

enced by certain strands of it, i.e liberal women's rights activism as opposed to radical feminism. Secondly, Arab women have struggled historically to gain rights and change existing gender ideologies and relations as women have in many non-western countries. Thirdly, all sorts of ideas and movements emerged in the West, ranging from the nation state to Marxist thought. What is wrong with appropriating certain ideas and/or politics and translating them into one's specific social, cultural, economic and political realities? The history of humankind is a history of encounters and exchange.

And finally: most women who are part of feminist movements in western countries are extremely critical of their own governments and their politics. This is not restricted to women's issues in the specific national context, but often extends to international politics. Living as someone of Iraqi origin in the UK, for example, I am always moved by the number of British women who have no direct connection to either Palestine or Iraq, but who are very passionate and effective in their struggle against war, against imperialism and against injustice.

3. This question is very complex and would need a very long answer. The factors accounting for the spread of religious fundamentalism range from a series of economic crises, the failure of secular governments and parties to deliver progress and affluence for all, the 1967 war and the ongoing atrocities committed by the Israeli government, anti-Western sentiments linked to Zionism and the US support of it, imperialist policies of the US and other western countries, and the corruption and oppression of existing regimes.

Religious revival in and of itself does not have to be antithetical to women's rights. However, in my view, any form of religious extremism, whether it is based on Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism or Islam (or any other religion) is a threat to women and women's movements. Women are being used as markers of purity and authenticity and are generally subjected to severe restrictions in movement, appearance and behavior.

I do not think that any religion can offer a long-term basis for struggle for women's rights, but I understand that in certain situations it might be necessary or useful to evoke religion.

4. Pluralism in itself is neither good or bad. It very

much depends whether resources and energies are put to good use, or whether women's groups are wasting their efforts by working all over the place and not focusing. In my experience in Egypt, the problem was not pluralism in terms of activities, but 'reinventing the wheel' and lack of co-operation. In other words, different groups and organizations would start certain projects without building on the work done by other groups earlier. Furthermore, activities were sometimes the result of available funding rather than well-thought through needs.

Yet, ideally, Arab women's movements (again as women's movements in other parts of the world) should be able to work on many different levels and issues, as gender inequalities are pervasive in all aspects of life. In light of the severe lack of human resources (due to the relative small size of women's groups), and in some countries of funding (though not Egypt), priorities need to be made.

5. Yes, the existing family laws in most Arab countries affect women of all social classes. They are the source of much anguish, emotional and material suffering and a general symbol for unequal gender relations.

6. I do not think it is an 'either or question'. But I certainly agree that there should be more transnational links with women in the 'East' as well as 'South.' One of the most powerful arguments in countering the common accusation of "imitating the West" is to show that women in non-western countries, such as Pakistan, Nigeria and India, suffer from similar problems and engage in similar struggles.

7. To some extent, this holds true for many social movements worldwide: it is the educated middle classes that have the time and energy to change the world while the poor struggle for daily survival. However, several factors account for the fact that Arab women's movements today seem particularly to fail to mobilize women of other classes (as opposed to places like Turkey where the women's movement has been much more successful in this point on various occasions).

8. Definitely. Unfortunately many women's organizations in the Arab world follow the prevailing political culture in the region, i.e. authoritarianism and hierarchical political structures. Those women and groups that try to challenge prevail-

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ing forms and cultures of doing politics struggle on several fronts at the same time. They often spend more time trying to create democratic structures and processes than in fighting for women's rights. But, in the long run, these attempts are extremely important and positive.

9. One of the greatest challenges for members of Arab women's movements is to challenge existing gender ideologies and relations in our own families and amongst friends. Many of us, whether in the Arab world or the West, fail to practise what we 'preach'. It starts with our relationships at home as well as towards our sisters. We are often still complicit with the patriarchal system of divide and rule, and we treat other women as rivals rather than partners in a struggle.

10. All inequalities and injustices - whether on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, etc. - are linked. Women's movements anywhere in the world need to have a holistic approach to the problem of gender discrimination. At the same time you can't fight the discrimination of religious or ethnic minorities, or the oppression of poor people, without addressing gender inequalities.

11. I think we should move beyond the endless debates about terminologies. The term 'Arab feminism' is as valid and as misleading as the term 'Western feminism.'

12. Initially, the UN decade for women seems to have boosted the Arab women's movement but some of the activities were not sustainable.

13. The effects have been multifold: It has led to the professionalization of women's societies which in previous decades were either based on charity and welfare work, or political militancy. On one level, this professionalization resulted in a situation where highly qualified women - doctors, lawyers, academics, etc. - became part of women's movements. They managed to combine their professional qualifications and insights with the political struggle for women's rights. I think that this has been a positive development. At the same time, the women's movements may have lost the voluntarism and militancy of earlier decades, and now sometimes run the danger of 'careerism'. I noticed in Egypt that some women made a career out of being women activists. This is not a problem if it is merely a side effect

Women's groups also played an important role in resisting the various dictatorial regimes that dominated Sudan in 1958-64, 1969-85 and the current regime.

of their activism, but it becomes problematic if the job becomes the goal in and of itself.

14. Repressive governments within the Arab world severely limit all forms of dissent and political expressions. They feel particularly threatened by women's movements that challenge the status quo. Radical Islamist movements and increased social conservatism also pose a great obstacle to the growth of the women's movement. Western imperialism, and particularly US foreign policy with respect to Palestine, Iraq and the so-called war on terrorism all increase anti-western sentiments in the region. Until Arab women manage to be less defensive towards the accusation of being too pro-Western, and show their critics that 1) the West is not one thing; 2) Western feminism is heterogeneous; and 3) most western feminists are critical of their own governments, their work will be very difficult.

15. It would be fantastic if there could be less rivalry and competition, and more solidarity and co-operation.

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1. It is very difficult to talk of a single, unified Arab women's movement. Women's groups in many parts of the Arab world have played quite an important role in anti-colonial, nationalist struggles and have been able to achieve certain advances, such as reforms in Personal Status Laws, employment laws (equal pay), etc. However, as has been argued in various feminist texts, and indeed by local activists, many of these groups have focused on reform rather than the complete transformation of 'the situation of women' in the various countries of the Arab world.

For example, the nascent women's movement in Sudan played a part in the anti-colonial struggle. Women's groups also played an important role in resisting the various dictatorial regimes that

dominated Sudan in 1958-64, 1969-85 and the current regime. However, the mainstream women's movement in Sudan has not adopted a transformative stand regarding gender issues, and although it has been more successful in addressing issues of socio-economic difference, it has failed to recognize differences between Sudanese women, particularly racial difference. However, there are new women's groups that are addressing these issues.

2. Charges of 'Westoxication' have been levied against active women's groups by both conservative and to some extent progressive forces in the region - including sections of active women's movements - but more so by conservative forces. I think the question to be asked is: why is this the case? Most of the time this happens for political reasons, mainly with the aim of undermining progressive feminist discourse. As I argue elsewhere, I have listened time and again to the first woman parliamentarian in Sudan arguing:

We are not feminists! For us, liberation does not mean '*alistirgal*' (behaving like men), nor promiscuity or moral laxity. Look at what feminism did in the West! Look at the photos of naked women you see on the walls of subway stations (in London)! Look at the spread of drugs, homelessness, and broken families! Do you know why this is the case? It is because bourgeois movements have made it a point to lead women's movements astray, and their conspiracy was successful.¹

Some of these issues are actually being challenged by feminist groups in the West. In the case of Egypt, this issue has been discussed by Nadjie Al-Ali in her excellent article "We are Not Feminists".²

It is important to mention here that one of the reasons of such a stand has been the tendency of some of the western feminist strands to homogenize women, 'Othering' Third World women in the process. In the case of conservative forces and politicized Islamic groups in the region, however, what is often criticized is usually a construct of what conservative forces see as 'Western feminism'.

3. I believe that there are both local and external factors that account for the spread of politicized Islam.³ Generally speaking, this is part of a resurgence of movements organized around religious,

ethnic or national identities. These movements find fertile ground in an increasingly globalized world, where they are able to mobilize religious collectivities by - amongst other things - emphasizing their difference from the 'West'. Given the fact that women are often considered as markers of national identity and cultural difference, they are often expected to commit themselves to specific notions of 'womanhood' and to reproducing ethnic and national boundaries, in a way that often undermines women's human rights. As such, I believe that it is difficult for any religion to offer a long-term basis for struggle for women's rights. However, I acknowledge the existence of Islamic feminist discourses and the fact that there are elements of religion and culture that can form a basis for promoting women's human rights; but they need to be approached critically. Groups like the 'Women's Memory Group' (Cairo) could play an important role in this.

4. This pluralism is not necessarily bad, but we need to be cautious about the transformational component of some of these activities. We need to look at why and how they are being undertaken. With high rates of illiteracy amongst women (and men) in countries like Sudan, literacy should be introduced as a basic right. This might contribute to changing the way women and women's roles are defined in society but it will not necessarily transform the 'position of women' in that society. If adult literacy is used as a form of pedagogy - feminist pedagogy - and if women who attend literacy classes are organized around a transformative gender agenda, then that is another story.

5. There should be more struggle towards changing personal status laws but this should not constitute the only activity of women's groups in the region.

6. Feminist theorizing has developed immensely in other parts of the Third World, mainly in Latin America and the Indian sub-continent. I think there are many parallels in experience between women from these parts of the world and women's groups in the Arab world. Struggles of women's movements in other parts of the Third World could inform, and also be informed by, the struggles and experiences of women's groups in the Arab region. Having said that, I believe that the West cannot be approached as a homogeneous entity, and there are theoretical currents that developed in Western countries that can be very

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useful in the context of the Arab region. I will always be indebted to Cynthia Nelson for introducing me to various feminist analytical currents (some of which developed in the 'West') that helped me better to understand and analyze some of the issues that face women in Sudan and Egypt.

7. This question depends on which groups are considered part of the 'women's movement' in any given country. In the case of Sudan, the 'official' women's movement has been traditionally dominated by educated, urban based, middle class and 'Northern'; but women have always organized to address their 'practical' needs, sometimes in ways that could almost be defined as anti-establishment. In the case of Sudan, I believe that experiences of conflict and exile have changed the nature of active women's groups. In my research amongst women's groups in exile and groups that address the needs of women in marginalized and war-affected areas in Southern and Eastern Sudan, I have noticed that women still attending literacy classes are organized and often leaders of women's groups (or branches of these groups), and they are adopting an increasingly transformative agenda.

8. I think that women's groups, like other political and social movements in the Arab world, need to be democratic and transparent. But I also think that in the case of Sudan there are groups that have been formed as a response to lack of democracy and transparency in the mainstream women's movement. In the context of the Sudanese exiled women's groups, the Cairo based 'Maan' (a women's work group), for example, undertake a democratic and non-hierarchical approach to decision-making. The motto of the Sudanese Women's Alliance is 'Empowering Sudanese Women in the Context of Democracy and Social Justice' and the group undertakes a decentralized approach to decision-making.

9. This is a very important question and complicated issue. The achievements of women's groups and women in various parts of the Arab world cannot be undermined. Women's groups have also had different levels of success in these areas depending - amongst other factors - on the dominant cultural beliefs in a society, receptiveness of the political establishment to ideas of change as well as the nature of the women's movement. However, there is a lot that remains to be done in terms of changing gender relations and practices in society and within the family.

Unfortunately academic feminists/ women's activists are sometimes excluded by the mainstream women's movement and their concerns branded irrelevant.

There is always a tendency to look at various cultures or at 'our culture' as a single entity. It is important to untie the links between elements of local cultures that are contradictory to women's human rights, and those elements that could actually be useful in promoting women's empowerment.

10. Recognizing the fact that minority or 'Other' ethnic/cultural groups exist, and that they have distinct problems would be a good starting point. In fact this is already taking place within some groups in a number of countries including Egypt and Sudan. In the case of Sudan, given the homogenizing tendencies of the post-colonial state and its attempts to impose a singular Arab and Islamic identity on a multi-racial, multi-cultural population, and the fact that this was linked to unequal distribution of wealth and power, identity questions have been central to our political experience. Mobilization and organization of women in Southern Sudan for example, has taken place in the context of struggle against oppression, linked to cultural hegemony. In the process, they have been challenging the tendency of women's groups to construct women from marginalized regions as victims who need support rather than as activists capable of organizing themselves, and adopting transformative agendas.

11. Yes; also because the term implies that there is a single Arab feminist perspective. I have addressed this in my "Arab Cultures and Human Rights: A Gender Perspective".⁴ Having said that, I believe that there are also many common issues on which Arab women's groups could work together given the socio-economic and political situation in the Arab region and its location in relation to the international system.

(12: not answered.)

13. I am particularly interested in the fact that the number of women interested and/or trained in feminist, women's and gender studies is on the increase, and that this has resulted in a slowly expanding tendency to look critically into existing groups and structures. Unfortunately academic feminists/women's activists are sometimes excluded by the mainstream women's movement and their concerns branded irrelevant. Others feel that this movement does not reflect their beliefs. However, I hope that this will lead to the development of local theoretical perspectives