

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 tendency 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, challenging prevalent gender norms is often considered a luxury. This can sometimes become a dilemma when setting our 'agendas' and priorities. How can we address complex theoretical issues when there are women around us who simply can't find food and water? Whose children cannot go to school? Who are likely to die young through maternal mortality and through TB for example? The challenge here is to integrate a concern with these issues into local feminist agendas, and to address issues of democracy, poverty and conflict through gender lenses. In the Arab region, the issue of 'universality' versus 'cultural specificity' in relation to women's human rights is an important challenge as well.

15. No less than focusing on the transformation of the current dominant 'neopatriarchal' order, to cite Hisham Sharabi. Meanwhile, I believe that it is important that we all continually sharpen our theoretical tools as well as our tools of practice.

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ENDNOTES

1. Ali, Nada M. (2001) "On Being a Third World Feminist" *Eve's Back*, Manchester, winter, no.27.
2. Al-Ali, Nadje (2000) "'We are not Feminists': Egyptian Women Activists on Feminism", in Nelson and Rouse (eds.), *Situating Globalization: Views from Egypt*. (Bielefeld: Transcript).
3. Ali, Nada M. (1995) "Women and Politicised Islam: Case of the Sudan" Paper presented at the workshop on Women's Education and Empowerment. Hamburg, UNESCO Institute for Education. An Arabic translation has been published in *Ruwaq Arabi*. CIHRS, 2001.
4. Ali, Nada M. (1995) "Arab Cultures and Human Rights: A Gender Perspective", Paper presented at the NGOs Forum, UN Fourth Women's Conference. Beijing, China.

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1. I believe that Arab women do have common issues, and that there are Arab women's movements with a regional dimension that bring out both the dissimilarities between specific political contexts and regimes, as well as the social realities that Arab women live in.

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 expressing the policies of ruling Arab systems with regard to the status of Arab women, instead of forming a platform for various intellectual, political and ideological trends, as well as women's mass movements.

Despite this, Arab women in general, and the women's movements, have succeeded in increasing the level of women's representation in the public sphere over the past two decades, for example with women being elected to parliament in several countries (eg. Morocco, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine). This can be considered as a step towards a stronger political participation of women. In Bahrain women succeeded in practicing their right to vote and to run as candidates for parliament. But in some countries, Kuwait for example, Arab women are still struggling 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 active in a bid to influence development policies towards securing women's needs.

At the same time it is evident that an important retreat in the role of certain women's movements 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 absence 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 devoted

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to strengthening the resistance of Palestinian women. The unifying tools of the 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 the 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 organized 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 levels 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 masses to support Palestinian national resistance to the Israeli occupation, or Iraqi women against the expected American invasion, or Algerian 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 organizations, so that they do not form an alternative to 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 development, and against war and globalization. The common factors between Arab women's movements and international women's organizations are many, taking into consideration the specificities 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 international 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.

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3. The rise of religious fundamentalism in the Arab region is due first, to the lack of democracy, 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 deepening 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. In 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, whether they originate 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 so 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 situation and problems. If we aim to form a popular Arab feminist movement, we have to mobilize women from rural and marginalized areas as well as from under-represented sectors, eg. manual and clerical workers, students, and housewives.

8. Fostering democracy in Arab women's movements would enable them to rid themselves of their flaws and to achieve more. Today, these movements must absorb democracy 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, ie. 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 women'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 more 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 democracy within Arab women's movements, so as to transform them into influential social movements.

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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.

Women's gains in the Arab world are the result of a silent revolution. Through education and 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 'woman 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 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.

2. Until the opposite is proved, the Arab feminist movement is indeed influenced by Western feminism. But how could it be otherwise? This is not a flaw. After all, no one has ever blamed the Arab nationalist, socialist and unionist movements for coming under Western influence. Western feminism is the only model that Arab women have so far. They have no other identifications or models in the sense of a struggle for equality and absolute liberation of women regarding their choices in their daily lives. Is there a 'Third Worldist' Arab feminist movement efficacious and strong enough for other women to identify themselves with? Is this accusation justified? This is not an accusation that is applicable to feminism only, as the westernization of societies goes beyond the women's movement. It is a global process that started with colonialism. Women are not the ones who imported it. So these accusations do not stand. The best response is to go on struggling for women's

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basic rights (education, work, judicial and civil equality, contraception, etc.), by choosing the means that are best adapted to the Arab societies. If the goals of Western feminism and those of Arab feminism come together, the means and ways towards achieving these goals have to be adapted to specific societies. 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.

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), the frustrations linked to the Palestinian problem, and the status of religion in our societies. The socio-economic situation offers favorable ground to all forms of messianism, among them Islamic fundamentalism. All this contributes to encouraging extremism among the young, who represent the majority in Arab societies.

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 *Shari'a*).

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.

Their divergence from secular feminists mainly relates to the status of women in the family, and to the family code. Islamist women must manage the contradiction between their duty as believers (duty towards God, and fidelity to precepts concerning, for example, the veil and polygamy), and their rights as citizens in a secularizing society - not an easy matter. But if any change is to occur in religion, it will most likely come from women.

4. Yes, absolutely. It is necessary to take into

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consideration the situation of rural women, as well as working women and women at home. They are the basis of the movement in the long-term. All these activities give social visibility to women's movements, and are necessary to convince women. Their problems are unfortunately sometimes ignored by the women elites.

5. More than ever! The family codes are unjust towards women, and are in contradiction with constitutions (as is the case in Algeria). Only women who have been deeply wronged by these discriminatory codes can develop the struggle for their rights.

6. Yes. Priority should be given to reinforcing relations among feminists in the Arab world, and to extending them to the rest of the Muslim world. For example, the greatest Arab feminists are not well known by generations of franco-phone women in North Africa: their writings are not available in French, and not found in libraries; and their struggles are not known by the women's movements. Problems are common to these societies and often differ from problems in Western societies. These societies are all dominated economically and culturally. Women would gain by knowing about the experiences of women living in Islamic societies, and by adapting their struggles to the means and conditions of these societies. The experience of feminist movements in the Western world is very rich, but it cannot be imported as it is, without discernment. After all, isn't it the same problem with development?

7. The women elites remain in spite of everything very distant from the problems and concerns of women of the 'people'. Their discourse is often one targeted towards foreign audiences, and seldom addressed to the mass of women (rural women, workers, housewives). This prevents women of the masses from identifying with these leaders. The elites are primarily concerned with their own equality, and the equality of their status with men, and not with solutions to social problems experienced by women of the masses - poverty, school failure, lack of housing. The women elites think as individuals, but the women of the 'people' think first as mothers of families. We also remember that women lack the time and freedom to struggle. Finally, the women's movements have not obtained sufficiently impressive results to serve as an example. In a situation of internal conflict