

be active, they would have to open up to non-Arab Islamic women's movements. This would enable them to take advantage of the latter's experiences, and to get out of the shaky situation they find themselves in with regard to women in our Arab societies, and their failure to make any worthwhile achievements. In Pakistan, Turkey, Bangladesh and Indonesia, women have succeeded in becoming prime ministers, leaders of political parties (both loyalist and opposition), whereas until now this has not happened in any Arab country. Also, the recent important achievement in Iran in amending the personal status code - as I mentioned above - represents a model and experience that could be taken advantage of. There is no problem in using both Western and Eastern experiences, while taking into consideration the cultural specificities of our own societies as well as to be open to recent achievements in the West.

7. It is only natural that the leaders of Arab women's movements are mostly educated, urban women from the middle to upper classes. This is mainly so because the struggle can only be carried on if it is accompanied by awareness, education and intellectual openness, and these qualities are more to be found among urban educated women. In the 1970s and 1980s education for girls in Arab countries began to expand, and by the 1990s the level had reached its highest point so far, though with variations between one Arab country and another. This led to the rise of a new group of activists within the women's movements. Unfortunately however, despite the progress achieved, illiteracy is still high in the Arab world, especially among women in rural areas. As for obstacles to the spread of the women's struggle to all social classes: when a woman is under the pressure of poverty and illiteracy, she doesn't have time to think about the struggle to secure her rights. She needs - just as men do - a minimum level of decent living.

Change does not seem to be achievable in the short-term, especially in face of economic globalization and International Monetary Fund recommendations, which rule out any social guarantees, and leave citizens facing their fate on their own. One of the most dangerous results of this trend is the disappearance of the middle class, which is generally the most stable and active class, and the division of society into only two classes: the rich who do not care about what

goes on around them, and the very poor who hardly know what is going on.

8. Arab women's organizations are a reflection of political and cultural (if it exists) life in the Arab world. All parties, whether loyalist or oppositionist, have leaders who are not elected and, as such, they practise power in a dictatorial way. I do not know whether it is possible for women's organization leaders to overcome the reality surrounding them and be more democratic. Certainly if they want to be a vanguard, and more effective, they should do this.

9. I am surprised at the way so many Arab women's movements adopt the notion of gender without even debating it. I think it needs a lot of debate, especially since it originated in an entirely different culture from our own, and is the result of a post-modern stage in the West, where all the values, thoughts and paradigms have fallen one by one, so that people are left in a world devoid of values and morality. This represents a leap above our cultural specificities, and serves to heighten the isolation of Arab women's discourse.

10. I don't know what the policies of Arab women's movements are with regard to minorities. I have not monitored this issue, and have no information about it. But what should these policies be? They really should not be different from their work with the majority, because women's problems are one, and their issues are similar among the majority and the minority, whether this is religious, or racial, or national, taking into consideration that minorities often suffer from isolation and discrimination. I believe that if women's conditions improve in society as a whole, or if there is an amendment of the laws, then this will reflect positively on everyone.

11. As I said in the beginning, there is not one Arab, homogenous women's movement, but several movements. It is important to note that the expression 'Arab feminist movement' is different from 'Arab women's movement'. Feminism is a trend that originated in Europe (I talked about it earlier in answering question 2), that struggles for equality between men and women, and sometimes calls for the superiority of women over men, and 'feminizing the world'. Of course, not all women's movements in the Arab world agree with this; some do not believe in male/female equality and refuse the idea from the beginning. I do not think there is an 'Arab

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homogeneity' and generalization will not help us in realizing achievements. It is true that the cause of Arab women is homogeneous as far as the fundamental facts, but the approach and tools of work can differ, as well as priorities, between one Arab country and another.

12. From the beginning the impact of the UN Decade for Women was limited to official delegations, since it gave them the responsibility of representing Arab women, and of participating in the various conferences. The last of these, the Beijing conference, led to some studies and statistics. Today, the circle of influence has started to expand a little, and a few notions and issues are being activated, such as violence against women and reproductive health.

But I believe that we have to remain cautious, because the priorities of international organizations may differ from our priorities, and their approach to women's issues may also differ, since they originate mainly from Western societies. We should not repeat everything they say in parrot-fashion, nor should we adopt everything they demand without thought. The minimum level of respect for our national and cultural specificity demands a careful revision of what emerges from international organizations, so that we should adopt it only when it suits our societies and helps our women improve their status, but firmly refuse it when it contradicts our values, such as the call to legitimize adoption, or legalize homosexuality, and allow marriage between homosexuals.

13. This is a very positive development, since research and specialization are the right way to help women achieve their goals. They must themselves conduct research into different aspects of women's situation, and try to discover solutions to women's social problems. Women researchers should make more effort to coordinate their work, so as to benefit from a variety of approaches and fields of expertise, and to avoid duplication.

14. I believe that the greatest obstacle facing Arab women's movements today is the patriarchal system that runs deep in our Arab societies, and prevails among women as much as men. No one should believe that religion is responsible for this situation; rather, it is the wrong interpretation of religion and the faulty use of religious texts that serve the system, which dates back to thousands of years. This original

patriarchy and the faulty religious interpretations together form traditions and customs that are very resistant to change.

15. In light of the political, military, economic instability prevailing in most Arab countries, discussion of the future of the women's movements should foresee a difficult future. Despite this, I believe that the women's cause is making progress, even though slowly. One proof of this is that younger generations (both male and female) are much more aware of women's rights, and practise them more.

It is not enough to work on women alone; this change has to happen among both men and women. Work on awareness has to be conducted with both sexes, because women's cause cannot be isolated from society as a whole.

If I wanted to change anything in the Arab women's movements, it would be to give the opportunity to younger generations to participate and have a role. I would also try to give an enlightened role to men and cooperate with them, and rely on the practice of democracy to infuse some new blood into these movements, which are suffering from stagnation.

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1. a) Achievements always have multiple sources of input. The achievements of the Arab women's movement have been multifaceted, but among the most visible is the high development of education among women in a selected sector of Arab societies and as a result the entry of women into critical professions.

b) Failure: While the responsibility for failures cannot be attributed only to the women's movement, one must say generically the lack of equal citizenship for women in terms of suffrage, voter participation, election/appointment to high political office, and the rights of women to pass citizenship on to their children and spouses. Under this umbrella, I would put the inability to produce civil personal status laws in most Arab countries.

Parallel to this, are the problems of addressing poverty/health issues and the general education of the women not in the more advantaged sectors of society.

2. First, the Arab women's movement is over a century old and has its own history which has long been in conversation with Western feminist movements. Second, we should not overlook the influence, in complex ways, of the Arab women's movement on Western feminism. Western feminism developed with a gaze – a gaze on the East. For better or worse, Western feminism, in many ways, defined itself in relation to the Third World woman as “other”. As Aihwa Ong has pointed out, no category of Third World women has figured as large in the Western feminist imagination as Arab and Muslim women.

Third, few large movements of the past century can claim themselves to be purely culturally specific. We live in a global and globalizing world in which ideas as well as commodities and people travel. One has to ask why those same conservative forces who are concerned about Western influence in feminism seem unconcerned about Western influence on technology (if such a designation can be made for products that are developed all over the world). They seem to adopt the illusion that technology is innocent of culture. The assertion of cultural purity is a strategy for control over innovation and change. It cannot be allowed to preempt constructive dialogue and engagements across state boundaries.

3. Religious fundamentalism is spreading world wide. And world wide, it has a political arm. And world wide, it has made inroads into state power. One has only to look at the religious right in the US and in Israel. The fact that the West focuses on the rise of fundamentalism in the Arab world as if it were an exceptional situation has much to do with global politics which defines Islam globally and the Arab world in particular as the evil other. Power has the privilege of defining its enemy and naturalizing itself.

That said, it is important to look at the specificities of the rise of religious fundamentalism in the Arab region. Many scholars have offered plausible reasons for the rise of religious fundamentalism: the corruption and tyranny of Arab regimes; the corrupting uses of oil wealth; the alignment with the West of many Arab regimes, discredited by significant sectors of their own population;

the heavy-handed alignment of the West with Israel, seen as an occupying force; the economic instability, uneven social development, marginal political freedoms.

In principle, there should be room for women's emancipation within religious frameworks. The simultaneous embrace of Christianity and feminism by many Western women has not worried Western feminists as much as the simultaneous embrace of Islam and feminism by many Arab women. That in itself, is a worry. Many Muslim feminists have argued that Islam can and does offer women their rights and therefore religious revivalism should not threaten the Arab women's movement. Thus far, where it has taken power in the Arab region, or where it has comprised itself into a political movement, religious revivalism has either compromised women's emancipation or left many concerned about the constraints packaged with the liberties. While in principle there should be room for women's emancipation within religious frameworks, the path cut so far has proven difficult if not impossible to walk.

4. Pluralism is not only good, but it will happen regardless of our judgement. I would be worried about institutionalizing “activity police”. Women must work wherever they feel they can and want to. Who could possibly be the judge of the long term impact of the various kinds of work? What might appear to be simple acts can have far-reaching and important political consequences.

5. Family law must continue to be a high priority for the Arab women's movement. It is the lynch-pin, within the political arena, for most other legal constraints on women. Women's lack of full citizenship is linked to the ways in which family law defines them as subordinates to their male kin; their economic inequality is similarly rationalized in terms of their familial roles (deemed subordinate); and their control by patriarchal religious clerics is anchored in the power that religious institutions have over family law.

6. The Arab women's movement is already engaged with and networking with women's movements in the ‘East’ and ‘South’. This is important not only in the quest for alternative models and strategies for women's rights, but also for general social change. In a globalized world with one superpower, those outside the arena of power have been given two options –

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align with the power center or align with the de-centered. Non-alignment was itself a strategy for maneuvering. A bipolar world (us versus them) is not a better world. But when power centers impose those binary choices, those marginalized from power can concede power or creatively invent new alliances for power.

7. The Arab women's movement is not unlike the women's movements in most of the world which have attracted primarily women of educated classes. It is not unique in this regard. Where it differed was in countries with aggressive state - sponsored women's federations. What stops the struggle for women's rights from moving to other classes is that political struggle of all sorts may be a luxury of leisure and the privilege of certain historical moments. Other social classes are not flocking to labor movements either. To the degree they are ‘signing up’, it has been mainly the religious movements which have claimed their support. But even here, the ‘signing up’ in the sense of ‘active’ participation in a movement is not widespread. In addition, women who are struggling to feed their families and keep them alive often feel that gender issues are secondary to the issues of economic, political and health security. Even Western feminists struggle to link the economic, political, health issues with gender issues for women in less advantaged classes.

8. Sadly, as I have argued elsewhere, Arab women's movements often reproduce the hierarchical structures of their societies within their own feminist organizations.¹ To struggle for women's freedoms and rights but to not practise them within their own organizations suggests that the struggles are within the movement as well as outside of it.

9. Arab women's movement members do struggle to change relations within their societies and their families. It goes without saying that more needs to be done. I have argued elsewhere that there is a reluctance among Arab feminists to take on the family as an issue of inequality.² In some sense, literary figures have more dramatically taken on the family in the form of novels, movies and plays than has the women's movement as a ‘movement’. In part this reluctance is linked to the absence of viable alternatives to the family in Arab societies (other than religious alternatives), given the perceived distance, ineffectuality or repressiveness of many Arab states.

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How the family is to be addressed in Arab societies will have to be quite different from the way it has been addressed in Western societies by Western feminists. The specificity of that engagement is taking shape.

10. The Arab women's movement has tried to embrace ethnic and religious differences. This continues to be a task before the movement and is one of monumental importance. Law stands against these solidarities as the devolution of family law to the different religious sects in some countries often creates different legal realities for women of different religious sects. It is a challenge that must be faced.

11. Little is gained by avoiding the term feminism in the effort to avoid creating a false notion of Arab homogeneity. We use the term ‘Western feminism’ even though it is utterly the case that there are theoretical, political, and ethnic/religious/national differences among Western feminists. The term feminism is a strategic insertion on behalf of a cause. As long as we do not collapse all Arab women into a homogeneous category and as long as we are aware of the strategic use of all our terms (including the term ‘woman’ which is also homogenizing) – that is all we can do. Language cannot perfectly reflect our understanding of the world.

12. The UN Decade for women and its offshoot agencies (eg UNIFEM) have had an important impact on the Arab women's movement. First it made Arab governments pay attention and, for face saving, if nothing else, claim victories on behalf of women's rights. Second the Decade provided an arena, a set of fora for networking and developing bodies of knowledges about the conditions of women. Third, the UN Decade was the backdrop for various international conventions having to do with women's and children's rights that have provided a critical stage of activism on behalf of women. Fourth, the UN Decade made many of us aware of the similarities as well as the differences among women around the world that needed to be addressed.

13. The women's movement moves not only through the efforts of self-identified feminists, but through the efforts of all women who empower themselves. The increase of Arab women professionals will, de facto, change the gender equation in Arab societies, and is therefore most welcome.

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