It has allowed us to recognize internationalism, etc., no one thinks of not using it. Women don't dare assert their rights and the defense of their interests. When nationalist or regional conflicts often lead to splits. Instead of having one large unified movement (even if with autonomous structures), we find ourselves with small groups of women having no real impact, and prey to endless internal divisions.

9. It's not so much the feminist movements, it is individual women who have carried out mistreatment in their families from the moment when they started working and working. This has contributed to changing family relations. Yet have these relations really changed? Many women have succeeded in having a professional life, but at the expense of their family life. They have not found either the help or the necessary understanding to lead both at the same time. Only women are submitted to these painful choices. So what has changed?

10. If feminist movements are democratic, they should favor the voices of all citizens (majority and minority), and should be ready to listen to problems of women within all social groups, since language is not always a women's movement. But movements within these minorities are often monopolized by men, and women serve as a springboard only for the global project - nationalistic or regional. Women don't dare assert themselves outside the group for fear of being rejected by the community.

11. This question seems to me a bit ambiguous. On the contrary, we should keep the term 'feminism' to denote women's struggle for their rights and the defense of their interests. When we talk about Arab socialism, or liberalism, or without any of thinking of not using it.

12. It is impossible to measure precisely. At least it has allowed us to recognize international resolutions in favor of women. This is why Algeria ratified CEDAW (Copenhagen) in 1996. But we have never received any Arab country that this convention. Besides this, I don't really see any impact on the daily situation of women.

13. Has there been a feminist movement that was not guided by intellectuals and that succeeded? The leaders of feminist movements are often intellectuals. This fact should contribute to increasing the research done on women's conditions and to developing knowledge of their different situations. To this effect, we should encourage the development of laboratories of research on women's issues, sociological enquiries, etc. This element of knowledge should help in gaining a better understanding of what women really want.

14. The obstacles are inherent in the societies in which women evolve and in women themselves. Our societies need democracy and freedom in order to evolve. As for women, they must overcome an age-old fear to learn to organize themselves and struggle for their rights. This is not the case today.

15. I am not a specialist in predicting the future. The Arab feminist movements have not yet future outside pluralism and democracy. This is a meeting ground. The Algerian experience has proved it in the course of a decade of violence. Violence has been a powerful brake on the development of the feminist movement which really started organizing from 1989. Everything was put on hold following the events, and the women's movement drew back in its claims for women's rights. Peace and democracy are factors that would not allow it to build itself a bit more, and to deepen its claims.

If we could change one element in this situation, it would be in the functioning of these organizations. Women's organizations must prove their rejection of the authoritarianism that is within them, and function in a democratic manner. For this to happen, one has to hope for and imagine a functioning based on the participation of the greatest number of activists, and not at the top of the hierarchy only. If organizations do not pay attention to their whole membership, then they will nurture the indifference of the majority, and become empty shells.

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Translated from Arabic by Lynn Maalouf

1. That the voice of women, their concerns and ideas are now in the forefront of the public sphere; and that the hidden potentialities of women have been discovered beyond imaginations, beyond what the women's movement anticipated. Another great achievement has been that women are allowed to join the public sphere, starting with education and going on to politics.

Their greatest failure is the fact that they have not been able to find a culturally relevant discourse concerning the private sphere and to empower women ‘within it, not against it’. As a key concept for describing and understanding Arab family relations and structures of power and empowerment, ‘patriarchy’ is not appropriate. Yet the Arab women’s movement has failed to introduce another conceptual frame of analysis.

2. My position is that this is the way the Arabic women’s movement has been and is portrayed. But there are other histories, and Islamist women and men were always a part of the movement. If we review history we can see this. Of course there were those who saw Islam as a challenge, but I claim they were a small minority. Even Qassim Amin is now being re-read, and the Islamic component of his ideas recovered. We should avoid the ideological classifications and over-politicization of stances that have dominated this debate for so long.

3. My answer is short and affirmative: I do not see any spread of fundamentalism in the negative sense. These trends are strong, but they are NOT spreading. I see a mainstream that is re-discovering the liberalization potential of Islam. And I see Islam as susceptible — like any other religion or frame of reference — to being abused at times by certain trends. But the issue for me is clear: religion is about dignity and equality, and Islam is the basis of Arab culture and women’s liberation.

4. I celebrate pluralism. So I ask you, where is the problem? Women have the right to choose which avenue of participation they would like to join, and the road should be wide open. On the contrary I do not think putting all women on one path is useful. We realize justice through participation, not by talking about liberation.

5. Yes, but towards more Islamization; and here I mean towards greater justice. It is a must to do proper politics. This is one part of a wider movement for religious reformation that actually seeks the understanding of the holy text, towards a more authentic view of the Islamic Sharia, one that goes beyond inherited faith without either attacking it or ignoring its social contributions throughout history. This should aim at fostering the family, not destroying it.

6. Yes. But the question is on what basis? If the basis of our approach is Western secular feminism then we would just be spreading and fostering Western feminism. I think we should build on a mutual Islamic identity; or the common potential of the progressive role of religions in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. We need to transpose our modes of thinking beyond the polarization that has dominated for the past century, and come together to appreciate our heritage, religious identity, and different ideologies, cultures and ideas. We are still very divided from other women of the East, and this factor that has come into the picture is that states are building bridges with secular feminisms, and against Islamic movements of liberation. The sad truth is that attacking religion has become their mutual objective, at the price of a withering away of democratic concerns.

7. What has stopped the spread of this struggle is precisely an alien discourse that marginalizes religion or attacks it as only a ‘patriarchal’ mode of culture.

8. Without doubt the Arab women’s movement should adopt more democratic structures and methods. Of course. But this can only happen if they are ready for democratic change that includes the whole society, and for cooperation with mainstream Islamic movements that are sometimes more democratic than progressive voices and circles.

9. Sometimes they have destroyed them, and this is what has deprived them of credibility in many
Munira Fakhro: PhD Columbia University (1987), in social policy planning and administration. Visiting Scholar at Columbia (1987), in social policy, planning and administration. The Association for Historical Dialogue and Research (AHDAR) was established from political movements and social liberation started its movement towards modernization in the 19th century, earlier than any other Arab country. The Association for Historical Dialogue and Research (AHDAR) was established in Bahrain in 1928. However, there was no women’s movement in the Gulf region until the ‘50s when the first women’s society was established; in the ‘60s and ‘70s women joined underground political parties in Bahrain and started their movement within their ranks.

In my view, the greatest achievement of the women’s movements in my view are: political divisions; Western funding of specific agendas; and political authoritarianism. Give Islam more weight, give democracy more importance, and give the silent majority of women more opportunity and attention.

Women’s movements are an essential part of civil society, which is considered the pillar of democracy.

Munira Fakhro: Women’s participation is an integral part of any political change, starting with the women’s movements and reaching the people and their demands. Women’s participation is an essential part of any real political change, starting with the women’s movements and reaching the people and their demands.

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