that will then inform the struggle of women’s movements in the region, as has been the case in
other parts of the Third World.
14. The absence of democracy and respect for
human rights in many parts of the region is a
problem, issues of conflict, poverty and a tenden-
cy to sometimes use these very important issues to
discredit feminist groups is equally important.

As is the case with other Third World women’s
movements, especially progressive groups that
do not identify with religious or ethnic political
projects, ‘challenges on the ground’ are often
invoked: where poverty and conflict prevail, chal-
 lenging prevalent gender norms is often consid-
ered a luxury. This can sometimes become a
dilemma when setting our ‘agendas’ and priori-
ties. How can we address complex theoretical
issues when there are women around us who simply can’t find food and water? Whose chil-
 dren cannot go to school? Who are likely to die
simply can’t find food and water? Whose chil-
dren are affected by war, or those who view the
human rights is an important challenge as well.

In spite of the attempt by the Arab Women’s
Conference to unify women’s efforts at the Arab
national level, the conference ended up expres-
sing the policies of ruling Arab systems with
regard to the status of Arab women, instead of
forming a platform for various intellectual, polit-
ical and ideological trends, as well as women’s
mass movements.

Despite this, Arab women in general, and the
women’s movements, have succeeded in increas-
ing the level of women’s representation in the
civil sphere over the past two decades, for exam-
ple with women being elected to parlia-
ment in several countries (eg. Morocco, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine). This can be consid-
ered as a step towards a stronger political partic-
ipation of women. In Bahrain women succeeded
in practicing their right to vote and to run as can-
ididates in local elections. In the Middle East, for
example, Arab women are still strug-
gling for this right. They have also achieved
changes in the judicial sphere (the family code) in
Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco. A number
of Arab women’s movements have also been
able to achieve in their development policies towards
securing women’s needs.

In the same time it is evident that an important
retreat in the role of certain Arab women’s move-
ments is taking place. For example, during the
first Intifada (1987-1993), Palestinian women’s
organization played an outstanding role. But
despite the severe suffering of Palestinian
women during the second Intifada, no unified
role of women’s organizations has emerged. This
appearance weakened the role of the women’s
movement in resisting the invasion, which would have bolstered their role in Palestinian
society, and their role in the various fields devot-
ed to strengthening the resilience of Palestinian
women. The unified role of women’s movement
during the first Intifada, such as the Higher
Women’s Committee (which included members of women’s movements with various
political affiliations, and grouped under the PLO)
was a unifying tool for all women’s bodies. The
loss of this unified front has weakened this role in comparison to first Intifada. The role of
women’s movements has also receded in
Yemen, Algeria, and Sudan. One of their flaws
was that they failed to build popular and organ-
 ized women’s movements active in all fields, in
opposing discriminatory social realities as
regards marriage, or education, and in drawing
up programs to eradicate poverty. The work
these organizations did, despite its importance,
is no alternative to building a broad women’s
movement with branches in all sectors and lev-
els of the population, one able to bring about
real change in the stereotyped role of women. In
my opinion, the Arab women’s movements have
not been able up to this day to make this
change. They have also failed to rally the Arab
women’s movements to support Palestinian
national resistance to the Israeli occupation, or
Arab women against the expected American invasion,
or Arab women against ongoing civil strife and
violence.

Instead of having women’s movements working
among women, it would be best to have civil
organizations offering services to women, but
without minimizing the role of women’s organi-
sations, so that they do not form an alternative
for organized work but play a supportive role to
the larger feminist public movement.

2. The Arab women’s movements are part of
international women’s organizations that strive
to improve women’s position in all societies, as
well as to struggle for peace and sustainable develop-
ment, and against war and globalization. The
common factors between Arab women’s move-
mements and international women’s organi-
sations are many, taking into consideration the specifici-
ties of each society in its cultural, societal and
economic reality. Many international women’s
organizations are currently active in opposing the
war in Iraq and supporting the right of the
Iraqi people to control their fate. Many Arab and inter-
national women’s delegations have also been
coming to Palestine, in a popular campaign to
protect the Palestinian people, and they have
been facing Violence from the occupation forces.

Many international women’s organizations
are currently active in opposing the war in Iraq
and supporting the right of the
Iraqi people to control their fate.

ENDNOTES
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Translated from Arabic by Lynn M alakouf

1. I believe that Arab women do have common
issues, and that there are Arab women’s move-
ments with a regional dimension that bring out
disimilarities between different political
contexts and regimes, as well as the social real-
tities that Arab women live in.

2. Many international women’s organizations
are currently active in opposing the war in Iraq
and supporting the right of the
Iraqi people to control their fate.

Despite the severe suffering of
Palestinian women during the first Intifada, a unified
role of women’s organizations has emerged.

3. The role of religious fundamentalism in
the Arab region is due first, to the lack of democra-
cy, second to the economic situation and its
social impact, in addition to the inability of ruling
bodies to offer solutions for increasing poverty,
rising debt to the World Bank, and the deepen-
ing of economic inequality. A third factor is the
emergence of religious political resistance groups
such as Hizbollah, and its heroic victory against
the Israeli occupation forces in South Lebanon;
and a fourth is the cultural background of Arab
societies that supports religious thought.

4. My opinion, these activities are positive and
contribute to activating the role of women in
society.

5. Yes, we do need to sustain the struggle for a
contemporary family code. It is also necessary
to sustain the gains we have made so far in legal
amendments to the family code.

6. Each women’s organization starts from a
given reality, and works to change reality towards
a better future. Many positive examples can be
found in this respect, which are well adapted to
the reality of our societies. We can adopt them,
over time, and reinforce them in the West or the East,
as long as the vision is clear about changing
women’s status in our societies so as to integrate
them in development as a whole, so that
women’s issues are no longer isolated from the
general effort for development and progress,
and that women occupy their role in Arab
societies through society’s progress towards
a better future.

7. Women’s movement leaders in Egypt, Jordan,
and Arab North Africa are mostly from the elite
and based in cities, far from the mass of women’s
actual situations in the countryside.
In our effort to achieve a popular Arab feminist movement, we have
to mobilize women from rural and marginalized areas as well as from
under-represented sectors, e.g., manual and clerical workers, students,
and housewives.

8. Fostering democracy in Arab women’s
movements would enable them to rid them-
selves of their flaws and to achieve more.
Today, these movements must absorb democ-

raty into their internal life so that they can
have more impact on their societies, and gain
the power to bring about democratic change in
their societies.
9. I believe that the Arab women's movement needs to deploy intensive efforts towards changing the understanding of gender roles in our society.

(10) Not answered

11. It is hard to speak of "the Arab women's movement" in the absence of a framework unifying women's efforts at the Arab level. I believe that all Arab women's movements are linked by a pan-Arab element, i.e. a common language, common interests, a common culture.

12. International organizations that address women's issues contribute to translating the resolutions of international conferences into local structures and programs aimed at improving the situation of Arab women. I believe that these international organizations have positive effects on women's status.

13. All research related to the status of women helps in the creation of programs and plans aimed at meeting the needs of women in all sectors. They should be focused on indicators that arm every Arab woman's movement, regardless of the direction it is taking. If these research institutes do not coordinate, they will not serve the interests of the women's movements, especially in regard to meeting the policies of donor countries. This will be the case if they focus on issues that are not directly linked to the needs and concerns of the feminist movements. From here comes the fear that there are too many research institutes, and that they are being formed solely with the aim of receiving donations.

(14) Not answered

15. The main aim should be to bring change that would foster women's activity within Arab women's movements, so as to transform them into influential social movements.

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Translated from French by Lynn Malouf

1. It is hard to talk about a unified and homogeneous Arab feminist movement, since there are important differences between Arab societies (for example, between Tunisia and Saudi Arabia). There are many countries where this movement is just emerging, and other societies where this movement does not even exist.

2. Until the opposite is proved, the Arab feminist movement has not yet managed to become a political actor per se, with a significant bargaining power compared with other social and official forces. It does not at the present time have the power to impact decisions and laws regarding women. Algerian women activists, for example, have been struggling for nearly 20 years to bring about a change in the family code, without having achieved any results so far.

3. This is a complex question. Many researchers are trying to find the answer, without having so far offered convincing explanations. One can briefly list some reasons: the failure of developmental models chosen after independence (unemployment, poverty, the housing crisis, the accumulation of problems linked to the Palestinian problem, and the status of religion in our societies. The socio-economic situation offers favorable ground to all forms of maslination, among them Islamic fundamentalism. All this contributes to encouraging extremism among the young, who represent the majority in Arab societies.

4. Can religion serve as a basis for women's struggle? Frankly I don't know, but we may suppose that women with a continually deepening understanding of Islam will be able to use it to demand certain rights contained in the Qur'an, but from which they do not benefit today (for example, inheritance in those regions where women are excluded through customary laws in contradiction with the Qur'an).

5. Women who form part of Islamic movements described as moderate are quite combative: the Movement for Society and Peace had a woman elected to the (Algerian) National Assembly, and the Al-Islah movement also has a woman who was elected to the new Assembly ( 2002). They are also very numerous in student organizations, and quite dynamic.

6. The Arab feminist movement has yet to manage to become a political actor per se, basic rights education, work, judicial and civil equality, etc., are means that are best adapted to the Arab societies. If the goals of Western feminism and those of the Arab movements are not always aligned, ways towards achieving these goals have to be adapted to specific situations. It is not possible only to emulate the struggle methods that succeeded in another historical context. We have to think based on the realities of the Arab world.

7. Women's gains in the Arab world are the result of a silent revolution. Through education and hard work, they have managed to achieve social visibility and a place in the media. In fact, the feminist movement comes as a result of these social and economic changes. The need to call for women's specific interests, to change women's conditions, and to organize in groups, results from the will of educated women to liberate themselves from the tutelage of their families. The most significant achievement of the Arab women's movement is to have produced the "women issue" as a political and ideological factor that other social and political actors have to take into consideration, and not neglect.

The worst failure is that the Arab feminist movement has not yet managed to become a political actor, and that other social and political actors have to take into consideration, and not neglect. The most significant achievement of the Arab women's movement is to have produced the "women issue" as a political and ideological factor that other social and political actors have to take into consideration, and not neglect.

The Arab feminist movement has not yet managed to become a political actor per se.