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1. In spite of the fact that I belong to a society which does not acknowledge the term 'women's movement', I guess that with some concessions regarding the political implications of the term I may be able to pinpoint some important aspects of achievement and failure of the Arab women's movements. However, to do so, we need to agree on the definition of the term. The importance of developing such a common understanding is not only to reach a 'theoretical' agreement, but also to allow us to recognize its various forms in different social environments in the Arab world. If our understanding of the term is confined to a single meaning, in which 'women's movements' is defined only as a political body of feminism, such a limited definition would exclude those Arab societies in which neither are political activities permitted nor is feminism recognized.

Yet, in contrast to this limitation, there are Arab societies where even though a 'women's movement' does not formally exist, or is not acknowledged as a feminist movement, its momentum is constantly at work. One might say that the term can have more than one definition. For beyond abstract or operational concepts, a 'women's movement' can be found when we are ready to see it in its various forms. In Saudi Arabia, for example, although there is no 'movement' to defend women's cause, we cannot miss the implications of the term in all steps that have been taken there to improve women's status. Though Saudi Arabia, unlike neighboring countries of the Gulf region, has never witnessed any kind of women's movement, yet it would be difficult to maintain that it has not felt the effect of the overall Arab women's movement. It is true that most reforms related to women were due to government initiatives; but most of them were a response to civilian requests or demands. From the first royal decree in 1960 acknowledging girls' right to education to the official recognition in 2001 of women's right to their own identity card as citizens, not only as daughters or wives, the 'Arab women's movement', though never present in Saudi society, was at the same time never absent.

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The value of these two official decrees becomes clearer when we know that both measures faced strong opposition from some factions of Saudi society. The controversial nature of all issues related to women in Saudi Arabia would have made both decisions impossible to reach without the long discussions that took place between opponents and supporters, in which support for women's rights appeared stronger. This I would call an achievement of the Arab women's movement. The achievement lies in the fact that the movement managed, however indirectly, to set up an agenda of feminist reforms that has permeated the very different societies of the Arab world at different periods of their modern history. Challenging women's illiteracy from within the blacked-out value system of Islam was one of the movement's main achievements, especially in view of the fact that women in some parts of the Arab world were prevented from learning because of a certain interpretation of Islam. The same is true in relation to women's right to employment.

The failure of the Arab women's movement can be identified as its inability to extend this kind of success to other areas of women's life without being trapped in the modern image of western women. Another point of criticism is its failure to resolve the historical conflict between men and women by building an equality of gender.

2. We have an Arabic saying, "It is a word of justice that is used for injustice". This saying was first used by the Prophet Muhammad's cousin (may Allah's peace be upon him) to mean that sometimes a word of truth is misused to lead to a false conclusion. It seems to me this saying is very applicable to those who criticize the Arab women's movement not for the sake of giving an objective opinion but only as a means of condemning the movement itself. The aim behind labeling the women's movement as a blind follower of 'Western feminism' is not one of objective criticism of certain ideas and practices, but rather to condemn the movement as a whole and to diminish its appeal to Muslim women. In my opinion, the women's movement should not take time to respond to such accusations, or allow them to divert it from its goal of empowering women. The practical response is to devote itself to its goal by rallying women from all parts of the Arab world - in urban and rural areas, among women of different educational orientations, and from different ethnic, cultural and eco-

nomie backgrounds. This cannot be done unless the movement tries faithfully and seriously to link itself with the urgent issues and real needs of women in specific Arab environments.

Despite the overwhelming trend towards globalization, it has to be realized that women's issues are not identical in every part of the world. It is true that there are commonalities, and that there should be a sense of solidarity among women internationally, but it is also true that problems cannot be imported or exported and solutions cannot be imposed.

In addition to this, another practical response is to take the issue of democracy seriously rather than using it as a slogan, which means that the Arab women's movements should democratize themselves from within. This needs taking into consideration the views and the criticisms of both women and men. The women's movements should have the courage to initiate self-criticism.

Finally, it is very urgent that the whole Arab women's movement should make a serious attempt to crystallize its thoughts and practices in the light of what the legal system of Islam says about women. I think that there is a whole historical passage of women's legal status in Islam that must be revised and re-read in relation to the contemporary needs of women and contemporary feminist issues. This reading must be done in the light of *Al-Qur'an al-Karim* and according to *al-Sunna al-Nabawiyah al-Sharifa*, and not only according to the opinions of past 'ulama. This is not to disparage their opinions, but to draw attention to the necessity for women to take responsibility in this male-dominated area. This is not a call for isolation from the international arena; rather, it is a call to the Arab women's movement to place its own fingerprint on the 'woman question', so it won't be labeled by the singular image of Western feminism.

3. There have been several academic and journalistic attempts to specify the factors that account for the spread of so-called religious fundamentalism. Here I shall refer to two academic attempts that represent opposite approaches to the issue. One of them adopts a completely Western stand by giving 'Islamic revivalism' a stereotypical image as an antagonistic form of movement that has no other goal except to stand against 'modernism'. Modernism in this approach is defined exclusively as Western mod-

ernism, which allows it to label Islamic revivalism as a threat to the universal values of the West. The other approach attempts to read Islamic revivalism from within the historical context of the hegemonic relation between the West and the Islamic world (including the Arab world). It looks at this relation of hegemony as a framework that allows an exercise in power/knowledge by which the Islamic world is feared, belittled and controlled. Since this hegemony has been the framework of introducing modernism as a purely and exclusively Western product, it has consequently led to the creation of political conditions for modernism in the Islamic world. The condition was that the Islamic world could not be modernized unless it accepts to follow the Western model of modernization. This meant, in both theory and practice, erasure of identity beyond physical features, cultural heritage, and geographical boundaries.

Gita Sahgal and Yuval-Davis represent the first approach, manifested by their analysis of 'Islamic revivalism' as a form of fundamentalism identical to all forms of religious fanaticism, without giving weight to historical, socio-political, and cultural differences, based on an implicit assumption of Western universalism.<sup>1</sup> Such an approach labels all attempts at returning to the *Qur'an* and the *Shari'a* in issues related to women, as a retreat into tradition. This view is contested by those who see returning to the *Qur'an* and the *Shari'a* as the only way to challenge traditional interpretations by creating a contemporary and innovative re-reading of the canonical texts. The second approach does not only recognize the right of feminism in the Islamic world to have a choice of its own in the way it responds to challenges to Muslim women, it also provides a theorization for understanding the legality and not only the logic of this choice. But Leila Ahmed and Nasreen Ali among others question the validity of a single image of woman, which Elizabeth Spellman calls an 'essential woman'. They argue that this is an image whose look and mentality is Western. Bobby Sayyid takes the argument a step farther when he says, "The effect of this is that women who do not share essential woman's particularities become lesser women".<sup>2</sup> The implication is that in order to be recognized by the West as liberating movements, feminist movements have to be either Western, or at least western-oriented, a position that endorses cultural and racial hierarchies.

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4. This also is a controversial question. On one hand, there are those who think that involving women's movements in such projects might lead to their 'domestication' by diverting their attention from the political arena and the public domain. On the other hand are those who believe that the only way for the women's movement to gain political credibility is by dealing with the urgent issues and the immediate needs of women of different backgrounds. I think I tend to side with the latter, for two reasons. The first is personal, related to my intuition as a poet and not only to my orientation as a sociologist, which makes me prefer the romance of working with people to being puzzled by the surrealism of political work. The second reason is the actual need of women for social work, legal counselling, etc., as a means of empowering them, which could be the only way to help them struggle for full citizenship, legal and political.

5. Oh yes, I believe very much that there is an intense struggle to be carried on in the area of family law. As I said before, there is a whole system of Islamic law that suffers silence and neglect, and which has to be re-read and re-interpreted.

6. Yes, indeed. In fact, globalization must not exclusively mean Americanization or Westernization. Globalization in the positive sense of the word means the collapse of the Berlin wall in all directions of the globe. This means an equal representation of different dimensions of the seven continents. In addition, there are rich histories of women's personal and communal struggles, of joyful and painful experiences, which ought to be globally rediscovered and shared by women and men of the world. These need to be revalued and disseminated among new generations of women, especially as the Internet today helps to demolish political boundaries as well as the very concept of censorship.

7. I am glad that you brought up this question. The causes of this limitation vary from social to political to multi-dimensional factors. Some critics of the Arab women's movements think that this situation is a result of a poor practice of democracy. Others think that this is because the movements have failed to address the heterogeneity of the Arab world, and to move outside the ivory tower of its intellectual domain. Whatever the reasons, it is a source of worry for all those who would like to see the movement

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spread roots at a popular level. In my opinion, if elitism within the movements is not modified to include women of different social backgrounds and diverse cultural frame of reference, it could eventually be one of the major reasons for its future isolation and maybe elimination.

8. See my answer under 2 above.

9. We have to be modest enough to admit that individual achievements, no matter how great, can never be a full measure of the success of a public movement such as the Arab women's movement. Taking this reservation into consideration, one can say Yes, it is very likely that a number of movement members have done their best to change gender relations and practice on a personal and familial level. This is not to say that there is full achievement of gender equality in their families. Arab women's movement members live and function within a certain social environment; the only way for their personal struggle to be effective is to change the social framework that allows uneven gender relations to be an accepted pattern of social behavior.

10. This is a good question because it is related to the self-criticism that is badly needed within the overall movement. Unfortunately, women's issues in non-Arabic speaking minorities have been silenced for a long while as a result of political linkages between the Arab women's movement and the political project of nationalism in the region. I think it is time that the movement starts to realize the importance of its own independence. However this is not achievable unless it frees itself from being an echo of a dominant discourse of a ruling class, and/or political parties. This is also the only way to put an end to attempts to use the 'woman question' as a card in political maneuvering, as happened in Algeria and elsewhere in the so-called Third World during the second half of the past century. I think one of the main things to be done at this stage is to establish a mutual trust by strengthening solidarity among women of different linguistic, cultural and/or social backgrounds. This in my opinion should be done within the bound of unity of the Arab world.

11. I think that terms are not the problem in defining feminist movements in the Arab world. What really matters is the content of the

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movement, and that it does not become a duplicate of dominant modes of feminism, which may have a different agenda than that needed by women within a specific bound of time and space. Developing a form of feminism that does not deny women the right to have their own 'feminist imagination', their own choice in achieving gender equality, and the right to be proud of their cultural identity, is the real challenge of feminist movements in the Arab and Islamic world today.

12. I am sorry to say that the impact of most UN declarations in relation to women has been very limited, and so far most of them are going nowhere beyond propaganda. In my opinion, this situation will continue unless genuine and practical measures are created to protect women from national and international violations of their rights, whether these take the form of wars or domestic violence.

13. I think the growth of the number of women professionals and scholars in the Arab region is a very positive sign of a real liberation of women on a practical level. However these women should not allow themselves to be absorbed by official institutions at the expense of their feminist objectives. The increase in number of those well educated in different fields of knowledge widens their representation in social institutions, empowering them to speak and to have their voice heard.

14. The most serious obstacle that could impede the progress of the women's movement is fanaticism. In other words the Arab women's movements should not cling to their old ideas but be open to fresh ideas and new needs of younger generations of women.

15. First, I would like movement women to leave their offices and conference rooms and walk barefoot in alleys and on unpaved roads, to develop a sense of solidarity between urban and rural women of different intellectual and social backgrounds. Second, I would like it not to be ashamed of identifying itself with the Islamic feminist perspective of women's liberation (*al-tanthir al-nasawi al-mustanir*). Thirdly, I would like it to be more democratic and less exclusive and centralized. Finally, I would like it not to stop dreaming, for this is one of the best ways to renew its energy and to let fresh air replace the burned-up oxygen.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. Sahgal, Gita and Nira Yuval-Davis eds., (1992) *Refusing Holy Orders* (London: Virago).
2. Ahmed, Leila (1992) *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press); Ali, Nasreen (1998) "Essentializing Inessential Women" unpublished paper, Manchester; Sayid, Bobby (1997) *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (London and New York: Zed Books).

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1. The Arab women's movements have been most successful in improving women's roles and situations in the 'public spheres' of education, work, and political participation. Their goals in these areas often converged with male reformers who followed modernization paradigms. They have been less successful in making the link between personal lives and politics, and in addressing gender issues within the so-called private sphere.

The greatest failure, in my view, has been not to build on previous achievements, and not to build effective alliances between groups within a specific country, like Egypt for example, as well as with feminists in other Arab, Asian and African countries.

2. It does not take a western feminist to see injustice and inequalities in any part of the world. Women all over the world are facing discrimination, and aside from general problems related to poverty and war, they are confronting gender-specific problems. This is not to fall back into un-reconstituted universalizing and a patronizing "Sisterhood is global" mode, but to recognize that we need to break out of dangerous dichotomies. For some reason (well, we know the reasons), this never really came up with respect to socialist and Marxist movements and political groupings.

For a start, western feminism is not one thing, and Arab women's movements might be influ-