

of the official school curriculum. Algerian Berbers are calling for a similar solution. Since the UN's charter upholds the rights of minorities, it may eventually pressure countries to treat minorities as equal citizens.

11. Although Arab countries are not politically unified, the term 'Arab world' is common usage everywhere. 'Arab feminism' varies in degree, not in kind, according to the pace of development in each individual country. The Arab Human Development Report (2002), published by the UNDP, stresses the fact that Arab women suffer from many kinds of discrimination, including in the field of education, with nearly 60 million women illiterate. I believe that we should not avoid the term 'Arab feminism' because, whether we like or not, the world looks at us as one entity.

12. The UN Decade for Women has helped the Arab women's movement to a great extent. International conferences have strengthened women's movements in general, starting from the first conference held in Mexico (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), Beijing (1995), and Beijing+5 (New York, 2000). All those conferences have stressed gender equality. Many Arab women's organizations as well as individuals took part in these conferences. They learned a great deal from them, such as techniques of successful organization. They used UN recommendations as guidance in their local projects, and on how to lobby governments on women's issues such as reforming family law.

13. It is true that the number of women professionals and scholars in the Arab region is expanding, but the number of illiterate women is also increasing. As a consequence, Arab society is being polarized between those who are pushing for modernity and gender equality, and those who oppose any change in the status quo. This situation creates a dilemma among professionals and scholars. However they are trying to organize their efforts to represent the situation of women, and to overcome the many obstacles facing women through conducting research.

14. There are two main obstacles: the first is the authoritarian regimes that dominate the majority of Arab countries; the second is the extremist conservative movements which create more terror than the regimes. These two forces prevent Arab liberal movements from attaining any kind of reform.

15. To create a more democratic atmosphere in the women's organizations would be my first priority. Then to change some old faces who have stayed at the top of their organizations for decades, and to replace them with new, capable women. This also depends on the general situation in each individual country. As I said earlier, the authoritarian regimes will resist any change, and are apprehensive of the 'domino effect' that might occur if reform is introduced in any sector, leading to the collapse of the whole regime.

Email: mf258@batelco.com.bh

Suad el-Geddy:

Director of the Women's Forum for Research and Training, Taez, Yemen.

Translated from Arabic by Lynn Maalouf

1. I believe that women's groups in the Arab world have not yet reached the point of forming a movement in its full sense; at this point, they are still local groups that do not have a unified approach, and do not agree on specific demands or even specific goals. They have not benefited from previous experiences, except in taking the name 'movement' from these formations. I believe that this is the greatest failure of the Arab women's movements so far. There are several other problems, especially with regards to the leaderships of women's groups, some of whom are members of Arab governments. These flaws will last as long as the way that Arab governments deal with their societies, including women's organizations, remains unchanged.

2. This accusation is not directed only at women's movements but at all human rights' organizations that have emerged in Arab countries, because of their great reliance on the experiences of other people, including in the West. This accusation is justified in that their concepts and methods are copied from others as is, without integrating them into the specificities of their societies' cultures. The leaders of these movements are responsible for adapting these principles to those of their societies, and for translating them into local terminology so as not to arouse fear, and so that we can achieve the results we all aim at, namely equality, justice, security, safety and democracy for all. If we cannot work with these

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methods, then these have to be adapted to each society without hindering the goals, which are the claims of all sectors of society.

3. The rise of Islamic and political fundamentalisms stems from various factors, including repression, containment, backwardness, ignorance, poverty, and non-respect for dissenting views: in other words, the lack of democracy as a way of addressing a unified society. It is no surprise that all Arab countries should suffer from a rising wave of fundamentalism, because these societies do not enjoy a real democracy. This fundamentalist rise is detrimental not only to women's organizations but affects society as a whole, threatening to have a negative impact on all those who call for rights and for a dignified life, because they do not trust dissenting opinions, whether of men or women or any social sector. As for religions in general, there are thinkers who can adapt the notions and meanings of religion to the variables of life in such a way that they do not represent an obstacle to society, including to women. But if we continue to follow antiquated notions unadapted to our age, devised by thinkers of another age, this is detrimental to society in general, and to women in particular. In Islam for example, an issue that can be debated is any related to jurisprudence. Only the basics that relate to man's relation to God are not debatable. I believe that if there are religious clerics who are knowledgeable and experienced, and who understand the demands of our age, they could introduce positive changes for human rights in general, and for women's rights. So we should interact with such people, and attract them to the cause of women's rights.

4. The variety of women's activities is a positive thing in itself. It would be a mistake, however, not to distinguish between this kind of work, and the women's movement in general. It is good that women are participating in social and developmental efforts but we should not identify the women's movement with these efforts. The women's movement should have a prominent role, based on a specific ideology, to which all women adhere, and from which they develop their demands to the local and international community, and work towards securing these demands through unified means. This is because the women's movement should aim at introducing positive change in culture, policies and direc-

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tions that are detrimental to women and their rights. The women's movement cannot be limited to such activities.

5. We still need, and will continue to need, a lot of struggle to amend the family code and personal status code, as well as all laws that were drawn up in the past and do not accord with the spirit of the present age, using new methods. Whatever means and resources are available have to be used. As for those that are not available, we should work to make them available.

6. We need to learn from the experiences of the East, the West, and of other women - not import and imitate them as they are. We have to make use of the experience of those women who have moved ahead of us in their struggle to secure their rights, so that we take from their experience what we can use in our Arab society. We could thereby attract supporters, instead of opponents who take the pretext that we are imitating the West or the East. So the issue is not the source of experience. Rather the problem lies in ourselves, that we have not been able to use these experiences for the benefit of our own struggle.

7. This was one of the causes of failure of past women's movements that died without any achievements at the popular level. These movements relied on educated women, and restricted the debate on women's rights to educated circles, as if these rights that were being fought for concerned only educated women, and this is why the ideas were those of the educated class exclusively. This is why the movement never involved any women beyond the elite. I am one of those who call for the need to reach all women, especially because we in the Arab world have a majority of illiterate and rural women, and nothing prevents us from assimilating rural and non-educated women into women's movements, so that they will increase trust in their role in society, and work for equality and justice for all sectors of society.

8. Yes, this is true. We see a lot of women's organizations run by women who were elected when these organizations were first founded, and who have remained presidents for an unlimited term. This is due to the lack of awareness about the need for true democracy in the Arab countries, which has its effects on these organizations, as well as other civil society organizations. Also,

these leaders do not see the need to change leaderships on a regular basis.

9. No, we don't see any real efforts for change, whether at the level of gender roles, or at the level of family or society. This is partly due to the lack of awareness and full understanding of these notions on the part of the women who lead the organizations, so that these notions remain limited to certain sectors of society, and fail to reach to a majority. It is also due to the use of a Western terminology that is not adapted to a society that from the beginning is resistant to anything Western. The leaders of women's organizations need to work on this, without altering the basics of the issue, however.

10. The minorities in the Arab world that do not use the Arabic language are subject to the culture they live in. The important thing is that those like women, who are demanding their rights and freedoms, should extend their call to all sectors of society, because what is at issue are rights that cannot be more for some than for others. I don't think that there are rights specific to Arabic-speaking individuals and others for those who don't speak Arabic, so we have to respect human rights and the call for equality and justice.

11. There is nothing wrong in having women in the Arab world create a movement of their own. There is nothing shameful in it. What would be shameful would be to work for women's interests alone, not for society as a whole. We cannot call for rights and for change for women only, without looking at society, because it is society that is responsible for this lack of freedoms and rights. The Arab women's movement needs to adopt broad social rights in their call for justice, equality, safety and security; only then can it attract supporters from all sectors of society.

12. The United Nations and its agencies have generated much positive change for women around the world, including women in the Arab world. The problem lies in the Arab governments who fail to carry out the international conventions and resolutions. There is a need to develop the United Nations' resources for greater effectiveness, and force the states that refuse to implement these conventions to respect them.

13. The increasing number of women researchers and experts in the Arab world is a natural result of the leap in education. But these researchers can

only have an impact on the women's movement if they make the same demands. These women have to be assimilated into these organizations, which can only happen if the movements adopt the demands of women in all sectors. We cannot oblige experts and researchers to work in women's movements if they feel no allegiance to them, so the question is how to create feelings of allegiance among these women.

14. We can classify the challenges and obstacles as following: First, internal obstacles within the movement such as isolation and fear of using others' experiences, and the inability of women leaders to accompany change and progress; the lack of a clear vision and goals, and consequently the lack of clarity about the work to be done. There is a confusion prevailing in the activities of organizations that call themselves a movement.

Second, external obstacles: society is not ready to accept the women's movements' demands; the lack of true democracy in Arab societies; the spread of religious fanaticism and political radicalism; and male-dominated societies that accept no relinquishing of their privileges.

15. If I were able to change one factor, I would work first on developing a clear vision and clear goals for the women's movements, so that women's demands are linked to, and unified with, the demands of society as a whole, that is justice, equality, safety and security.

Email: suadwf@y.net.ye

Raufah Hassan:

Al-Sharki Professor of Gender in/and Media, Sanaa University, Yemen.

1. In my view the greatest achievement so far has been the space taken by women in the public sphere. The greatest failure has been women's lesser empowerment in the private sphere, where they continue to be socially and legally under the control of men.

2. This charge is largely justified in my view for both sides: concerning the conservatives forces because they put all their efforts into fighting radical Western feminism, and place all western women's movement in one basket; and concern-

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ing the Arab women's movements because they spend more time on defending themselves and trying to prove their independence of them. The best response should be in the recognition of similarities and differences wherever they may apply. It's important to create linkages with supporting forces inside our societies, as well as with outsiders, whether Westerners or from other parts of the world.

3. Several factors have led to the spread of religious fundamentalism in the Arab region, among them the failure of state-directed development. Equally important is the unresolved conflict in the Middle East, in addition to the support of the United States and some Arab governments for the Islamic groups during the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Religious revivalism does not really threaten the Arab women's movements — on the contrary, it has put back in the front line of discussion women's main objectives, equality in both public and private spheres, particularly among lower middle class women. The experience of women in Iran and Sudan make us believe that some of women's rights can be achieved through advanced understanding of the dynamics of religion interacting with other social and economic factors.

4. If the old ways did not give the desired results, new ways will do no harm. Good or bad is a value that differs according to the position one takes. In my view this fragmentation is a reflection of today's social reality in the region more than any thing else.

5. Laws have never brought solutions for women in the region. They change too easily in accordance with the mentalities of governing forces. New Arab women's movements will lead a new struggle.

6. The new Arab women's movements do not look to the West for models. The West is led now by the United States, which is not a heaven for women rights. The old women's movement is no longer a force able to play a leading role in the region. Other universal forces beyond the division West and East are emerging to take their place, and to find new ways and theories to solve their problems.

7. The new Arab women's movements are mainly led by educated urban women from the lower classes, unlike the old movement leader-

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ship that came from the upper and upper middle classes. The new movement is still in process of formation.

8. Yes, they should be more democratic in both structures and practices.

9. Very few have been able to do so.

10. The policy of the women's movement toward non-Arabic speaking minorities has been different according to the status of the minority. Minorities linked to Europe in nationality or religion have been involved in women's movements in some countries; minorities of African origin have not been involved in most cases. The old Arab women's movement cannot change its attitude in this matter, while the new movement is not clear yet.

11. Problems of terminology will continue no matter what term we are using. But the term 'feminism' is widely contested in the region and is more misleading than 'Arab women'.

12. It has helped in putting the issue of women on the political agendas of states.

13. The expansion of women professionals and scholars has not so far had a clear effect on the women's movements, but the development of the new women's movement is the direct result of this rapid expansion. Its full results will come in the near future when they find their own voice and way.

14. The greatest obstacles to the growth and development of the movement today is, first, the total confusion between old and new methods of approaching women's issues; and second, not having answers to the problems of every day life.

15. I would have them involve men in every institution possible, bring them into the movement, and not to be alone.

Email: raufah@hotmail.com

Rana Ahmed Hussein:

Reporter for The Jordan Times English daily, and human rights activist.

1. Women's movements' achievements vary from one Arab country to the other. However, I would

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