

say that in general there has been an increase in Arab women's awareness about their rights and issues. On many occasions, certain movements in certain countries forced governments to take action and make some change in favor of women, even though it was not always enough. One example is Egypt. Many women's groups and individuals united their efforts with the government to fight the harmful practice of female circumcision. Although government statistics show that the number of people resorting to this practice has remained unchanged since recording first began, still the issue has been brought to the surface in all its aspects, and people are talking about it. The same happened with 'crimes of honor' in Jordan. Women's groups and individuals worked hard at one point in time to press the government to take action against these killings and to change the laws that offer leniency to killers. Many changes resulted, such as open discussion of a once taboo issue, changing some laws, and a proposal to establish a women's shelter. Amendments in the Civil and Personal laws were achieved in Egypt and Jordan, guaranteeing some measure of justice to women. The *khula'* law was introduced in both countries, and ended the sufferings of women who spent countless years in courts fighting for a divorce that they could not get. In Yemen, even though the women's movement was relatively new and commanded few resources, yet they held several workshops to tackle domestic violence, and worked on rehabilitating female prisoners.

Several women's organizations have devoted their work to helping women prisoners, and exposing the violence which they allegedly suffer from prison officials. They also collect donations to provide women prisoners with basic needs lacking in prisons, and have launched several campaigns exposing violence against women, and to fight the 'house of obedience' (*beit at-ta'a*). The movement succeeded in temporarily freezing the application of the 'house of obedience' custom after winning the support of the Yemeni president. However some Yemeni deputies later managed to revive the issue and passed a law in parliament without the knowledge of the women's movement. Activists blamed this on the absence of women deputies in the Lower House.

Lebanese women's organizations have also focused much of their work on violence against women, and have succeeded in changing some

of the laws that relate to violence against women, especially honor crimes.

However, I would say that the inconsistency of the women's movement in some major issues has reflected negatively on them and on their efforts. I perceive that some women's and other organization's work is 'seasonal' and lacks persistence and continuity. Also many organizations lack the skill, or maybe the concern, to keep track of what politicians promise women and what they actually do. Politicians make glowing promises to women that they will call for gender equality, improve women's lives and fight against discrimination, but once they reach office their promises remain ink on paper. Other factors that hold back the women's movements include poverty, illiteracy and unemployment in the Arab world in general, and among women in particular. I believe that the absence or low percentage of women in Arab legislative bodies, when they exist, and women's slight presence in decision-making positions, are also factors that work against women.

2. Of course this charge is not justified. Conservatives in all Arab countries use this excuse to abort any improvement or change in favor of women, so as to perpetuate their control over women in their societies. Conservatives simply do not want to lose power, and they like exercising it over women. This is why they fight and resist change - they are afraid of losing power.

The best response is for the women's movements to close their ears, and continue with what they believe is the right thing to do.

3. I believe the factors are closely related to people's financial and social situation. Poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and inadequate knowledge of the true teachings of religion play a major role in spreading fundamentalisms in all religions. Oppressive regimes and the media in some countries contribute to this phenomenon by manipulating what people see, and preventing them from expressing their feelings and thoughts, or taking their own decisions. Fundamentalisms do indeed threaten the women's movement because many extremist religious leaders claim that its leaders are backed by the West, and that they are going against the teaching of religion. In some instances they issue rulings that have no connection whatsoever with what a religion really says. They manage to convince people that women's movements

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are really working against their societies because they are adopting Western ideas.

I believe that all religions can make positive contributions to the advancement of women's status and rights if discourse is controlled by moderate religious leaders, who would not twist religion to benefit their interests instead of the general interest.

4. I believe this work is very important and needs to be carried out consistently. As I said before, these services are badly needed in some parts of the Arab world, especially in rural and impoverished areas where women need most help. I noticed that most social work is concentrated in the cities.

5. Of course, because most family laws - they have different names in different Arab countries - contain many clauses that are discriminatory, and that I feel are meant to control and restrict women. It is very important for women to continue to concentrate on this area because more equal laws would mean more freedom for women and less oppression. This would ensure women's better status, and earn them more respect in their families and communities. Without this they will always be looked at by their families as the weaker side of the family, and this is not good for women's mentality, self-image and status, whether in their family or in society at large.

6. I believe it is very important for the Arab women's movement to establish relations with women's movements worldwide, because the women of each country have a different experience, and a different way to deal with their problems. It is very important to examine stories of success and failure in different societies, and to learn from their experiences for their own future work.

7. This is a general judgment. In some countries women in urban areas are major players in their communities. The problem is, of course, lack of resources. Women who have more resources have better opportunities in life, eg. better education, and more freedom to travel and be exposed to other cultures and experiences.

8. Of course. This has been part of the problem for the Arab women's movement in general. Many leaders refuse to let go of their positions, and remain at their posts for the longest time. If they ever happen to lose a post, they shift to

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another one at another organization, or start a new organization so as to remain in charge. As I said before, this restricts diversity within organizations, and restricts opportunities and ideas to a single person. We only need look at our situation in the Arab world, and see how far have we gone as nations, to know that this policy of non-elected and non-accountable leaders will not take us very far.

9. Women's movements have worked on this issue, but the problem is that there is so much that needs to be changed in laws and social attitudes towards women. In addition, some women's organizations had other priorities. I know of many Arab women activists and Arab families in general who paid attention to this problem, and are bringing up their daughters and sons on an equal basis. Of course the number is not large, but this is a good start.

10. The women's movements should be sensitive to all minorities within their country, because these share the same society, and may need help or assistance, but have no channel to express their demands. Any individual who lives in any society should be treated as a citizen of that society.

12. I believe that UN agencies, especially UNIFEM, have played a vital role in developing Arab women's societies, exposing many of the problems they face, and helping them in various ways. These agencies have conducted valuable research and studies, and come up with important findings that can be used to prove certain arguments. They have also conducted programs in remote areas, in Jordan, Yemen and Morocco, to empower women economically, and helped raise their legal awareness. But I believe that these organizations, with the resources they have, can contribute more to our societies, and I know that they realize this and are working towards achieving it.

13. I believe this increase has been one of the pillars of the women's movement. The visible activities and positive presence of these professionals and scholars has made many young women adopt them as role models, and encouraged them to work hard on themselves to be as successful and effective as these women are.

14. I believe poverty, illiteracy and unemployment among women are some of the main obstacles. Women's absence from the political

scene also prevents them from taking part in the decision-making process. I also feel that many women do not believe in themselves or in other women, and are blocking the path of women's development as well as their own. We also see the same faces appearing in gatherings and conferences over and over. New blood needs to be pumped into the women's movement in order for new leaders to carry the message to their communities, and to younger generations.

Another obstacle, as I see it, is that work is focused on developing women and their status. The women's groups mostly neglect to work with men and raise their awareness of the importance of women's issues, and to see women as their partners instead of their competitors.

15. Electing the leaders of women's societies and NGOs and liberating them from some of the unnecessary bureaucracies they are currently adopting.

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1. We cannot talk of a homogeneous Arab women's movement, carrying out carefully planned goals and common achievements. Each Arab region has its own context, and each Arab country has its own specificities. Despite the common factors - the most important being language, religion and history - we cannot consider that women's movements in the North African countries can be compared with those in the Gulf, for example.

The women's movement as a movement with its own dynamics emerged in the early 20th century, in the countries that had close cultural interactions with the West, in particular Egypt and Bilad al-Sham, especially Lebanon. Several pioneering women deployed serious efforts towards securing the minimum of women's rights, such as the right to education, to work,

and later to vote. It is also worth noting that these women were from the aristocracy, and because they were Francophone or English - educated and were familiar with the status of European women, they felt the need to improve the status of women in their own societies, even if their efforts did not reach beyond their own social class.

As for the other Arab countries, this movement came at a later stage and often emerged from within and through political regimes, to serve the latter's goals. This was especially the case in those countries that had adopted socialist doctrines and one-party rule. As for the Gulf countries, the women's movements only emerged recently to demand the rights that other Arab women had secured decades earlier. Despite the many achievements that Kuwaiti women were able to secure in various sectors, they, along with women from other Gulf countries, failed to secure their right to vote. This is a good illustration of the relation between the development of women's movements and the political and social environment, including society's level of openness.

Thus we find numerous differences in the situations and contexts of the Arab women's movements, and as a result, differences in what they have achieved and what they have failed to achieve. In general, the common achievement, which is the basic minimum, is the right to education and to work. The greatest failure is that they have not managed to bring about the amendment of the personal status code, which would have led to improving women's legal situation, and thereby forging stability of the family and of society.

2. This question already implies a position, and asks, "What is the best answer to this accusation?" What if I agree with the conservative forces?! In any case, there is no doubt that the Arab women's movements have been influenced by the 'Western feminist movement', especially since, as I mentioned before, they emerged as a result of interaction with the West, hence the actual model for the 'liberated' woman was no other than the Western woman.

As for the extent of this influence, its scope and persistence, it differs between one movement and another, and between one society and another. It is also related to the movement's intel-

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lectual, political and economic affiliations. It is worth noting that the course of Western women's movements is entirely different from that of their Arab counterparts. In the West, the feminist movement emerged as a result of several factors, the most important being the industrial revolution and the ensuing socio-economic changes, the world wars with their destructive impact on family and society, as well as the intellectual and philosophical trends that surfaced in the mid-20th century, especially existentialism, which led Western women to organize themselves along a continuous course. So Western feminist movements resulted from a variety of interacting factors. Obviously, it was not a homogeneous movement, as there were various parties and trends, some moderate and some radical, and many revisions and changes were introduced (especially within the radical wing).

The Arab women's movements - just like many other things in our societies - emerged as a result of Western influence, and of what Western women had been struggling for and had achieved. But the Arab movements did not have situations comparable to the West, and we did not have a continuous drive leading to anything in particular. There was always the force of tradition, the supremacy of the Western model and the need to emulate it. So far, very few Arab women's movements have been able to overcome tradition or imitation; a lot of them still represent an extension of patriarchal, male-dominated thought that has no relation whatsoever with feminist thought.

3. The Islamic movements are not one and homogeneous, any more than women's movements are. There are various movements with differing directions, ranging from the most backward to the most open and contemporary.

The main reason, I believe, for the rise of religious movements was the failure of nationalist and socialist ideologies, and their inability to achieve their slogans and goals. In addition, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the continued bias towards Israel of the West generally and the United States in particular, has made the Arab peoples lose all trust in the West, and pushed them to turn more and more towards their past, which helps them evade a harsh reality. When the Arab individual loses all faith in life and his daily means of survival, when he loses his freedom of expression, and everything he strives to do is negated,

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the only safe haven he finds is religion. The fact is that others - organizations, rulers and the new imperialist forces - have not left him anything but that margin in order to carry on his life and feel that he exists.

As to the question whether this rise of religion threatens the Arab women's movements, this reverts to the movement itself. If it stays elitist and isolates itself from the pulse of the street and people's real worries, then of course it will be isolated and fail.

But if one examines the positive aspects of this religious revival, and if you discuss with Islamic activists issues concerning women, this would yield important results, as we would understand that there are many important opportunities in Islam to guarantee women's rights. Realizing this depends on the vision and program of the party that interprets Islam, and its position on women. So this can only happen from the inside and through dialogue, not through alienation and estrangement.

4. The proliferation of activities and types of professionalism in the Arab women's movements is not negative. On the contrary, it is healthy and necessary, so that the movement will no longer be confined to the realm of words but become active on the ground, especially because women's issues interact with a number of 'sectors', and cannot be isolated as a single factor in society. Also, the reality of our Arab society is harsh and painful, and needs a lot of effort to push it forward.

5. Of course. Carrying out the necessary amendments in family and personal status codes is probably one of the Arab women's movements' priorities. But this must be done with cooperation with all sides, and without provocation. We should work in a carefully thought-out way that does not conflict with the Islamic *Shari'a*. I feel that there is no contradiction in saying this. We can achieve much without falling into a violation of Islam. We have important experiences, such as in Iran, where women were able to secure rights that Arab women could not dream of, and all this in the context of an Islamic regime. Unfortunately there is no space here to enter into the relevant details.

6. If the Arab women's movements wanted to be in harmony with their environment, and really to

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