beg the question of who has the right to speak for and about Islam. Can you comment on this question by taking your positionality into consideration? Do you/can you consider yourself an Islamic feminist?**

Anyone can speak about Islam. If a person has knowledge and discernment he or she will be more

readily listened to. Anyone can undertake *ijtihad* or critical engagement with religious sources. If, for example, persons make cogent readings of the Qur'an others may take notice; they may think about the interpretation and consider arguments. The readings carry their own weight. Many of the new interpreters of Islamic religious sources, men and women alike, were not trained in the religious sciences as students in seminaries and Islamic universities like Al Azhar. Those who articulate gender-sensitive readings of the Qur'an and other religious texts will be listened to by persons concerned with gender justice, whether or not these interpreters have official religious imprimaturs, if they are perceived to be treating the sources with care and offer meaningful expositions. Asma Barlas, whose discipline is political science, comes to mind with her book *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. The persuasiveness and power of her readings have had a wide impact around the world. You asked about my own "positionality" I suppose you are referring to someone who was not born Muslim and who is not ostensibly Muslim, asking do people listen to my takes on religious texts? As you know, many years ago I was a student at Al Azhar and I return from time to time and engage in debate with some of the *sheikhs*. They listen to what I have to say, to my arguments, they will agree or challenge them based on what is said, not who is saying it. Of course, I wear no *imma* (the turban of the Azharite sheikh). I simply share my own *ijtihad*. If people get hung up on who is speaking about Islam so be it. Some do. Some don't. To answer your question: Yes, I am an Islamic feminist. I am also a secular feminist. I am both together because, like most people, I use multiple discourses, discourses that support each other, not cancel each other, and inasmuch as discourses – and activism flowing from it – define us, I am both an Islamic feminist and a secular feminist. Yes, I claim both identities.

**5. What has been the reception of your work on Islam and feminism by Muslims in general as well as the interpretive communities, specifically the orthodox *ulema*?**

I suppose you must ask others about the reception of my work. But I can say in my travels I have seen that my work on Islam and feminism has resonated. It has produced discussion and debate, more agreement than disagreement. It is the engagement that is important. I also publish essays in the general press, mainly in *Al-Ahram Weekly* which I like because the response is immediate. The piece on

"Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name?" published in 2002 spurred interest and was translated into several other languages. It came out at the right moment, a moment when a lot of questions were out there. I was trained as an historian and my main interest has been to chart and analyze feminist experience in Muslim, and trans-communal, contexts. Although, like many others, I do my own *tafsir*, interpretation of the Qur'an is not my primary work. I do believe, however, that *ijtihad*, (rational investigation of Islamic religious texts) is open to anyone and that our understandings are enhanced by our own direct examination. You ask about interpretive communities and receptivity of my work. If you speak about the new interpretive communities, especially women, then I would say I feel that my work on Islam and feminism/s in Muslim societies, historically and contextually grounded, is generally well received. I have felt there is some kind of appreciation – maybe even relief – that someone raised outside the Islamic tradition has taken the trouble to study Islam, its ideas and lived experience, and to probe issues of gender justice in an Islamic context. But, of course, in my travels I have met those who think it is presumptuous or preposterous that, as they see it, an "outsider" should meddle in their religion and culture. But in secular contexts, turf wars in the heyday of identity politics in the 1980s were even fiercer. It goes with the territory. Several years ago I had an audience with the Sheikh Al Azhar, Muhammad Tantawi, (on a return visit to the institution that taught me) and gave him a copy of my book *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, which is an historical treatment of the secular feminist movement in Egypt (which had an important Islamic modernist dimension) in the first half of the twentieth century. He instantly ordered a member of his staff to read it and examine what it said about Islam and women. Later when the sheikh so charged told me that the book had been pronounced *halal*, I didn't quite know how to take it!

**6. You were the recipient of an award by the Fulbright New Century Scholars Program for 2004-05 where you worked on Islamic feminism in Nigeria – can you tell us more about that project?**

I wanted to look close up at the cases of two Muslim women – Amina Lawal and Safiyya Husseini – accused of adultery and condemned to death by shari'a courts under the new Hudud laws or Islamic penal laws in their respective states in the north of Nigeria and who were later acquitted in higher Islamic courts of appeal. I wanted to know how the

stories of these cases passed into local legend: how they were retold and the lessons drawn. I wanted to know more about the impressive and daring campaign mounted by women and men, and Muslims and non-Muslims, in the legal profession, scholarly community, and NGO world to defend the women and prevent them from being made facile victims or convenient scapegoats. In moving around the north and middle belt of Nigeria, I saw how the stories of the two women going from victim to victor had had a profound effect on people, women and men. Issues of gender and class were intertwined. There was wide offense that women and the poor should be victimized and made to pay prices from which men and the wealthy and powerful few in this poverty-stricken country were exempted. Debates around justice for citizens engendered by the two adultery cases and articulations and application of a progressive reading of *fiqh* constitute a milestone in Islamic feminism's still young history. Nigeria is the only country with Islamic Hudud laws on the books where women have not been stoned to death for adultery. In defending Lawal and Husseini it was necessary to work within the framework of the Islamic penal code as formulated in the two northern Nigerian states where they were arraigned. This did not necessarily mean that their defenders, and people at large, had favored the enactment of Islamic penal law; indeed, there has been considerable opposition to this. It is to show, rather, the breadth of *fiqh* and how it can serve social justice if it is not bent to serve other ends. Last March, women and men across the professional and social spectrum gathered to continue debates around Islam, gender justice, society, and the state, that the two adultery cases ignited, at a conference organized by the Centre for Islamic Legal Studies at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria and the Security, Justice and Growth Programme.

**7. What strategies and methods do Islamic feminists and Muslim secular feminists use, and how do they link up with other feminists in Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia? Are the strategies and methods similar or different? What does this mean for transnational feminist organizing?**

... feminists share the common goal of eliminating patriarchal thought and practices.

Nigeria is the only country with Islamic Hudud laws on the books where women have not been stoned to death for adultery.

Islamic feminists, Muslims as secular feminists, and other feminists share the common goal of eliminating patriarchal thought and practices. Strategies and methods at some level are generic, but also specific to local contexts. Theory travels, including feminist theory; it informs and supports local activist efforts. Thus, Islamic feminist theory grounded in Qur'anic reinterpretation and re-thinking of religious texts can be applied in specific ways at local levels, and this local experience in turn feeds back into theory. At the moment there are efforts underway in various countries that have Muslim personal status codes to achieve changes, or in certain Muslim minority countries. For example in India, Muslim women activists are pushing for limited legislation of Muslim marriage which in their eyes stands to give women protections, whereas progressive Muslims in Canada have recently successfully fought against the institution of any shari'a-backed law as not serving the interests of gender justice. New interpretations of the Qur'an, and the refinement of interpretive methodologies offer tools for those fighting for gender justice in specific environments. There is not one solution for all. New collaborations are also proving helpful. Secular Muslims are increasingly linking up with Islamic feminists, as I have already noted. Islamic feminists are taking lessons from the longer organizational and activist experience of Muslims' secular feminist movements. Secular feminists are accessing the new women and gender-sensitive religious interpretations of the Islamic feminists. They are pooling and sharing the benefits of new religious knowledge and the lessons of seasoned gender activists. As for cross-communal linkages, these happen at the local or country level – as also just seen in the case of Nigeria – as well as transnationally, regionally, and globally.

The network, Women Living under Muslim Laws, for example, includes women of any religious affiliation, although most are Muslims. From the start, WLUML has been an effective network for bringing together women from Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. For two decades, members of this pioneering network have shared advocacy methods such as circulation of alerts about violations of gender justice, and letter-writing and publicity campaigns. They have published documents and article collections, and have run innovative training sessions and workshops. An example of regional secular feminist work can be found in the African Gender Institute (AGI) at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, run by women who are committed scholar-activists. The AGI organizes conferences, hosts visiting scholars

and publishes *Feminist Africa*, a journal that appears online and in print form. The AGI offers a space where all women meet, whatever their religion – Muslims are among them – or strand of feminism. Feminists, of whatever kind, recognize that in the most immediate sense work has to be done on the ground and in cooperation with those who will support their goals. Returning to the transnational context, the quickest way Islamic feminists, Muslim secular feminists, and other feminists connect is through the internet. Muslim secular feminists and Islamic feminists take good advantage of cyber communication through their websites, listservs, chat groups and email. One of the most recently created electronic forums is *Hot Coals*, an online zine, published by the Abu Dharr Collective composed of seasoned theorists and activists resident in various parts of the globe. Muslims as secular and Islamic feminists from their diverse locations offer and receive instantaneous support. For the first time in history, patriarchal states are having a hard time continuing with impunity to perpetuate misogynist ideas and agendas, although they are doing their best to hold on.

**8. In our first interview when I asked what you see in the future for Islamic feminism, you mentioned that it is "the path towards recuperating the rights women are granted in Islam... Islamic feminism is on the roll. It has met with successes and will continue in this direction." Can you speak about this? Can you give specific examples?**

Concerning women's roles in religious life, I had mentioned, as you will recall when we spoke earlier, that a woman had given a *pre-khutba*, or pre-sermon talk in a mosque, at a Friday congregational prayer, referring to Amina Wadud's talk at the Claremont Mosque in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1994, an act of considerable symbolic value. A step further was made a decade later when Wadud took up the role of imam, leading a Friday congregational prayer in New York (this time in a church which offered space when no mosque would accept a woman leading prayer) and again a few months later Pamela Taylor served as imam in a Friday congregational prayer at a mosque in Toronto. These latest symbolic acts triggered off debate about gender and the ability to lead a congregation of women and men in prayer.

We can also credit Islamic feminists along with secular feminists in Morocco for playing a role in achieving the reform of the *Moudawwana*, now the most

progressive shari'a-backed family law to be found in Muslim countries. However, Indonesian Islamic feminists, as religious specialists on a commission set up within the Indonesian Ministry of Justice, have proposed a still more fully egalitarian draft family code. It remains to be seen when it will be adopted.

Islamic feminism is above all a process. It is a path with significant milestones, but always a path and one that needs to be paved with the help of like-minded others. Islamic feminism's consciousness-raising has been effective and widespread. The pressing challenge is greater application.

## Afterword Azza Basarudin

Islamic feminism can then be broadly understood as one strategy for Muslim women to struggle for women's rights from within an Islamic paradigm that is compatible with indigenous socio-cultural and religious locations. For if feminist scholarship considers feminism as not restricted to one culture or another, then feminism/s is indigenous. With indigenous feminism/s comes a variety of strategies of resistance that might not just entail resisting without complying – this might include understanding creative ways of resisting such as those explored in this interview. Women's strategies of resistance are situated as the forms of patriarchal and religious oppressions they encounter, which is how Islamic/Muslim feminists can also contribute to de-essentializing Eurocentric feminist discourses.

Working within the framework of religion and building progressive alliances with secular forms of feminism have produced a new direction for women to engage with religion and feminism that is practical and holistic to their history, social, cultural, and political settings. The libratory potential that Islamic/Muslims' secular feminism/s can offer, be it a form of identity, a project to re-excavate the gender egalitarianism in Islam, a way of embracing the new modernity of the twenty-first century, of becoming "modern" – not at the expense of religion and culture but within the context of religion and culture, or a tool to push for Islamic reformism in the public sphere, and/or a way of claiming new roles and opportunities remains to be seen. One aspect we can be sure of: Speaking for and about Islam in this contemporary moment of globalization entails radical redefinition of what constitutes Islam and how it can provide progressive spaces for women to reclaim their religious self-identification in the twenty-first century. I leave you with Fatima Mernissi's thoughts, "We Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but is a true part of the Muslim tradition."

## Endnotes

\* Margot Badran holds an MA from Harvard, a Diploma from Al Azhar University, and a D.Phil. from Oxford University. Among her books are *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton University Press, 1995) which appeared in Arabic as *Raidat al-Harakat al-Niswiyya al-Misriyya wa al-Islam wa al-Watan* (published by the Supreme Council of Culture in Cairo in 2000) and *Opening the Gates: An Arab Feminist Anthology* (first published by Indiana University Press in 1999 and as a new expanded version in 2004) which she co-edited. Badran is currently completing a book on secular feminism/s and Islam, from an historical and contemporary perspective. She is also working on a book on comparative Islamic feminism/s for which she has done research in the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia.

\*\* Azza Basarudin is a doctoral candidate in the Women's Studies Program at the University of California Los

Angeles (UCLA) where she is working on a comparative study of gender, Islam and feminism in the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

1. Cited from Mernissi, F. 1991, "Preface to the English edition", *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, New York, Perseus Publishing, ix.

2. This interview was first published in the Newsletter for the Center for the Study of Women (CSW) and Women's Studies Program at the University of California Los Angeles UCLA. Spring 2003, 5-7. Reprinted with permission.

3. See Moghadam, V.M. 2002, "Islamic feminism and its discontent: towards a resolution of the debate", in *Gender, Politics and Islam*. eds T. Saliba, C. Allen & J. Howard, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 15-52.

4. Mernissi, op. cit. p. viii.



# On Activism: An Interview with Amal Sabbagh\*

■ Myriam Sfeir

IWSAW

## 1. How do you define activism? Tell me about the pioneering work done by the Jordanian National Commission for Women and what it has achieved in the area of women's political rights?

Sometime during the past few years I came across a web page that classified terrorism as an activist action. Since that time I have been very careful with the use of the term "activism," and think that the task of defining it has become a rather elusive and tricky one. This being said, I would rather not define it but talk about some of the work of the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) which can be viewed as comprising a group of activists within the conventional meaning of the word.

Since its establishment in 1992, JNCW considered women's political participation as one of its priorities. Hence the National Strategy for Women and its update brought the issue to light, gave it a whole domain, stressing both political participation at the grassroots level as well as the national level. At the community level, JNCW's role was pivotal in paving the road in 1995 for women to run in municipal elections and win for the very first time in Jordan's history. This was achieved through intensive training of 99 women appointed as members of municipi-

pal councils. These appointments were made possible through the initiative of Her Royal Highness Princess Basma bint Talal, JNCW Chairperson.

However, the disappointment of the women's movement following the failure of any of the 17 women candidates who ran for parliamentary elections to win prompted JNCW to team up with women's NGOs to campaign for a quota system. Meetings with decision-makers and a two-week petition-signing campaign resulted in collecting 15,000 signatures, and making the issue a public one. The press joined forces and called for a quota for women. In 2002, JNCW held a national conference in preparation for the parliamentary elections of 2003, which demanded the executive authority to introduce a quota system. Providing a quota system for women in the 2003 parliamentary election was one component of the "Jordan First initiative," which was developed by a royal commission.

Currently the government is considering a new electoral law, the debate on the most suitable law is still ongoing, JNCW and its partners decided to provide decision-makers with three scenarios that may fit any of the suggested proposals. Our demand is to have a quota system; this will enable women from all governorates to participate if

the electoral system stays as is, or through "winnable" positions if the proportional system is adopted, or a combination of the two. We are seeking to have at least 15-30 percent of the seats reserved for women at different levels. Certainly this would help in creating a critical mass that would hopefully contribute to changing the prevalent stereotype of women's role in public life. Moreover, it would ensure that women's voices are heard.

## 2. What triggered your interest in calling for the adoption of a quota system in Jordan? The current number of seats reserved for women is six and I heard work is being done to secure another six. Can you tell me more about that?

Of course the 1997 elections were a turning point in convincing many women activists, as well as men, that a quota system is needed at least on a temporary basis to break the psychological barrier that exists to women's representation in parliament. We were convinced that quota systems are effective tools to ensure representation of women in decision-making positions. It is a way of leveling the field, specifically in patriarchal societies, where the woman's role is confined to the private/domestic sphere.

The quota system is provided for in the Jordanian electoral law. Seats are already allocated for minorities in Jordan (nine seats for Christians and three seats for Chechens/Circassians). In the recent debate over a new electoral law, some voices suggested the elimination of the quota system for all these groups including the quota designated for women. Certainly, this would jeopardize the efforts made by JNCW, as the national women's machinery in Jordan, in partnership with the Jordanian women's movement. Lessons learnt from other countries' experiences demonstrate that the quota system has to be extended for more than one election to ensure effective results. In the Jordanian context, we need a longer time to ensure that the system yields the expected results.

We realize that the quota system introduced in 2003 was not flawless. In fact, the quota system was used successfully by small tribes, which could not compete with larger tribes except by resorting to the women's quota sys-

tem. Our new proposals to the government try to circumvent such loops that may be abused.

## 3. What were the major obstacles you faced while working on introducing a quota system and how did you overcome these obstacles?

Working on women's rights in societies in transition is never easy. In any traditional society undergoing modernization, some aspects may be easier to change than women's issues. The latter can become very thorny since women are suddenly turned into symbols of a culture that people are afraid to lose.

In working for a quota system, there are also more issues at stake. Would the reserved seats mean less men in parliament, or would they be added over and above those seats already occupied by men? So a new type of hidden power struggle could evolve.

Of course there were some decision makers who dismissed the whole idea on the premise that "women are already equal (!!!), so why should we give them a quota?"

I believe that His Majesty King Abdullah II's belief in the importance of women's participation was the needed blessing to tip the balance after five years of advocating for a quota system. The large base of support that we built was also crucial in:

- a. making the quota system a public issue for debate,
- b. preparing the population in general for the idea.

Also the fact that the six reserved seats were added to the 104 seats that the electoral system allowed for rather than deducted, made the issue more acceptable to men parliamentarians.

*... women are already equal so why should we give them a quota?*

### Endnotes

\* Dr. Amal Sabbagh is the Secretary General of the Jordanian National Commission for Women. She has held positions within the Ministry of Social Development in Jordan and was Director of the Regional Centre for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in the Near East (CARDNE).

# Combatting Crimes of Honor

## ■ Rana Hussein

Journalist, *Jordan Times*

In January 1999 a Jordanian pharmacist approached me following a series of documentaries on so-called honor crimes in Jordan that were broadcasted on the American networks ABC and CNN. Because of my participation in those documentaries and the Reebok Human Rights Award that I won, the issue of so-called honor crimes in Jordan was becoming a hot and public debate.

He commended me for all my efforts to bring the issue to the surface and proposed that we start a grassroots movement in Jordan not only to have this issue widely publicized in the foreign media but also to fight these brutal murders and bring them to an end.

The reasons behind his decision, as he stated them, were my expertise and the comprehensive knowledge of this issue that I gained working on it for over six years (back then). I welcomed the idea, since my main concerns were first to see an end to so-called honor crimes in Jordan and second the abolishment of all the laws that discriminate against women, especially laws used by court tribunals to offer leniency for murderers in such crimes.

We decided to email our respective friends and any potential volunteers. Many people expressed interest and

over 20 people showed up for the first meeting.

Brain storming meetings were held on a weekly basis to come up with the best approach for raising public awareness, draw up strategies, and at the same time lobby the government to abolish laws that discriminate against women.

The number of people meeting regularly declined to 11 within a two-month period. A few months after our initial meeting, we decided that our first step and one of the best means to raise public and politicians' awareness was to organize a nationwide petition signing campaign. Such a petition was to be presented to parliament upon collecting a large enough number of signatures.

Another step was to hold a series of activities, which included preparing pamphlets that included information and statistics about the size of the problem in Jordan and holding lectures in public and private arenas to raise people's awareness about the issue and to encourage them to sign our petition.

The group also voted against working under any organization's umbrella or establishing our own organization

because we feared that going into such a matter could divert us all from our real goal: fighting for the right of life for women.

In August 1999 we held our first press conference, appealing to the public to join in and support our campaign by signing a nationwide petition. We wanted each and every Jordanian to know that he/she bears a responsibility in fighting for this noble cause.

As such we highlighted the fact that the numbers of women killed in Jordan annually in so-called honor crimes ranged between 20 and 25 and stressed the need to abolish Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code. (Eleven women were reported killed in 1999 until the day we launched our campaign.) We also explained that Article 340 includes two clauses. The first stipulates: "He who discovers his wife or one of his female relatives committing adultery (with a man) and kills, wounds, or injures one or both of them, is exempted from any penalty." The second states: "He who discovers his wife, or one of his female relatives with another in an adulterous situation, and kills, wounds or injures one or both of them, benefits from a reduction in penalty." The origins of Article 340 (copied from French Law by the Ottoman Turkish rulers, and incorporated in turn into our laws when the Kingdom was established) and its discriminatory inhumane aspects and implications were also stressed.

During the press conference we also pointed out a second article, 98, that was being used by the courts to enforce a lenient punishment against criminals ranging between three months and one year maximum depending on the circumstances of the case in question.

Article 98 stipulates: "He who commits a crime in a fit of fury caused by an unlawful or dangerous act on the part of the victim benefits from a reduction of penalty."

We finally announced that around 380 petitions had been distributed in the Kingdom and that group members and other supporters had managed to collect around 3000 signatures over the last two weeks before the official launch. We urged people to sign the petition to collect as large a number of signatures as possible to be submitted to His Majesty King Abdullah, Prime Minister Adur-Ra'uf S. Rawabdeh (then) and the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament to emphasize people's desire to abolish Article 340.

A month before the campaign was launched, a special

committee at the Ministry of Justice decided to cancel Article 340, and referred its recommendations to the Upper and Lower Houses for debate. At the same time, the committee decided to toughen the punishment against adulterers "to prevent people from committing adultery." His Majesty King Abdullah had instructed the government of Prime Minister Abdur-Ra'uf S. Rawabdeh in February of 1999 to amend any laws that "discriminate against women and inflict injustice on them."

During the same year, the King promised leaders of Jordan's women's movement that he would back their drive to amend all discriminatory legislation, by stating that he "would support women's cause... and concerning the discriminatory laws, you have my full support. We should do something to amend them." We used all kinds of means to collect as many signatures as possible. We used the internet, fax, free and paid ads in the newspapers and interviews on television and public radio to encourage Jordanians over the age of 19 to sign our petition.

Many people approached me personally asking for petition sheets to fill up in their own organizations or towns.

We also divided ourselves into groups, visiting deputies, officials and various governorates to lobby against discriminatory laws and urging people to sign our petition.

Moreover, we approached the foreign community in Jordan and explained that we are not seeking any financial support from anyone, but rather a moral one. Our aim was to draw attention to the real positive efforts and changes taking place in Jordan. Besides, we promised to provide them with more information later on in the future.

Many people were convinced about what we were doing and signed our petition. Others argued with us about the whole matter and refused to sign it. Some feared the idea of signing a petition since such activities have always been banned in Jordan and many of those who signed were prosecuted or questioned by the security forces. Others were against what we were doing, arguing that women who committed a "wrongful and immoral act" deserved to die and killers needed to be protected.

This was evident in remarks made by conservative deputies and Islamists who accused the government of succumbing to Western pressures that aimed at destroying the Jordanian cultural values, tradition and women.



Rana Hussein



As put by Lower House Deputy Mahmoud Kharabsheh who told me when I asked him about the proposed changes by the government: "Women adulterers cause a great threat to our society, because they are the main reason that such acts [of adultery] happen. If men do not find women with whom to commit adultery, then they will become good on their own."

On November 21, 1999, a sweeping majority of the Lower House deputies rejected the government's proposal to cancel Article 340, describing the move as "legalizing obscenity."

When the Upper House reviewed the Lower House's decision, it decided to uphold the government's amendments and returned it to the Lower House again. On January 26, 2000, and during a quick three-minute debate, the Lower House voted against the draft amendment again.

Despite this disappointing vote by the Lower House and strong criticism by many, the campaign continued strongly. By February 2000, we were able to collect over 15,000 signatures. With royal and governmental support, a public march was organized during that period and we presented the petition and the signatures to parliament.

A week following our march, the senate reviewed the draft for the second time and upheld its previous deci-

sion, forcing a joint session to vote on this draft law. But a joint session was never held. Many people said that we failed in convincing the Lower House to abolish Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code. But to me, I believe we succeeded in many other ways.

A few months following the heavy debate in the Kingdom, committee members headed to some popular neighborhoods in Amman to talk to people and see the level of awareness they have regarding this issue. We also wanted to collect more signatures for future activities.

To our delight and comfort, almost 95 percent of the people we spoke to had knowledge of the problem of so-called honor crimes in the Kingdom. Many were eager to sign our petition and the rejection was less than five percent.

Unfortunately, the committee's work weakened following the Palestinian Intifada and the war on Iraq. Despite this, it is my belief that the issue was exposed for good and it is no longer a taboo subject. People in Jordan are proud that one of the most brutal violations against women was heavily debated in public and that people had the will and ability to express their views by signing petitions, which was considered a rare privilege at that point in Jordanian history.

<http://www.jordanembassyus.org/Aug2499.htm>

# Forthcoming: The Role of Higher Education in Empowering Arab

## The National Jordanian Campaign to Eliminate the so called "Crimes of Honor"

We are a group of Jordanian citizens who have no personal, political, or racial interests, but are gathered with one unifying issue as free individuals, which is our right to a good and safe life, free from violence in a society that protects the rights of all, which abides by the rules of the Constitution which assures equality to all in front of the law in rights and duties.

Through the years, our country has witnessed abhorrent crimes that are refused by every clear-thinking and honest Jordanian. These crimes were committed in the name of honor, and those who have committed them received very soft sentences, which in turn have encouraged their belief and that of others that the crime they committed is socially acceptable.

Since the victims no longer have a voice to raise, and since we jealously guard the life and the safety of all Jordanian citizens (men and women) and the right of each Jordanian to live in peace and harmony based on the respect of human dignity, individual rights, justice, security, fair trial and defense and because these crimes contradicted Islamic Law (shari'a), the Constitution and the International Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), we express our support of the decision of the Minister of Justice Hamzeh Haddad and the government, who, in moving to abolish Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code, have acted according to the spirit of His Majesty King Abdullah's directives to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women.

Based on these principles, we decided to organize this campaign to practice our civil rights to demand that legislative, judicial and administrative authorities and the various national official sectors take all necessary measures and use all legal, democratic means at their disposal – judicial, legislative, educational and media – to eliminate this ugly phenomenon of the so called crimes of "honor."

In the name of our sisters, daughters and mothers who do not have any voice, in the name of those who this minute unjustly suffer different forms of violence and injury to protect honor, with no one to protect them and guarantee their human rights, we raise our own voices.

We call for the immediate cancellation of Article 340 in its entirety, which gives reduction and exemptions to those who kill or injure in the name of honor.

We stress the need to implement the law so as not to waste any chance to punish killers and to show society that these crimes will not be tolerated. We stress the need to implement a fair and preventive punishment against anyone who commits crimes against women or a female in the name of honor.

We call on all the concerned citizens of this country to share our work to ensure that this initiative is a national effort which allows Jordanians to express their opinion and help the authorities to become aware of the public's directives in order for the authorities to take the appropriate and necessary decisions to protect the safety of dozens of innocent women who are victims of traditions and social norms that are outside the rule of Islam, the Jordanian Constitution and basic human rights.

We announce that we have prepared numbered petitions which contain five columns including the name, date, number of official document, phone number and signature. Jordanian citizens only, who are legally eligible to vote, will sign these petitions. Our aim is to collect thousands of signatures to emphasize the desire of a large percentage of voters to cancel Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code and to work intensively with all means available to abolish this inhuman practice.

We launch our campaign by appealing to all citizens to take the initiative and sign this petition. We will also announce some of the names of the first groups who lent great support to this national effort, which helped to strengthen our convictions of the necessity of this campaign.



# Round Table: Women's Activism and Participation in Lebanon

■ Myriam Sfeir

IWSAW

*Women's Activism and Participation in Lebanon was the subject of a round table discussion held at the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World last October. The participants were Lina Abou Habib, Iqbal Doughan, Linda Matar, Mona Khalaf, Zoya Rouhana, and Dima Dabbous-Sensenig. The moderator was Marguerite Helou.*

**Marguerite Helou:** The subject of our round table is "Women's Activism in Lebanon." Based on your experience, is there a difference between women activists and women participants, and when can we call a woman an activist and when can we call her a participant in the public sphere?

**Linda Matar:** In order to answer this question I would like to know what are the criteria you are using to measure participation. In other words, what do you mean by participation? Is it mere participation in activities organized by non-governmental organizations or demonstrations; or is the participant the initiator who organizes the activities? How do you define an activist, the person who organizes the event, and who is the participant, the one who participates by the mere fact that she got invited?

**MH:** This is what we are trying to find out. We have no

set definition. We are hoping to come up with one once this round table is over. So basically my question is: In your opinion who qualifies to be an activist? And how is an activist different from a mere participant? What are the criteria we must use to make this distinction? Does it have to do with initiative, volunteering, or level of participation?

**LM:** There are two categories of participants. The first group is made up of women whose participation is generally sporadic and restricted to specific activities, either because of personal choice or due to lack of time. Members of the second group are more involved. Their participation is more the active rather than the passive type. Their involvement is permanent and they are active at all levels. This group – or at least a significant number of them – can be considered activists. They initiate activities, are highly devoted to the cause, and usually volunteer on a full time basis.

Defining activism and participation is very difficult because there are degrees of participation and activism. Some women may be considered active participants by the mere fact that they are present. Others are regarded as participants because they are involved in the discussions, sug-

gestions, and recommendations taking place. Hence, the degree of participation of these two groups is not the same; it differs with the commitment demonstrated. If a woman constantly participates in women's activities and has a positive impact in terms of her suggestions and opinions then I think you can consider her sort of an activist. An activist in my opinion is a woman who has volunteered to serve and be active in the fight for women's rights. No matter how difficult the task is, she plunges in and tries to overcome the difficulties. Some women believe in the cause and are convinced that their input can make a difference. However, there are others who only care about personal exposure and visibility. There are many whose sole aim is to be seen. If they don't get the chance to sit in the front rows they leave.

**Zoya Rouhana:** Before I answer could you clarify more what you mean by activism and participation?

**MH:** I am going to propose a simple basic distinction between the two concepts to start with. Activism entails advocacy, strife, and volunteering. It aims at changing the prevalent situation in society. As a activist, I may not be directly suffering from discrimination but I am conscious of what is going on around me and I strive to change the situation by working to help others. I am working for the future to improve society as a whole. Participation, on the other hand, may not entail advocacy, taking initiatives – or at least it is not consciously intended to change the situation. Voting is one such type of participation.

**ZR:** I agree with what you said. I believe that participation has its reasons and considerations. I guess the word participation in a way diminishes the effort put in by women. Why should we differentiate between an activist and a participant?

**Lina Abou Habib:** In my opinion we are talking about different degrees of participation where activism is the utmost level of participation. It is important to highlight what you are participating in and what you are actively advocating. If we take Casablanca as an example, a million women participated in a demonstration that opposed the amendments of laws. Women were demonstrating against equality. So basically both participation and activism are for change, yet, this change need not lead to a positive change for women. As a concept, participation has degrees and the highest levels of participation yields activism.

**Iqbal Doughan:** There are different degrees of activism and participation, yet, if we have a goal to change certain issues in society then all the individuals working on this subject ought to be a team. I believe that an activist is a person who is committed to a particular cause and considers it a top priority where it occupies a huge part of her

life. However, I also believe that those who participate with her and assist her in her strife are also activists. Activists and participants both participate, yet the time and effort exerted by them differ because participants do not really have the time that activists have. That is why we see less and less young women activists given that they lack the time needed to volunteer. Hence, the levels of participation differ and the activist is the one who devotes all her life to a particular issue. Some participate in terms of their presence, others in preparing and putting forth a plan of action and strategy, etc. So some participants will turn into activists, but not all of them will. However, all activists will pass through the phase of participation where they train, learn, and gain experience to participate on some level. I believe that the more committed they get the more they are fit to be called activists.

**ZR:** A distinction should be made between women who are working and striving to make a qualitative and real difference in women's lives and those who work for charitable or superficial reasons.

**ID:** Not all participation is charitable, there are some social aspects related to participation. Women volunteers working with the elderly and striving to improve their situation are bringing about a positive change, and hence can be considered social activists. Nowadays, we shy away from any charitable act and refuse to consider it activism. I believe those are activists in society, they are sacrificing their time and mobilizing their efforts for various causes. They fill in a gap where there is negligence.

**MH:** Is there a difference between the activists that were working during the independence period and the activists of today? Were they activists without passing through the phases of participation and training?

**LM:** A lot of the non-governmental organizations at that time were accused of being made up of women who belonged to the high society. The reason behind this was because many of the women who started working socially were well to do, bourgeois ladies who weren't involved in any political work. Most of them had the time and means and were members of organizations that were engaged in social activities such as illiteracy eradication, etc. Their participation was seasonal and periodical. At that time women were allowed to engage in social and charitable activities but politics was a field relegated to men. Yet when the need arose, those same women took to the streets in the fight for Lebanon's independence. Women from different areas, religions and organizations united, demonstrated and clashed with the occupying army. Even though these women recoiled from the word politics and refused to engage in any political activity, they were unconsciously very politically active and involved

when they joined men in the fight for liberation. The fact that they demonstrated for independence was neither a charitable act nor a social one – it was a purely political act. Once independence was gained, those women retreated because they thought that with independence they would gain their full rights. Shortly after, they realized that that was not the case. However, there were certain women figures who played an important role in granting women their political rights, such as Ibtihaj Kaddoura, Laure Tabet, Emily Fares Ibrahim to mention a few. I remember when I joined the League of Lebanese Women's Rights, even though I was young and new in the field of politics, I knew that every social action or work to be realized needed to be backed by a political decision. So the question here is aren't we really involved in politics? This was the general trend.

**Mona Khalaf:** Which years are you talking about?

**LM:** 1976

**MK:** But in 1948 women were very much involved politically and denounced the occupation of Palestine. Those women went to Egypt and the Arab Women's League was formed under the leadership of Huda Shaarawi. The first pioneers had an upper hand because they were activists in the real sense of the word. They paved the way for us. In the early 1900s you were sometimes imprisoned because you were an activist. Back then there was no backup from the United Nations, there was no Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, no UN convention renouncing violence, no support from men or politicians, etc. Women were accused of importing Western values.

**MH:** Is the level of backup women receive related to the issues they are fighting for?

**Lina Abou Habib:** There is no doubt that the Beijing conference was a turning point. How things deviated over the years is something else. Yet, the international agenda does influence which issues and women's concerns are prioritized.

**MH:** When women participated in the fight for Lebanon's independence the whole society approved and encouraged them, yet when women started to ask for their political, social and economic rights there was disapproval. Is the level of acceptance and backup provided linked to the issue one is fighting for?

**LAH:** Yes, it is related but it is a double edged sword. The more important the issue, the more it is fought. If you can find support for an issue that does not mean that it is important for everyone.

**Dima Dabbous-Sensenig:** When women are fighting for a cause that benefits men or coincides with their interest it's ok because women can be used to take to the streets when they are needed. However, men expect them to go back home, sit aside and attend to matters in the private sphere when the goal is achieved. Hence, when she is needed she is used and after she helps out she is put on the side and robbed of all her privileges. So I strongly believe that when the goal is relevant and convenient to men, women are encouraged to take part but when they start working on something that would benefit them as women they are fought and discouraged. Men usually use everything in their power to fight women, especially religion.

**ID:** That is why we should try to link men's issues to ours. The social security law is a good example. We worked for over 25 years to secure social security for children through their mothers. We were calling for the right of women to be considered breadwinners. We encouraged men to join in our plight given that the amendment of this law would benefit men. And in fact, husbands started backing us because they realized that they are ameliorating the situation of the family given that they and their children were the primary beneficiaries. Mind you, not all issues can be won this way but we have to try. I believe that it is very important to raise men's and boys' awareness of and belief in women's rights.

**LM:** I agree with what they said, yet I would like to add something: No matter how important the cause is for you it does not have the same weight – not only for men, but for other women as well. Women sometimes fail to support other women in their plight. Some women are convinced to stay at home and have men spend on them. So we need to enlighten men and women and the youth.

**LAH:** I agree, given that the ultimate aim is to change the power structure and this is very difficult to alter because men will not renounce their privileges easily. There is a very interesting study conducted by Elizabeth Thompson entitled *Colonial Citizens* in which the author studies the formal and informal women's movement in Lebanon and Syria. According to her, the regression of the women's movement after independence has to do with the fact that men decided to relegate women back to the private sphere. Even in terms of publications the gap is very wide. It is not a coincidence that women were used.

**MK:** No one mentioned the war Lebanon passed through. There was a momentum of the Lebanese women's movement that stopped as a result of the war. Society usually views women as the ideal candidates to take care of the hungry, the wounded, etc. There was an agenda for the women's movement, yet it had to stop during the war. No

one was interested in giving women their rights because there were other priorities at the societal level. So women's issues were more or less ignored for 20 years and until about two years before the Beijing conference. So women's issues were not a priority. Of course there were individuals who were actively participating in the fight, but on the societal level there was no interest.

**LM:** I don't believe that the starting point was the Beijing conference but rather 1975, International Women's Day, because it was an important event for both the developing countries as well as the whole world. We used to say that the country comes first and then every other issue. Lebanon was represented in all the international conferences even though there was war. We were actively engaged in organizing conferences and seminars even though the war was raging.

**MH:** If we are to take the war period, we find that there was societal, regional and confessional acceptance of women's participation and activism. Women demonstrated, fought and worked. After the war women were asked to go back home.

**MK:** I disagree. Women didn't actually fight and we can't compare Lebanese women to Palestinian or Algerian women. Women were a support group but they weren't active participants in the war.

**LAH:** Women did participate in the siege of the camps. They were participants and were a support group.

**MH:** Why did you become activists? What triggered your interest?

**DDS:** Given that I was an only girl I wanted my father to love me more than my brothers so I used to compete with them and wanted to prove to my father that I was equal to them, so whatever they did I wanted to do. Besides, I got involved in women's issues for personal reasons mostly related to my first marriage that ended in divorce.

My personal interest developed and triggered my academic interest in women's issues. I realized that when one is armed with education one has knowledge, can think and solve one's problems. Because I was discriminated against I relate to women who are discriminated against. Academically I can now comprehend the reasons why women accept their fate. To me an activist differs from a participant in that the former has the political knowledge, know how and maturity. Political consciousness gives one an agenda that enables one to analyze the problem and come up with a solution based on experience, political thinking and education. When you tell the participant that it is important for women to attain most of their rights,

she might not fully comprehend all the aspects this involves. However, if I am an activist I am able to know exactly why men act this way and why they discriminate against women, and why they don't want them to work. Work leads to empowerment and independence, which in turn strengthens one's personality. I used to know that what was happening to me was wrong instinctively, yet, when I got more involved academically I was able to understand why. When one is in an abusive relationship one feels very weak and vulnerable. Abusive men rob women of all their privileges because they know that this is the only way they can control and terrorize them.

**ID:** Just like Dima, I was brought up with six other brothers. I was the only girl and had special treatment from everyone in my family. My brothers supported me a lot. When I was 13, I joined a political party. This political party taught me how to be disciplined, work in a group, think, and become a planner. It also influenced the formation of my personality. I remained a party member until I got married. I had to quit my political work because of family issues. Yet I still felt the need to improve the situation of women. Since a young age I was interested in working on women's issues and I believe that as long as the personal status codes discriminate against women nothing will change. Hence, we are trying to amend the discriminatory laws in the Lebanese legislation.

I strongly believe that women who work are more capable of changing their situation. They are capable of making decisions on their own. Unfortunately, despite the fact that the situation of women has improved, the ingrained habits of the mind are still the same and so are the stereotypes and discriminatory laws; they hardly go away or change. As a result we decided to found the Working Women's League in Lebanon. The purpose was to ameliorate the situation of working women by encouraging them to unite and join syndicates. We realized that women working outside the home are more eager to change things than women who are at home. We faced many difficulties at first in terms of logistics, funds and attitudes. A major problem we still suffer from is shortage of funds given that most of the funding we get is conditional. We try to manage with our own resources but that is not easy. Besides, stereotypes prevail when one is fighting for women's rights. Women are ridiculed and constantly criticized when they ask for their rights. For example, once a politician made fun of the fact that we were trying to incorporate a clause related to sexual harassment in the labor law.

**MH:** To what extent are women politicians working on women's issue?

**ID:** MP Nayla Mouawad and MP Bahia Hariri have worked



a lot and they support us in all our requests. Yet, there are a lot of women in decision-making positions who are not interested in women's issues or in advancing the situation of women.

**MK:** It is our fault. We should be more involved and plan ahead of time if we are interested in being elected. We should start working from now if we want to participate in the 2009 elections. We should start formulating a plan of action and publicizing our electoral program. Most essential is that we should work as a team and support each other. We should back those among us whom we think would represent us well. I disagree that men are not allowing us to enter politics; we are not helping ourselves.

**ID:** The electoral system is not helping either. Let's face it. I agree we are not working hard to pursue our rights but the system doesn't help.

**LAH:** The basic reason I got interested in women's issues was Auntie Georgette. She was a neighbor and a very good friend of my grandmother. Every two days she would flee to our house because her husband used to beat her up. We were young and didn't comprehend what was happening. But we knew something was wrong given that Auntie Georgette always fled to our house with torn clothes, bruised and crying. She would hide in our house and it was a traumatizing experience to see her in such a state. Given that the beatings were recurrent we sensed the discrimination early on. Also when you attend a convent school you either try to abide by the system or rebel. One thing I wanted for my daughter was to put her in a nonreligious school.

**MK:** I too am an only girl. I was very fortunate to have three fantastic men in my life: my father, my husband and my son. I went to a convent school and then attended the American University of Beirut. Yet, I do not feel that the convent school affected me negatively; because with time I succeeded in sorting out the values I was taught. I grew up in a family where I never felt discriminated against. My father treated me and my brothers on an equal footing, except when it came to going out at night. When I graduated from AUB with a B.A. I was offered a job as a research assistant. I was overjoyed so I rushed home to tell my mum. My aunt was visiting when I arrived and after I told them the good news my aunt couldn't help but say, and I still recall her exact words: "God keep your father safe and able to provide you with financial support. In our family, girls do not work." The prevailing mentality at that time was that if you could afford to stay at home then you should not work. Having a university degree at that time was a plus which enabled you to marry well and raise children adequately. My mother never worked and neither

did any of my relatives or people in my milieu so it was a shock to them. When my father came home, I told him about the good news. He was thrilled at the idea and supported me all the way. So ever since I never felt discriminated against. I also majored in Economics, a field that was a man's domain. I recall my professor encouraging me and the other two girls majoring in Economics to shift to Education.

**ZR:** I am an only girl. I was my father's favorite. I didn't experience any discrimination within my immediate family though my extended family is very conservative and patriarchal. There was a contradiction between the way I was brought up, within my own family and my milieu. I recall that it was the end of the world when girls in the family used to be born.

I got interested in women's issues at an early age. I was a member of the League of Lebanese Women until 1995. A turning point for me was when the Arab Women's Court convened in Beirut. The Court was a forum where women came to testify about the violence they were subjected to. My husband is very supportive and so is my family. The issue of violence against women was a touchy subject and our organization had a hard time getting a permit. We needed five years to get the license from the government because such an issue was considered a family matter. One husband told me: "It's no one's business if I want to throw my wife from the balcony. I can do it and no one has the right to interfere."

**LM:** My experience is totally different from the others. Since I was young I was very pampered but I was brought up in family that could hardly make ends meet. At every phase in my life I had question marks about so many things. My father was very liberal for his times, he wanted me to choose my spouse when the time came, which according to him was not before 20. But I fell in love and got married at the age of 17 to an Armenian guy against my brother's will. My husband was very supportive.

I could not tolerate discrimination and I will recount one incident that affected me and made me interested in defending women's issues. Prior to 1953, women were not granted the right to vote. During one of the elections I saw our neighbor, who was physically and mentally retarded, being carried to vote. I was outraged because the poor guy knew nothing about what was going on around him and his vote was counted as a valid one whereas I wasn't even allowed to vote. Around that period I was visited by two women roaming around collecting signatures for a petition that called for granting women the right to vote. I signed the petition and asked them if I could join them in collecting petitions and they agreed. In one of the houses there was a lady who told

us, and I quote: "I am not signing anything, I don't want any more rights. I have everything I need. I have all the jewelry I want, I have a car, and I have a maid at home. What do I want more?" Since that day I decided to join the League of Lebanese Women and founded a center in my area. With time I advanced and was elected president of the League and I am still president till this day. I also joined the Communist Party but after I became president of the League I didn't have time for the two so I left the Party.

**MH:** How flexible were parties in promoting women?

**LM:** Promoting women in parties stems from women's willingness to invest time. Women sometimes don't have the time to stay late and attend party meetings. Most parties and syndicates hold their meetings at night and this depends on the woman and how much she is willing to participate. No matter how understanding husbands and parents are they will not allow women to stay out very late.

**ID:** I disagree with you totally Linda, you are trying to give excuses why parties refuse to promote women.

**LM:** This is your opinion, but when I was a member of the Communist Party they tried to help me advance and give me a top ranking position within the party but I refused because I didn't have the time.

**MK:** I know two women who wanted to move forward in the Communist Party, yet they were fought and they ultimately left. Each party has a few token women who rarely occupy decision-making positions.

**MH:** What about personal status codes, are you working on amending these laws?

**ID:** Religious laws prevent us from adopting a civil law. The personal status codes of all sects agree to discriminate against women. We are trying to amend some provisions within the personal status codes. What we are working on is increasing the child custody age limit. We are finding a lot of difficulty in doing so because religious figures are fighting us. Many Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Yemen, and Iraq amended their laws on custody age. Only two sects in Lebanon managed to amend this law and they are the Greek Orthodox and the Evangelicals.

**MH:** Amending personal status laws is next to impossible. So don't you think that women's activism is condoned as long as it is in conformity with the customs and traditions? When one addresses issues that are outside the scope of what is acceptable all hell breaks loose.

**ID:** There are issues that may be amended but others that are taboos, such as inheritance. If you decide to touch upon this issue with Muslim clerics you are considered a heretic.

**LAH:** Patriarchal systems are in favor of personal status codes. Hence, given that we are discriminated against we try to make do with what is available. Even though we might not reach any developments now or in the near future, the struggle has to continue. This should be our aim.

**ZR:** One has to admit that familial relations are undemocratic, controlling, and authoritarian in nature. Given that these relations are the norm, there is no way society will develop lest these relations become egalitarian. Women are the caretakers and they should enjoy equal opportunities to relay egalitarianism to their children. Activism should adopt as a starting point human rights in general and not just women's rights.

**MH:** While bringing up their children, women sometimes reinforce the same culture by ascribing to their daughter everything relating to the private sphere.

**ZR:** We have to acknowledge that there is a prevalent patriarchal culture that is affecting men and women equally. Hence, our fight should be directed towards consciousness-raising to educate both men and women. Women and men are the victims.

**ID:** I agree with you but it's the woman's cause and women should work harder to attain their rights.

**MK:** Women are the ones who bring up the children be they boys or girls. It is thus their duty to raise their sons and daughters in a way that would put an end to the stereotyped gender distribution of roles. It is only if they do so that there would be some hope for a positive change in the prevailing norms and traditions.

**ID:** How can you empower women who have no decision making power at home, who are battered and discriminated against? Even if this woman tries to raise her children in an egalitarian manner she will fail because she has no influence over her children. The children will be influenced by the father and learn what is right and wrong from him.

**LAH:** When you say the solution is in raising awareness and the target group is women, one is under the impression that women are the problem and this is not the case. I agree that raising awareness is very important but the focus should be on both genders not just women.

# Women Entrepreneurs in the Middle East and North Africa Region

## An Untapped Resource with Growth Potential

■ Carmen Niethammer

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Women in the Middle East and North Africa (MNA) comprise a large untapped economic resource. Indeed, a 2003 World Bank Report<sup>1</sup> concludes that had MNA countries utilized their female labor force potential as other regions did, per capita income would have grown by an additional 0.7 percent during the 1990s. This would also have translated into a 20-25 percent increase in net family income had women worked outside the home. But the reality is starkly different; gender unemployment gaps in the region are the highest in the world with the female unemployment rate being six percentage points higher than the male rate (2003).<sup>2</sup> This indicates that women in

women's empowerment indicators (as measured by female labor force and political participation) lag behind. At 32 percent, women's labor force participation is the lowest in the world. This is most likely due to the dearth of job opportunities in the public sector and the limited size of the private sector – which tends to absorb primarily men, who are still considered the main breadwinner in many MNA countries. Furthermore, women who manage to be employed by the private sector tend to occupy lower level jobs and earn less for the same work than their male colleagues – a situation that is common throughout the world.<sup>3</sup>

International experience shows that the promotion of small- and medium-sized enterprises are key to economic growth and leads to improving the welfare of the poor and the underprivileged segments of the society through its impact on income. More specifically, over the last decades, there has been an emergence and growth of women-owned businesses as an economic force. For example, in the United States women-owned businesses continue to grow at twice the rate of all U.S. firms. The United Kingdom's Department of Trade and Industry also recognized that female entrepreneurship is a key driver of economic growth.<sup>4</sup> The Department concluded that if the

MNA are clearly at a disadvantage when attempting to access formal labor force markets. Despite remarkable gains in human development indicators – health and education – that put MNA ahead of other developing regions,

U.K. had the same rate of female-owned startups as the U.S., the U.K. would have 750,000 more businesses with a major impact on productivity growth. Moreover, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Research Program (which measures differences in the level of entrepreneurial activity among countries) concludes that increasing the participation of women in entrepreneurship is critical to long-term economic prosperity and that (for most countries studied) the largest and most rapid gains in firm startup rates can be achieved by increasing the number of women participants in the entrepreneurial process.

Women's entrepreneurship in MNA can be a solution to creating jobs for women (and men) and to promoting economic growth. Women in the MNA region increasingly aspire to participate actively in the formal labor force and to become entrepreneurs, investors and producers in their own right, casting aside the traditional image of women as restricted to the home. Given the great human resource potential of women in MNA (who are in increasing numbers graduating from post-secondary institutions), women's entrepreneurship is a solution to women's (and men's) unemployment. In fact, women in MNA are also more likely than men to hire other women ("female employment multiplier").<sup>5</sup> According to preliminary findings from investment climate assessments,<sup>6</sup> women do in fact prefer to work for women-owned small- and medium-sized enterprises.

Women's entrepreneurship appears to be increasing throughout the region, with the number of women entrepreneurs varying from 3 percent in some countries to 18 percent in others.<sup>7,8</sup> One difficulty in determining the exact number is linked to the fact that the definitions of small- and medium-sized enterprises vary from country to country – sometimes different definitions are even applied within one country. Moreover, many businesses in MNA are either not registered, or are registered as women-owned businesses without the women actually running the business – in order to retain the man's privileges of government employment, for example. Most female-owned businesses tend to be smaller than male-owned ones. Furthermore, there appears to be a positive relationship between educational attainment levels and female entrepreneurial success rates.<sup>9</sup>

The majority of female entrepreneurs in the region are owners of informal micro and home-based businesses, mainly in the service sector. While many of these entrepreneurs have benefited from poverty alleviation programs, they did not sufficiently benefit from formal support structures. Studies indicate that the majority of women entrepreneurs gathered valuable experience through previous employment in the private sector – sometimes managerial positions provided them with the

skills needed to set up their own businesses.<sup>10</sup> While most female-owned businesses tend to focus on the services sector, they cover all sectors. For example, in Yemen as many as 77 percent of women-owned businesses are operating in the service sector. In Egypt, 59 percent of members of businesswomen's associations are in the service sector. And in Morocco, the largest segment of women-owned businesses is also in the service industry (37 percent), while 31 percent of its female businesses are trade-related, and 21 percent are in the industrial sector. In Saudi Arabia, women's 2002 aggregate investments were made mainly in industrial and service projects.<sup>11</sup>

A number of surveys suggest that, surprisingly, financial incentives are not the key motivators for successful businesswomen to start their business. Women entrepreneurs' contribution to the household income is a key factor in assuring the important family support to MNA businesswomen. And the moral and practical support of male family members appears to be critical for the success of women-owned businesses. This, however, does not imply that MNA businesswomen are "less serious." As in countries where women are highly educated, women's main motivation for starting a business in MNA is the desire to be independent and to be able to apply all creative skills.<sup>12</sup> Thus, not surprisingly, successful women entrepreneurs in MNA tend to be fairly young when they start their business and in general have more than a high-school certificate. Indeed, there is a trend in MNA countries that successful women entrepreneurs are more Internet savvy than their male counterparts, indicating that women are increasingly pushing the boundaries and moving into new growth sectors.

Women in MNA have the education and adequate resources to start their own businesses, but they are at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing networks and credit. Moreover, MNA businesswomen lack the supporting infrastructure.

Often, social-cultural barriers seem to be among the important obstacles to women's entrepreneurship as they impact women's mobility, and their access to labor markets. And in some instances they can include the requirement of male agents for business registration.<sup>13</sup> It is not clear whether the marital status of businesswomen fur-

*Educated women in MNA represent a large economic resource in the region...*

thers or hinders women's entrepreneurship: Findings from Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen seem to suggest that marriage has an impact on the success of the women-owned business (possibly facilitating access to family networks and an appropriate work-life balance).<sup>14</sup>

The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor found that role models exert a powerful influence on prospective entrepreneurs in many of the countries studied. Historically, women in MNA have not occupied many high-level decision-making positions – either in the public or in the private sector. Although this number is notably increasing,<sup>15</sup> MNA women entrepreneurs today still lack successful role models and access to businesswomen's networks. The good news is that some successful businesswomen's committees and support organizations have been forming and that women role models are becoming more visible.<sup>16</sup>

Having recognized that women are reluctant to register their businesses with chambers of commerce, there has been a recent trend of either targeting businesswomen specifically or establishing "women's departments" within chambers of commerce, which in turn has increased women's access to networks and role models. In October 2001, the Bahraini Chamber of Commerce and Industry elected its first woman board member, an active member of the Bahraini Business Women's Society. The 18-member Chamber also established a special businesswomen's committee within the Chamber with the objective to further develop the role of women in the country's economy.<sup>17</sup> In Saudi Arabia, the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry has recognized women's important role in the economic sphere and women's business needs. To this end, the Chamber now targets businesswomen's issues by providing business services for women and by advocating their case.<sup>18</sup> Government agencies focused on promoting women in general have also taken an interest in supporting women's economic participation. In Egypt, the National Council for Women established a Women's Business Development Center which functions as a "one-stop-shop" by providing businesswomen with the tools and skills to start small businesses, training, mentoring, and business information services.

While access to finance remains a business constraint for both men and women, anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that women are facing higher hurdles. To begin with, most initiatives targeting women in MNA offer micro-credits with an aim of promoting poverty alleviation. This approach by itself has promoted a view that women are not capable of being borrowers of larger loans – which is reflected by the fact that women themselves are not confident to apply for larger amounts of financing and that bank officers put women's loan applications under higher scrutiny. This is despite the fact that

women have proven to be excellent re-payers of loans – certainly given the global micro-credit experience where women are known to be most reliable in repaying loans. Moreover, there are many instances where women have personal savings accounts that are not being used as collateral. In Saudi Arabia, for example, women are said to control up to \$26 billion that is lying idle in Saudi bank accounts. And in Yemen, one commercial bank observed that women's personal saving accounts are – on average – larger than those of men, but are not being used for investments.

Yet, new opportunities for women's entrepreneurship in MNA are on the horizon. Commercial banks are increasingly realizing that targeting women customers makes a lot of business sense. For example, the Commercial Bank of Dubai has launched a "Shahrazade Ladies Banking Program" which – among others – offers members special discounts from department stores, preferential rates on personal loans, and access to car loans and overdraft facilities. This program also plans to provide networking opportunities to its female customers. But for the time being, few financial institutions in MNA are targeting women specifically – although some MNA banks (especially in the Gulf countries) have special women's sections that are physically separated from service desks for men. What appears to be lacking, however, is that bank officers are not adequately trained to understand and accommodate women's financial needs. Sometimes it is just the type of women-run business (mostly in the service industry) that requires a different understanding of the proposed business plan (where, for example, inputs and outputs are not measurable goods as one would expect in an industry-focused business plan). New initiatives include the Moroccan Regional Investment Center for the region of Kenitra which is embarking on establishing a special partnership with women entrepreneurs. In Iran, the Women's Employment Bureau of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs has allocated 40 percent of a competitive "Graduate Support Fund" to women entrepreneurs.

Even though women in MNA are highly educated,<sup>19</sup> (which has a positive impact on women's technical skills as well as their competencies in entrepreneurship and business development) women entrepreneurs across MNA are expressing a need for greater skills development services. This is also partly due to a lack of available market relevant (demand-driven) education. In the absence of entrepreneurial skills development centers, technical assistance to women entrepreneurs is increasingly being offered by national businesswomen's associations. The Moroccan Association des Femmes Chefs d'Entreprises has, for example, offered skills development courses ranging from management training, public speaking, and project management, to marketing and

accounting. One notable public-private partnership initiative is the Dubai Women's College and the Mohammed Bin Rashid Establishment for Young Business Leaders which is a new initiative between the College's business school and the private sector. Currently donor support providing this kind of technical assistance is still limited, and not many entrepreneurs have been able to access donor funded assistance in the past. Yet, it should be noted that the International Finance Corporation PEP-MENA facility (located in Cairo) is planning to launch a two-year technical assistance program called the "Gender Entrepreneurship Markets (GEM) Program," starting in September 2005 – with a focus on the underserved segment of growth oriented women entrepreneurs. Other technical assistance initiatives are also being planned by the US-funded Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI).

## Conclusion

Educated women in MNA represent a large economic resource in the region, and increasingly women are successfully entering the formal labor market (and creating employment for others) by establishing their own businesses. Women face the same business constraints as men, but in addition they are having more difficulties in overcoming obstacles related to access to finance, administrative and regulatory barriers, lack of skilled labor, and socio-cultural barriers. On a positive note, governments and private institutions (such as businesswomen's associations and banks) are moving in the right direction to support the new women entrepreneurs. The challenge for the region will be to ensure that such support is sustainable. To this end, the focus on skills services to women entrepreneurs and support initiatives that enhance women's professional networks are likely to play a key role.

## Endnotes

1. World Bank. 2003, *MNA Regional Development Report: Women in the Public Sphere*.
2. ILO. 2004, *Global Employment Trends for Women*.
3. A July 2005 article in *The Economist* "Why are women so persistently absent from top corporate jobs?" cites a study that found that "women had 45.7 percent of America's jobs and more than half of master's degrees being awarded. Yet 95 percent of senior managers were men, and female managers' earnings were on average a mere 68 percent of their male counterparts."
4. See "UK strategic framework for women's enterprise" available at [www.sbs.gov.uk](http://www.sbs.gov.uk)
5. A 2005 International Finance Corporation (IFC) *PEP-MENA GEM Yemen Study* concluded that women-owned small enterprises create as many jobs as male-owned businesses (12 on average), but women were twice as likely to hire other women.
6. Investment Climate Assessments are used to identify and prioritize investment climate constraints, benchmark reform progress, provide cross-country comparisons of investment climate indicators, and help countries forge broad consensus on priority areas for reform. These country assessment reports ultimately feed into World Bank operations and technical assistance.
7. World Bank. 2005, *MNA Women Entrepreneurship Institutional Study*, draft report, June.
8. According to a 2003 study by Women in Business International, recent figures from Dubai indicated that over one third of new business registrations were made by women. (See "The role of women in the modern Arab world" by L. Hamed & A. Suleiman.)
9. According to the 2005 IFC *PEP-MENA Gender Entrepreneurship Markets (GEM) Study*, most successful women entrepreneurs had a tertiary education.
10. World Bank. 2005, op.cit.
11. Chamlou, N. & Yared, R.K. 2003, "Women entrepreneurs in the Middle East and North Africa: building on solid beginnings", paper prepared for the Annual Joint Seminar 2003 of

- the Arab Fund on "Arab Women and Economic Development", World Bank, Washington, DC.
12. World Bank. 2005, op.cit.
13. According to a 2005 World Bank Report entitled *Republic of Yemen: Women in the Local Economy of Aden* there are major impediments to increasing returns on women-owned informal businesses. The survey found that women lack access to information, markets, social networks and financial capital which is partly due to new norms of gender appropriate behavior which are increasingly restricting Adeni women to the home. Many surveyed women cited problems with marketing because of being restricted to selling to other women and to having limited networks and knowledge to market their goods outside of their own neighborhood. Obtaining the necessary licenses in a male-dominated bureaucracy and public space was often cited as an impediment to entering the formal sector.
14. *ibid*
15. Moreover, having been persuaded of the business case for diversity, private companies like Shell Egypt are promoting women to high-level management positions – most likely in order to improve the company's performance based on the notion that mixed groups are better at problem solving than like-minded ones, and in order to reflect the diversity of their customers.
16. The Center of Arab Women for Training and Research's (CAWTAR) first Arab Women Development Report 2001 *Globalization and Gender: Economic Participation of Arab Women* points out that in 1999, the Arab Business Women's Council (ABWC) was established with which national businesswomen's associations from various Arab countries have associated.
17. UNDP-AS, SURF. 2003, "Women and chambers of commerce: case studies from the Gulf", April.
18. In Syria, women's committees within the Chambers of Industry and Commerce were established in 1999. In Yemen's Sanaa and Aden Chambers of Commerce, the establishment of women departments is more recent.
19. Girls' tertiary education doubled since 1980: Nowadays, 14 percent of girls vs. 20 percent of boys go to university.

# The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation

Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and  
Meredith Turshen eds.,  
London: Zed Books, 2001.

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H-NET MEDIA REVIEW - Published by H-Gender-MidEast <http://www.h-net.org/~gend-mid/> (June 2005)

This is an important book that takes up the questions left by a generation of studies that celebrated gains made by women during national liberation or revolutionary struggles. This generation of feminist scholars found reasons for optimism in the visibility of women in these struggles, and in the progressive gender ideologies and practices of many Third World leaders. With Algeria as a paradigm of the frustration of such hopes, the editors of *The Aftermath* begin from the basic question: Why is it that the gains made by some women during conflict are very seldom sustained after conflict ends? Where the first generation of "women and war" scholars privileged national leadership ideology as the primary causal factor in women's emancipation (or its absence), the editors of *The Aftermath* bring into their analysis a wider range of contributory factors: international donor pressures; national and local economies; the state, its policies and relations with civil society; structures of class, race, ethnicity, and sect; women's organizations, networks and consciousness; social constructions of male and female identities; and the way these factors interact and change through historical transitions. At the same time, their concern with a theory of causes has an undertow of practical urgency, as violence against women increases, and as conflict spreads throughout the South/Third World.

The book issues from workshops held in Africa between 1998 and 1999, and the body of empirical studies that feeds its theorization is mainly – though not entirely – African. Papers presented at the Johannesburg conference (1999) "confirmed that violence against women has reached unprecedented heights globally" (Pillay: 35). Pillay asks: What underlies violence against women? Why does it increase in "transitional" periods? She argues that violence against women is rooted in gender hierarchy and power inequality, giving it a widespread social acceptance, silencing women and subjecting them to blame, especially when the setting is domestic. There is a need for a gender analysis that goes beyond individual acts of violence to less visible forms of economic, cultural, and political violence. Indeed, a focus on the violence perpetrated against women during war may deflect attention from "normal" gender inequality and "invisible violence" in time of peace.

The ambivalence of the effects of conflict for women is expressed in the editors' introduction as well as in the case studies that follow. The observation that some women in some liberation struggles have made collective gains during war is set against another reality that can be stated as "there is no aftermath for women;" or in other words,

that violence against women precedes wars, and continues during and after them, even if from different sources and in different forms. Thus, though the editors agree that there are different gender outcomes from different types of conflict (anti-colonial/national, inter-ethnic, class), yet even where leaderships advocate and practice gender equality in war zones (as in the case of Eritrea), the overall outcome of war's aftermath for women is usually the restoration of the gender status quo ante.

Theoretical explanations of male violence proposed here include both the psychological and the structural: "In socializing men to repress all that is feminine within them, society also requires men to repress and oppress all that is feminine outside of them" (Pillay: 43). Masculinity constructed in this way is raised to a peak by wartime conditions. Sideris also discusses the effects of war on male identities: "the institutions of war constitute exclusive male clubs, which are defined by hierarchy, authoritarian control, aggression and violence" (151). A deeper structural explanation is that in the most patriarchal societies, women are regarded as property whose value lies in their productive and reproductive labor. These vital bases of male dominance are controlled through controlling women's sexuality. A psycho-structural analysis suggests that male violence against women will not lessen until men have found a positive identity alternative to the aggressive model. The introduction of gender identities offers a way of connecting the levels of ideology and material conditions, retrieving a failed Marxist prediction of gender equality following women's entry into employment.

The paradox raised here in relation to gender and violence is that women are sources of value (e.g. material goods, offspring), yet their centrality to social survival and reproduction brings them neither power nor status. There is a similar paradox in relation to rape, that while communities and families consider it a heinous crime, it has only recently begun to be recognized as such by national and international law, and still finds little redress or personal compensation. These apparent paradoxes become understandable through "the recognition that patriarchal societies regard women as property," therefore necessitating control. One form through which societies and men assert rights to women's productive and reproductive value is through control of their sexuality. Any post-war challenge to men's control is likely to arouse male violence in proportion to their expectations of a restoration of the domestic status quo, i.e. the subjection and silencing of women. Not only men's expectations of peace are at stake, but their gender identity. War is a masculine business, and the aggressive elements of "maleness" are brought out through the practice of destruction. Turshen's comment that war erodes many "traditional" community

values but not sexist beliefs deserves our attention: Why is this so? (83)

The type of war itself also influences the degree of violence against women, whether during or after. War in general emphasizes collective identity, with women allocated special roles in its conservation, hence likely to be subjected to a "re-traditionalization" promoted whether by the weakness of the new state, international agency pressure, or the re-emergence of local custom (Turshen: 80). But as the wars of national liberation that marked the post-World War 2 period give way to wars of ethnic nationalism, identity becomes even more heavily involved and takes on an even greater potential for generating violence, as clearly manifested in the cases of Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, Congo, Mozambique, and Kashmir.

Important questions thus become: If women's gender identity makes them "internalize" the role of the victim, what can be done to modify this aspect? What conditions encourage women to stop silencing themselves, and to report violence? Since in many instances (e.g. Sudan) violence against women during and after war seems to be linked to institutional violence before war begins, what can be done to raise awareness of these less visible forms? Women must struggle for economic equality, since it is economic marginalization and poverty that most subject them to violence. But since the basis of violence against women is ideological as much as material, to focus on building up women economically (e.g. through micro-credit schemes) is insufficient, and may even be provocative. Comparing women's experiences of rape and sexual violence in Mozambique and South Africa, Sideris proposes a broad band of solutions: enforcing constitutional and legal rights; transforming local justice systems; increasing the presence and profile of women in political decision-making structures; ensuring the economic empowerment of women and men; supporting women's grassroots networks as well as their national, regional and international ones; and addressing social constructions of masculinity (61). Other contributors concur that "women must inhabit all sites of struggle."

Though national liberation, civil wars, identity conflicts may have different effects for women, the aftermath of all types of war seem to lead to a loss of gains made by women during them. Codou Bop weighs social, economic and political gains and losses, and tries to explain "the fragility of women's gains compared with the acuteness of their losses" (33). Though context may make a difference – e.g. ethnic or factional conflicts offer fewer gains to women than wars of national independence – the key factor Bop proposes lies in the "absence of a political perspective for transforming relations between the sexes"

(33). The most extreme and long-lasting of losses has been in the domain of politics, and this is as true for Europe after World War 2 as in the contemporary South. One important reason is that women themselves have accepted that women's interests are subordinate to collective national interests. Especially in national and revolutionary struggles in the South, the Maoist concept of principle and secondary contradictions has been deeply influential. Women's organizations formed during anti-colonialist struggles have had "satellite status;" in turn "their lack of autonomy has contributed to the absence of a political and ideological vision... to transform gender relations" (31). In the negotiations that end wars, "gender issues are virtually ignored." This suggests that an essential condition for long-term change is a "strong women's movement... that bears a plan to transform gender relations" (34).

The editors propose a theory of the "critical moment" as key explanation of why women fail to maintain gains made during war: "We came to the conclusion that the reconstruction phase is too late for women to assert themselves" (Meintjes, Pillay, Turshen: 10). Gender issues must be raised at the cusp between war and peace. The acceptance by women's organization leaders of a subordinate status during conflict inevitably means their marginalization in the aftermath. Because conflict reinforces the non-transparency of (male) leadership, women tend to be more excluded from decision-making during war – even if they are combatants and leaders of combatants – and from the negotiations that follow. This exclusion may be decisive in negating their wartime gains.

Though a strong, unified women's movement appears to be a necessary condition for sustaining gains, as in the case of South Africa, it may not be sufficient. As the Eritrean case suggests, a women's organization formed in a liberation war does not necessarily represent women's interests in the aftermath. Women leaders may be rewarded by positions in the state apparatus, but to others – especially women from rural areas – peace may bring a punitive re-imposition of "gender normality." Women's unconsciousness of their war time gains and the need to defend them may be another cause of loss; also the breaking-up of women's "communities" formed during war; and the difficulty of translating women's grassroots activism to the national political level.

Since the "crucial moment" is likely to be lost by all women's organizations except those matured by long struggle (as was the case in South Africa), it is necessary to look at cases that appear to be exceptions to this rule. Why in Haiti and among the Ogoni of Nigeria were women's organizations able to grow and develop under regime oppression, without any clear transitional

moment? Why were rural women in Namibia able to demonstrate for their inheritance rights without the backing of a strong women's movement? Perhaps we should ask whether observation of women's movements that win victories in adverse conditions may offer useful models to others in terms of structure and modes of operation? A second objection we might raise is that possibly no change in gender relations, whenever it is achieved or whatever form it takes, can be final and permanent. Current conflicts and their aftermaths do not offer a sufficient time span to judge this question. The contributors to this volume rightly remind us of the tenacity of sexist beliefs, and of women's collusion in reproducing them. Even in cases where women have made real legal and political power gains, as in South Africa, violence against women has increased. In other cases such as the Ogoni, the end of conflict merely meant a shift in perpetrators of violence from forces of the state to members of the community. Yet whether or not it is validated by time, the theory of the "critical moment" has value as a warning to women's organizations to resist "secondarization" and formulate their demands without delay.

Women's networks formed during war may also be a source of empowerment, for example in refugee camps or, as in Kashmir, in communities under siege. The post-war break-up of these associations as women return to home and domesticity is seen by the editors as "at the heart of the failure to consolidate wartime gains" (Meintjes, Pillay, Turshen: 10). Though national women's unions generally survive the end of conflict, they easily become hierarchized, and lose their wartime capacity to mobilize women at all social levels.

The focus of an earlier generation of feminist scholars on the ideology of national movement leaderships is replaced in *The Aftermath* by attention to relations between the post-war state and civil society. This move has been made necessary by the perception that where the outcome of war for women is concerned there is little to choose between post-war regimes, whether progressive, Marxist, or neo-colonial. Similarly an earlier attention to the expansion of women's roles in wartime, and relations between men and women combatants in the battle zone, has shifted to what awaits women as they return (or are prevented from returning) to "home." Change in gender ideology among a leadership stratum does not necessarily lead to broader societal change. Hence Turshen's essay on the state and civic society begins with the dual regime that regulates women: "At least two legal regimes govern women's lives simultaneously: the statutory regime of the nation-state and the customary regime of their natal household or clan" (78). The second is hardest to change. Whereas new states sometimes feel obliged to enact progressive gender laws, these may be resisted at the local

level, and by customary courts. It is in the aftermath of war that resistance to gender change is strongest among most men and senior women, cropping up even in democratic states such as Zimbabwe. Whatever its ideology or enactments, the state is generally unprotective of women's claims. Indeed Turshen argues that there is a close relationship between women's centrality to productive and reproductive labor on which the state depends, their invisibility in politics, men's control over women's sexuality, and the role of social violence in maintaining this control. Post-colonial states often carry on systems rooted in colonial regimes, for example the way these increased men's economic resources in order to increase productivity, taxes, and capital accumulation. By entrenching gender hierarchy, states are able to lower the cost of reproducing labor.

An earlier generation of feminist scholars observing activist women in anti-colonial struggles viewed them as agents of social change: as transmitting progressive gender ideology from political leaderships to families; as models for younger women; as enacting a new model of woman, actively engaged in the public arena yet respectable; and as forming organizations expected to articulate women's claims in the era of reconstruction. But war conditions may conceal deep reservations that publics may hold about gender change, so that obstacles blocking change in society at large only appear after conflict ends. These aftermath studies reveal many sources of limitation to the influence of activist women and their organizations. They underline: i) the gap in gender ideology and practice between battle zone and hinterland; ii) the absence in most national and revolutionary movements of programs of gender change directed at society at large; iii) post-war decline of ruling party interest in, and support for, women's organizations, with a variety of other consequences. For example, the "women's wing" of the Marxist-inspired EPLF (Eritrea), was loaded with social tasks as well as "women's issues" but at the same time under-funded (Hale in this volume). Demobilized non-elite women militants could not find jobs, nor re-integrate themselves into rural communities; men and senior women demanded that they return to pre-conflict norms of women's domestic labour. Finally, though a few women leaders found jobs in the new state, the marginality of the women's union left women as a collectivity with minimal influence or representation, in spite of their long history of militancy.

The desire for "normalcy" shared by most members of war-torn societies is a powerful factor in weakening wartime campaigns for gender change. Local systems of gender hierarchy are likely to be strengthened by factors such as the poverty of new states, their narrow popular bases, and World Bank policies favouring decentralization.

Ethnic conflicts fought around "identity" are most likely to lead to "re-traditionalization." As a powerful influence in the restoration of "normalcy," religion may emphasize women's centrality as pillars of moral order; in Sudan the NIF government mobilizes women as "markers of Islam," dissolving the boundary between state and civic society. Concepts of "normalcy" differ along gender lines: Men define it as a return to the gender status quo ante; women may want to build on wartime gains, or they may feel that pre-war values that supported them have been irretrievably lost. The local level becomes devalued in peacetime: Women may have been crucial to community survival during war, as household-suppliers, or grassroots activists, and afterwards they may be active as NGO organizers. But the restoration of "normalcy" is likely to mean marginalization of women at both state and local levels.

Restoration of gender "normalcy" is not only harmful for women, it stunts their potential for peace building, an important consideration for the contributors to *The Aftermath*. The presence of women peace activists in the "Aftermath" workshops can be felt in a number of texts, particularly Sideris, "Problems of Identity, Solidarity and Reconciliation." Two kinds of peace potential are signaled out in this chapter: i) in the reconstruction of war-torn societies; and ii) in relations building with other women across hostile national or ethnic boundaries. Yet the general marginalization of women after conflicts' end means that the role usually assigned them in reconstruction is the passive and oppressive one of restoring "normalcy." In spite of many cases where women have acted energetically to prevent or assuage conflicts, whether across national, ethnic or factional boundaries, as in Kashmir, Yugoslavia, and Nagaland, there is more here about frustration than accomplishment of this role. Women's potential for postwar reconstruction lies in their unique relation to domestic institutions. Yet, paradoxically, "the very institutions that play such a crucial role in the continuity of society embody the relations of power that perpetuate the subordination and vulnerability of women" (Sideris: 56). Postwar restoration of normalcy disempowers individual women, while national women's unions have not assumed or been allocated an active role in post-war reconstruction. This in spite of many types of healing activity that women in conflict have undertaken, from forming prayer groups, to appealing to international authorities (Bop: 23).

The failure of most postwar reparation systems to include women or compensate them for loss is well substantiated here. Women are seldom compensated for losses suffered during war: of home, relatives, or property, or damage through rape. Loss of home is a blow that many women do not recover from. Most truth commissions established so far have not given women either compensation or jus-

tice, because their "gender neutrality" has not encouraged women to participate or, if they do, to speak of personal loss or damage.

Gender identity, men's and women's, recurs as a theme through all the theoretical chapters, indissolubly linked to other major themes – violence against women in war and peace, social reconstruction and peace building, state/civil society relations, gender inequality. Arising from consideration of female identity are questions with implications for gender change activists around women's potential for agency: most women experience violence done to them as part of their gender identity – is victim hood therefore a constituent element of women's identity? Can they resist subjection? Does it serve women's interests if they use specific aspects of their identity, for example motherhood, thereby expanding their social and political role? What contextual factors encourage women to report violence against them or actively claim property rights? What makes one woman choose an identity as peacemaker while another in the same society chooses to be a militant nationalist? A point underlined by all the writers is the need to pay attention to variation in women's situation produced by local and historical specificity. Yet one senses an implicit question underlying all the others: Is the universality of women's subordination a sufficient condition for their solidarity across frontiers to prevent violence? Recognition of the power of structure over consciousness prevents even posing this question. Yet the text of *The Aftermath* is seamed with instances of struggles affirming women's capacity to overcome socially imposed passivity.

In countries of the South, elements of women's "traditional" identity – especially the maternal component – is often a basis of mobilization, legitimizing women's action in the public arena. This has been the case in Nagaland, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Kashmir. Speaking about their experience of war, Mozambican women "identified mothering as a fundamental source of resilience" with the result that "their consciousness of themselves shifted to include a sense of strength and capacity" (Sideris: 50). The transition from war to peace may allow women to lead healing movements or resume ritual roles (Turshen: 83). The reservations of some feminists and progressives about this phenomenon are carefully weighed by de Alwis in her paper on Sri Lankan "Ambivalent Maternalisms," and defended within a perspective of historical contingency.

Consideration of violence inevitably raises the question of male as well as female identity. Male identity as a topic recurs throughout the pages of *The Aftermath*: in relation to colonialism, war, violence, "normalcy," social hierarchy, property, leadership. Several contributors call for work on alternative, more positive models of masculinity. Sideris

considers alternative effects of war on men's identity, either erosion of their manhood through inability to protect their families, or an aggrandized masculinity that may find itself frustrated by peace. Either way men are likely to reassert their masculinity and power in the only sphere available to them postwar, that of the home. Cases that follow in the empirical section find strong correlations between male class subordination and domestic violence. Hence emphasis is placed throughout on attention to the creation of economic opportunities for men as well as women.

The editors of *The Aftermath* have targeted it primarily at international agencies, policy-makers, because of their conviction that international and national policies to stem violence against women have failed to tackle its deepest causes. "Our point of departure was dissatisfaction with many of the reconstruction programmes, which are based on one of two approaches... either human needs or human rights" (4). *The Aftermath* is written both for international agencies and against them, in the sense that global rather than national or local actions may create the conditions in which gender inequalities are exacerbated, or in which aid agencies, through faulty analysis, apply failing remedies. The human needs and human rights approaches lead, the editors argue, to advocating legal reform, protecting individual survivors, trying to change individual behaviour, or offering material aid, none of which attack national, local or international frameworks that produce gender inequality. Indeed the policies of powerful actors such as states and international aid agencies, in conjunction with the "globalization effect," are likely to exacerbate gender hierarchy: "wars and structural adjustment policies do not impact equally on women and men" (Bop: 28). Consideration of the effects of external policies is especially necessary because of increase in conflict and in international interventionism. Meintjes notes how World Bank and IMF policies increase the poverty of many Third World states, diminishing their capacity for re-training or employing demobilized women; World Bank pressures towards decentralization fosters the re-emergence of local customs, including female subordination. As Sideris remarks, international aid agencies need to recognize the social/political/economic causes of violence against women "in the discourse that legitimates male domination and female subordination" (Sideris:153).

*The Aftermath* also speaks to local women activists in the belief that they have much to learn from each other's experiences, and from an analysis that covers both structural and ideological causes of inequality while including women's actions and changing consciousness. Feminist activists outside war zones are called on to participate through understanding and solidarity in building new gender relations.

# Women in Struggle

Buthina Canaan Khoury  
Palestine: Majd Production Company, 2005.  
56 minutes, 1 CD-ROM. \$150

### Reviewed by Victor Kattan

Arab Media Watch, London

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"I am not the person responsible, the occupation is."

Buthina Canaan Khoury tackles a difficult subject in her first feature documentary *Women in Struggle*. The film is about four Palestinian women imprisoned in Israeli jails for various offences, ranging from the serious, (providing safe houses for members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, surveying targets and planting bombs), to the less serious (waving the Palestinian flag, which was prohibited before the 1993 Oslo Accords).

Most of the film centers on the lives of three middle-aged women: Aysha Odeh and her sister Rasmieh Odeh, who were both sentenced to life in prison but spent ten years in detention; and Rawda Basir, who spent eight years in prison. These women joined the resistance in the 1960s and 70s, after Israel occupied what remained of Palestine in the June 1967 war. Towards the end of the film a younger Palestinian woman called Terry Bulata is interviewed. She was imprisoned several times in the 1980s during the first Palestinian intifada – a national civil uprising that lasted from 1987-93.

The film starts off strangely, with Aysha Odeh watching a movie on a TV set where a young girl is tortured and

thrown into a bucket of water. In the next scene, Odeh is driving the car while Khoury is filming. On approaching a checkpoint (one of hundreds scattered throughout the West Bank), Odeh and Khoury enter into an argument with an Israeli soldier. The soldier is complaining because Odeh didn't bother to queue up with the hundreds of other Palestinians who had been waiting at the checkpoint all day. Instead she overtakes them on the wrong side of the road and then enters into a pointless argument with the soldier. Khoury's intention was probably to elicit the viewer's sympathy by highlighting the suffering and misery caused by Israel's prolonged and belligerent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and its impact on Palestinian life (such as restrictions on movement). But entering into a semi-coherent argument with an Israeli soldier (who probably does not want to be there) over the rights and wrongs of the occupation is not the best way to go about doing this. This scene as it is adds nothing to the documentary and it should have been cut.

Similarly, the next scene with Rawda Basir is out of place. In this clip, Khoury follows Basir from Nablus where she currently lives, to see her former home in the old city of Arab East Jerusalem. Rather embarrassingly, the current occupant, a Christian Palestinian woman called "Mary,"

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doesn't want a complete stranger barging into her home with a journalist (who happens to have a camera on her shoulder) while she has guests! It beggars belief why it did not cross Khoury's mind that this scene ought to also be cut from the documentary, which is a shame because the film's subject matter is unusual, important, and interesting.

The most fascinating and shocking aspects of this film are the interviews with the three middle-aged women about their activities in the Palestinian national movement, their experiences in prison, and their relationships with their families during and after their internment. Aysha Odeh, a strikingly beautiful woman in her youth, was subjected to sexual torture (similar to the stories one hears today from Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and Abu Ghraib in Iraq) which included being tied up and displayed naked (in front of male officers who touched her), as well as being beaten and raped. At one point Aysha alleges that she was violated with a stick:

No matter how much I screamed, they would not stop. I remember the pain. It seemed like it came out of the belly of the earth and would come through my body like a twister reaching up to the sky.

Despite the passage of time, the sexual torture made it difficult for Aysha to have a normal sexual relationship with her husband. So when he was exiled to Jordan it was a relief for her. But the pain did not stop there. Aysha's sister, Rasmieh was also subjected to sexual torture. The Israelis used torture to force the sisters to confess against one another. In the film, Rasmieh describes an incident when she was brought into a room and made to watch a male prisoner get electrocuted after she herself had been tortured and stripped naked. The man died from the shocks. But for Rasmieh, the worst was yet to come:

Even though I was stripped naked and tortured in front of others, in front of my father the situation hit me at a different level. I was worried about my father; this was a very

sensitive issue. I was worried he would die from this incident, as though something major inside him was destroyed.

Walls and fences have become a familiar sight for many Palestinians in the West Bank who have discovered that prison seems to follow them wherever they go. When Rawda Basir makes the difficult journey from Ramallah to Jerusalem to visit her friend Terry Bulata, Khoury skillfully uses the camera to portray the concept of imprisonment that most Palestinians have to live with now. And Aysha put it most pertinently:

You discover that you cannot get prison out of you. You carry it inside you. It confronts you with every detail. Your life in prison dictates to you your behavior to the outside world. In other words, you didn't leave prison; you actually carried it with you.

The film explores an interesting subject but it is too long. At least 15-20 minutes could be cut. Khoury needs to keep the viewer engaged and interested. There is too much incidental information in the film that is not necessary for the message she is trying to convey. Khoury also presumes that viewers are familiar with the Palestinian question, and with the story of Jamela Abu Hared, when in fact they may not have any previous knowledge whatsoever of the Palestinian struggle for social justice. And since it is presumed that this film is primarily aimed at a Western audience (since it is subtitled in both English and French) more background information is required. This could be achieved with a voiceover or with maps and supplying additional material on the DVD.

Sadly, Khoury does not quite manage to convey the plight of the Palestinian people in the film, nor the pivotal role Arab women have played in Palestinian society and in their struggle for independence. Having said this, the film does contain rare and invaluable testimony to the appalling treatment meted out on Palestinian female detainees in Israeli prisons in the last quarter of the twentieth century.