

# Arab Women's Movements: Late Subject of History

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Women's movements in the Arab world seemed both a necessary and a difficult choice as topic for *Al-Raida's* 100th issue. Necessary because it is surely one of *Al-Raida's* chief *raison d'être* to discover and re-present women-based organizing throughout this vast area. Difficult because of the short time for collecting materials, unevenness of research and knowledge, disconnections between activists, organizations, and regions, and the rapid recent expansion of women's NGOs that makes even listing them a major project. In spite of the number of women and gender study centers that exist in Arab countries, the data they have is still slight and hard to access.<sup>1</sup> Many women's organizations still don't have electronic mail, especially in the poorer countries. Above all, there's no single center whose function is to accumulate studies, collate, connect and disseminate them.

From the beginning of discussions about the issue with *Al-Raida's* editorial committee the first dilemma arose: should we focus on 'feminist' movements or on 'women's' movements? There were several voices in favor of 'Arab feminism': as a more interesting topic, and one that challenges Western feminist notions that there was no such thing, that it all began with reactions to, and imitations of, the West. But 'Arab feminism' also raises

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thorny questions of definition: some would argue that any women's organization can be called 'feminist' if it brings women out of the home into public life, and teaches them organizing skills. Others would say that only those organizations that explicitly call for gender equality can be qualified as 'feminist'. A related debate of strong current interest revolves around the term 'Muslim feminism' – can this be accepted as such, as Heba Ezzat argues in this issue, or is it a contradiction in terms?<sup>2</sup> To deal adequately with such a complex question calls for a whole *Al-Raida* issue to itself. So rather than plunge into a quagmire debate about names, definitions, and boundaries, we decided to use the more inclusive term 'women's movement', posed by scholars as identifying a type of women's activism that is less separatist, less critical of the family, community and 'patriarchy' than radical feminism in the West.<sup>3</sup>

Here again, however, it can be asked how do we define a women's movement? Does it mean any group founded by women, or that works for women, or most of whose members are women, or - exclusively - a group that aims to achieve 'women's rights'? A leading scholar of women's movements, Maxine Molyneux, suggests, "A women's movement does not have to have a single organizational expression, and may be characterized by a diversity of interests, forms and spatial location."<sup>4</sup> Arab women's movements have always been closely linked - ideologically and often structurally - to broader political and social movements, even while expressing women's

consciousness and interests more or less explicitly. In a debate highly relevant to this kind of organizing, both separate and 'embedded', Molyneux argues against those who would exclude women's branches of political parties and state-linked mass organizations for women as not primarily organized to advance women's gender-specific concerns, noting that they "deserve consideration in order to evaluate their significance both as political phenomena and for what they signify for their participants" (p 145). This remark is a useful reminder that an organization is not defined by declared aims alone, but needs to be assessed along several dimensions, including its effects for members. Because of the difference between Arab countries in terms of socio-cultural constraints, we also need to be aware of suppressed 'womanism' (as in the case of Saudi Arabia, where only professional or business women's organizations are allowed), as well as the different ways that states have controlled women, whether through single national unions, strict NGO regulation, permanent leaderships, and other forms of 'state-feminism'. The crisis-ridden nature of the region also forces women's organizations to develop in a constantly changing ideological and political context, generating swings in state and public opinion attitudes towards the 'woman question'. Such a context spells unevenness - between regions and over time - and necessitates that we should avoid easy assumptions, for example that change always equals progress, that the proliferation of women's NGOs and women's conferences necessarily empowers women organizationally vis-à-vis the state, or that women's greater visibility in the public domain signifies real change in gender relations.<sup>5</sup>

From the beginning we aspired to a presentation that would be both historical and evaluative. It soon became evident that this was far too ambitious an aim for the space and time at our disposal. We discovered that not many historians have worked on the Arab women's movements, so that the kind of substantial, analytical evaluations we hoped for could not readily be found - especially if we wanted them to embrace larger regions rather than remain within the boundaries of nation-states. A second challenging aspect of our topic was how to 'cover' and represent the 22 Arab League states, spread over a vast stretch of North Africa and West Asia, comprising a total population of 274 million (4.6% of the world's population in 1998). In spite of their shared Arab language and culture, these countries are heterogeneous in many ways, marked by different population 'mixes' (linguistic, sectarian, ethnic), by different histories of colonial domination, varied types of political/legal regime, and current external relationships - differences that have influenced the way women's organizations in each have developed. This heterogeneity means that one country cannot be taken to represent others even if they are part of the same

region, or share the same level of economic development. Close neighbors may be highly dissimilar when it comes to the state of women's movements. Look at Saudi Arabia and Yemen for example; or Tunisia and Libya; or Lebanon and Syria.

'Covering' women's organizations in all 22 Arab League states was difficult in another way: there is a marked lopsidedness in data availability between 'accessible' countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia, Algeria - where women's organizations are comparatively well studied - and others about which little information is available (at least in English), or where information is mostly provided by non-indigenous sources: notably Comoros, Djibouti, Libya, Mauritania, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, and the UAE. In the middle comes a third category, eg Iraq, Kuwait, Sudan, Yemen, about which some studies exist, or which are attracting new scholars, or where Internet is proving its worth as an alternative source. Sudan is a particularly interesting case of an Arab country that has gone through shifts of regime and a long, disastrous civil war, but where women's movements have not only survived but spread to minority and exiled communities, and played an impressive role in peace-building attempts.<sup>6</sup>

The existence in Sudan of a plurality of women's organizations, springing from several of its many minorities, including those in exile, is a timely reminder of the need to question an old assumption in Arab women's studies of a necessary correspondence between boundaries and the national/ethnic identity of women's movements. With the tremendous displacements of populations due to conflict and poverty, the term 'Arab' must include a large, internally differentiated diaspora. If we are talking about 'Arab women's movements', then we have to look not only at growing communities of Arab exiles and emigrants in the wider world, but also - to complicate things further - at expatriate Arab communities within the Arab world (Sudanese in Cairo, Iraqis in Beirut and Amman, etc). If we are talking about 'women's movements in the Arab region', we must look among ethnic/linguistic minorities within the region - Berbers, Armenians, Kurds, Circassians, and other ethnic minorities. Nor should we forget political movements such as the Saharawis, Arabic-speaking but claiming national independence. In Morocco today, Berbers enjoy increasing scope for claiming their own distinctive voice and organizations.<sup>7</sup> Kurdish women's organizations are taking root in areas where Kurds have relative freedom, as in northern Iraq. One of the oldest immigrant groups, the Armenians, have women's associations in every part of their large Arab diaspora, especially in Lebanon. Information about these expatriate and non-state women's movements is scattered and marginal compared with the steady accumulation of studies that stay

within state/nation boundaries. We could begin to think about them in this issue but not 'cover' them. This remains work for the future.<sup>8</sup>

Since we could not cover the histories of women's movements in every Arab country, and did not want to present the histories of a few as representative of the rest, we tried to group them into three main regions: Egypt and the Mashreq (Fawwaz Trabulsi), the Maghreb (Rabea Naciri), and the Gulf (Sabiqa al-Najjar). Regrettably some countries fell through the broad meshes of this net, eg Libya, Sudan, Yemen and Iraq, as well as more recent Arab League members such as Mauritania and Somalia, still not fully absorbed into the Arabic circuit of communication. Yet these three regional papers demonstrate the advantages of adopting a broader-than-state framework for looking at women's organizations, through highlighting comparisons that single country studies suppress. Two other papers complete the first 'historical' section of the issue: Bouthaina Shaaban on early Arab women writers, the precursors of women's organizations; and Islah Jad on the contemporary stage of 'globalization', with its substitution of NGOs for political and social movements. This set of historical contextual papers foreshadows a more comparative and analytical approach to the mobilization of women for intertwined causes - anti-colonial, national/social, statist, political, religious, feminist, professional - throughout the region, from the beginning of the 20th century to the present time.

One of the key questions we asked people in the email interviews that form the second section of this issue focused on the relationship between Arab women's movements and 'Western feminism'. Some respondents scored hard-hitting points here, noting the way this 'accusation' is brought against women's movements but never against national or social ones that equally could be accused (if it is an accusation) of having grown out of Western models. But this is a polemic that should be shifted from 'essentialist' arguments about the nature of Western or Arab feminisms to the historical contexts in which each movement developed. Surely the major distinction that can - indeed must - be drawn between 'Western feminism' and the Arab women's movements is the very different historic conjuncture in which each emerged and developed. Feminist movements in most of Europe and North America developed from within established nation-states in which women were disenfranchised whereas adult men enjoyed full citizenship and suffrage. Western feminisms arose to contest women's exclusion from political, legal and economic rights. Arab women's movements, on the other hand, developed in a period and region characterized by discontinuity and instability: European intrusion (economic, cultural, military, political), the disintegration of the Ottoman order,

nationalist struggles in which women participated, the consolidation of new states and national boundaries, external attacks and internal conflict, economic polarization between rich and poor regions and classes - these have set the framework in which movements for change in gender ideology and practice in Arab societies have developed. In such an overall context, women's movements have been bound by complex ties of feeling and identification to the communities to which women 'belong'. This has not prevented them from crystallizing 'feminist' aims - reform of family law, 'women's rights' - but crisis and external threat has made it hard for them to prioritize these aims. Always there have been problems that appeared more important than gender equality.<sup>9</sup> Women's placing as Rabéa Naciri well puts it "at the intersection between two identities: that of an oppressed community and that of subordinated women",<sup>10</sup> is the crucial characteristic separating the feminism of Arab women from that of women in the 'developed' world.

Because of this very different context, the relationship of women's movements to the state in the Arab world is more complex and harder to manage successfully than for feminist movements in the West which engaged in straightforward contestation. In the Arab world new, fragile states enlisted women in numerous ways: as emblems of modernity or cultural authenticity, as arms of social outreach to rural regions, as state employees, or as a female service sector.<sup>11</sup> In the immediate post-independence period Arab states appeared to many women as a counterbalance to the control over them of clan and community, a space for the exercise of their 'public' interests and administrative abilities. States provided women with low-cost education, hope of progressive legislation, small budgets for their organizations. Hence a complex relationship of appeal to, and struggle against, states that themselves vary over time in terms of the dominant aspect of their 'women politics', alternating between support, constraint, and manipulation.<sup>12</sup> Weak in international and regional terms, Arab states are 'strong' vis-à-vis their own peoples, engendering constraints on the expansion of social movements, at the same time as they have failed to solve basic economic and social problems. This 'mix' of authoritarian constraint and incapacity has generated many forms of popular reaction, among them religious revivalism. Religion appeals to the many excluded from political and economic privilege, both as a critique of elite corruption and inefficacy, and as response to continuing Western domination. Women's organizations are caught unwillingly in the middle of this complex contestation. Answers to our email questionnaire show how clearly women perceive economic crisis and general impoverishment as constituting the main obstacle to the expansion of women's struggle for gender-equality. Though activists and scholars alike welcome the support

for programs of gender equality emanating from the 'international community' - the UN and its agencies, Western donors and NGOs - there is also a perception that this phalanx of institutions is embedded in an unequal international distribution of power. An UN-generated language of 'gender in development' has little chance to win hearts and minds in a region where there is so little genuine development, and where economic benefits are so unequally distributed.

Culture is of course an essential part of the historical context of Arab women's movements, one that has yet to receive the research attention it deserves. In her recent study of NGOs in Lebanon, Azza Beydoun asks whether Arab women bring to organization specific qualities based in their domestic roles.<sup>13</sup> Bouthaina Shaaban's essay in this issue shows how deconstructing Western cultural stereotypes was a vital motive for early Arab women writers. Both these studies suggest the need for a longer, deeper look at how Arab women navigate between the resources and handicaps that their cultural identity gives them in the struggle for greater gender equality. Perhaps another critical difference between Western and Arab women's movements is Arab women's deeper embeddedness in their communities - national, local, religious, etc - which offers them choices and resources as well as elements of constraint. Another point to remember is the way their critiques of their culture (as gender-biased) is continually offset by instances of 'Occidentalism' in Western policies and medias, ranging from exploitation of the veil to symbolize 'backwardness' to the absurd and dangerous 'clash of civilizations' theory propagated by Samuel P. Huntington. Such hostile Western constructions continually force Arab women back into defensive positions vis-à-vis their culture and community. This embeddedness of women is undoubtedly one of the factors that produce fragmentation of the women's movements, fissures that reproduce not just national boundaries but also internal ideological divisions - between political or religious parties, between progressive/secular and religious fundamentalist currents, between 'feminist' and 'womanist' NGOs. Secure niches for women's public action, quasi-families, these NGO spaces also explain why the multiplication of 'women in public' and high levels of activism have not yet produced a strong, autonomous women's movement in any Arab country. Though written about Algeria, Saliha Boudeffa's words have a wider application: "...the feminine movement has broken up into pressure groups and associations with limited objectives; there is no powerful unifying organization; the female electorate has no autonomy, but faithfully reflects the main ideological tendencies of the country".<sup>14</sup>

If the history of the Arab women's movements present-

ed us with the difficulty of not yet having attracted many historians, the need for evaluations of the present situation faced us with the opposite difficulty - a multiplicity of forms, goals, activities, and affiliations at the organizational level, and an expanding number of scholars, administrators, and grassroots activists qualified to offer their comments and critiques. We decided to use email interviews to bring as broad a range of views as possible to bear on this subject; and selected around 20 respondents - a mix of scholars, organization activists and women's studies specialists - people with local organizing experience and/or a broad overview of the region, people whose outlook varied between secular and Muslim feminist, women at work in the region and women teaching or studying abroad. To these we presented a list of questions highlighting 15 issues which we chose after lengthy debate and consultation. These included the alleged influence of 'Western feminism' over the Arab women's movements, their affiliations, structures, leaderships and programs; what have been their achievements, and in what ways have they failed? What has been the effect on them of the UN Decade for Women? What factors have blocked their spread in most countries beyond urban educated women? What of the relationship between religion and the women's movements? Which of their prevailing characteristics most needs change?

These email interviews on "Contemporary Challenges to the Arab Women's Movements" form the second main section of the issue.

In a third section we present 'gender-sensitive' profiles of each Arab League member state. Our original hope was that we would find extensive data-bases not only in the UN and its regional agencies, but also in Arab research institutions and gender networks. UN Agency sources (ESCWA, the UNDP) are indeed data-rich, and certain websites proved very valuable; but they also tended to be repetitive, or contradictory, or undated. In comparison the data available from Arab sources, for example the Arab League, were scanty and often derivative. Another initial hope in planning the country profiles was that we would find 'anchor' people in each Arab country who would confirm, correct and supplement information obtained from international data sources. We did indeed find willing contacts in some Arab countries, but in many this attempt failed. Even where UNDP/Gender in Development people were listed, contact with them was difficult to establish or sustain. Arab women's Internet networks did not prove as productive as we had hoped. This experience highlighted two difficulties that must also exist for women's organizations and research institutes: i) the difficulty of networking over such a large area; and ii) the difficulty of obtaining reliable local information.

Frontiers between organizations as well as between states have obviously contributed to obstacles in obtaining micro-data.

Difficulties we experienced in obtaining information means that the country profiles must be taken as a research aid and pointer to sources of information rather than as an accomplished survey. Yet we feel that the endeavor has been worthwhile. It emphasized for us, first, the vast area that an Arab women's studies institute has to keep within its sights, and how little of it is yet documented. Second it emphasized the disconnections that still impede the accumulation and free circulation of knowledge about all aspects of women's situation, knowledge the women's movements in the region as a whole surely need if they are seriously to work for change.

This continuing state of disconnection is hard to explain in the face of the entry of two modern communication methodologies into the Arab region, the conference and electronic mail. The calendar of conferences and workshops for Arab women is highly charged, and organized under many different auspices, eg ESCWA, ECA, the World Bank, European cultural foundations such as the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation, and the US State department.<sup>15</sup> Fewer such gatherings are Arab-organized: Arab women's studies institutes, or women's sections of broader Middle East study associations such as AMEWS are probably the main conveners of inter-Arab women's gatherings. There is also the annual Cairo-based annual Arab Women's Conference, and another that is Gulf-based. Studies are needed to assess the impact of these variously authored conferences on the Arab women's movements: What kinds of ideas and methods are propagated? Have there been benefits for women's organizations, whether in greater cooperation between them, whether inside country borders or across them, or in greater effectiveness? How developed is the exchange between women scholars and women activists? Is there a 'trickle down' effect from those chosen to attend conferences and rank-and-file members?

Electronic mail needs a similar assessment: what difference has it made to the organizing capacities of Arab women's organizations? How have they used it? According to Lamis Alshejri, women's use of Internet is lower in the Arab world than any other region.<sup>16</sup> Government restrictions certainly play a role in some countries (eg Syria), but the argument of poverty is less convincing, since ownership of home computers among the urban middle classes in all Arab countries is quite high. In several Third World areas, computer connections have been used by women to carry out health or other types of service programs among rural women but, as far as we know, this hasn't happened yet in the Arab world.

Women scholars, in contrast, are using email extensively and to good effect. One example of productive use is the ListServ H-Gender/Middle East distributed by the Gender and Women Studies Institute at the American University of Cairo. Others are websites such as those of CAWTAR, 'Aman', 'Bunian', and networks such as Aysheh and NAD that offer bases of transnational communication between computer-literate women, as well as potential data sources. An example of how email connections between scholars can be creatively used is the 'thematic conversation' organized by Sharifa Zuhur and published in a recent *Al-Raida*.<sup>17</sup>

In conclusion, I want to emphasize three main points which the experience of editing this special issue have highlighted for me. One is the primary importance of the historical conjuncture in shaping the trajectory of women's movements in the Arab world – how they choose their aims, how they relate to the state and to their political environment, even their structures and methods. Given the current degree of political and economic crisis in the Arab region as a whole, we must expect that women's movements will have to pursue their struggle for 'gender democracy' in difficult conditions - external pressures and interventions, heightened political crisis, state repression or manipulation, and a growing economic inequality that can only reinforce gender conservatism, whether religious-based or not. Will new strategies emerge from within the current women's movement leadership – strategies such as closer cooperation between women's groups within the same country or across state borders, or to bridge the class gaps between elite and non-elite and minority women? Will women's movements manage to take a lead in confronting broader issues of inequality, human rights repressions, and the absence of representation; or will they stay within the (relatively) safe limits of past frameworks and formats?

Second, I am struck by the gap between the rich human and social interest of the histories of Arab women's movements, as conveyed through those fragments that have been recorded, and the paucity of historians to work through this history, to recover and analyze it. In contrast to a number of studies of 'women in Middle Eastern history' there has been strikingly little on the history of the Arab women's movements. It's as if one of the consequences of 'modernization' in the Arab world is to push people onwards and disconnect them from history. Yet this is to ignore the historic interest and richness of the early Arab women's movements, from the onset of 'modernity' with the arrival of missionaries, schools, and Western women travelers, and the beginning of a new phase in 'Arab feminism'.

Finally, I've become convinced that comparison between feminisms in the 'advanced' societies such as the US and those of the Arab region are not wholly irrelevant, culturally and historically. Globalization has had many effects that its promoters surely do not intend, for example revealing examples of religious reaction in societies that used to claim the epithets 'secular', 'tolerant', 'rational' and 'civilized'. With the neo-conservatives in the United States rolling back legislation around women's rights to choice, we see a situation that makes Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale* neither futuristic nor surreal, but a likely prediction of a near future. The unfortunate conjuncture of a decline of American feminism with the emergence of neo-conservatism places women in America in a situation which, for all its surface dissimilarities, is not different to the point of non-comparability with that of women in Arab and Muslim countries. The struggle for gender equality is not having an easy time

anywhere. This should give new force to the idea of a global patriarchy, and subvert the ancient Occidental custom of assigning 'backwardness' to certain parts of the globe, particularly in association with the veil, or chador, or other body covering for women.

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## ENDNOTES

1. "Women's Centers in the Arab World", *Al-Raida* vol XVII-XVIII, no 90/91, Summer/Fall 2000.
2. See Shahrzad Mojab, "Theorizing the Politics of 'Islamic Feminism'", *Feminist Review* no 69, Winter 2001.
3. See Temma Kaplan's use of 'female consciousness' in "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918", in N. Keohane, M. Rosaldo and B. Gelpi eds., *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
4. Maxine Molyneux, "Analyzing Women's Movements", reprinted in Molyneux, *Women's Movements in International Perspective: Latin America and Beyond* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).
5. See Jean Makdisi, "The Mythology of Modernity: Women and Democracy in Lebanon" in Mai Yamani ed., *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives* (London: Ithaca Press, 1996).
6. In the middle of civil war, women from all parts of Sudan and from refugee communities managed to hold a series of conferences in Kampala, reaffirming national unity and women's rights: see "Women's Rights in the Sudan: Agenda for the Future", Kampala March 11-15, 2002 (Kampala III).
7. See Fatima Sadiqi interview, pp. 91-92. But Saharawi women, who have been outstanding as refugee community leaders, are obviously not present among Moroccan women's organizations.
8. *Al-Raida's* next issue will focus on non-Arab women in the Arab region.
9. When Palestinian women raised 'women's issues' within the Resistance movement male comrades would challenge them: "Have you come here to liberate Palestine or women?" (Jihan Helou, interview, Beirut, March 1982).
10. Rabea Naciri, this issue, p 22.
11. It is interesting to find women in state employment even where the political system does not allow their political participation. See country profiles of Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia.
12. For a comparative study of women's organizations across three Arab countries, see Laurie Brand, *Women, the State, and Political Liberalization: Middle Eastern and North African Experiences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
13. Azza Sharara Beydoun, *Nissa' wa jami'al-lubnaniyat beyn insaf-al-dhati wa khidmat al-gheyr* (Beirut: Dar Al-Nahar, 2002). Reviewed in this issue, p 142.
14. Saliha Boudeffa, "Le Contexte de Crise et les Femmes en Algerie" paper submitted to an IWSAW workshop, July 2001, p 19.
15. In November 2002 the US State Department organized a workshop for Arab women in political campaigning: *Washington Post* Nov 4, 2002.
16. Alshejri, Lamees (1999) "Unveiling the Arab Woman's Voice through the Net" in Wendy Harcourt ed., *Women@internet: creating new cultures in cyberspace* (London: Zed Books). Reviewed in this issue, pp 145-146.
17. "Insiders/Outsiders, Emic/Etic Study of Women and Gender in the New Millennium", *Al-Raida* Vol XVII-XVIII, no 90/91, 2000, p 41.