

women's activism and is leading the movement to a better future.

14. The political regimes prevalent in the region, and absence of democracy; leaders for life; gaps between old leaders and young ones; lack of economic resources; lack of communication between local organizations; conflict and competition for funding from donors.

15. Organizations should encourage each other's work, adopt more democracy, and widen participation and coordination in order to create a strong women's movement.

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### Valentine Moghadam:

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1. Forming organizations and raising public awareness, including governmental understanding, of women and gender issues – especially as regards nationality rights, family laws, honor killings/domestic violence, and political participation – have constituted the greatest achievement thus far. Of course, women's movements have had varying degrees of success cross-nationally. The greatest failures have been the lack of coordination, cooperation, and coalition-building across the region (and sometimes even within a country), and lack of participation in transnational feminist networks.

2. The charge is not justified. First, there is no unitary 'Western feminism'; the history of feminism and women's movements in the West (first- and second-wave) has been characterized by different priorities, strategies, discourses, and ideologies (eg. socialist, liberal, radical, Marxist, post-modernist feminisms). Second, feminism is a set of ideas concerning problems facing women (oppression, inequality, discrimination, second-class citizenship) and the means to achieve equality, empowerment, an expanded rights (eg. educational attainment, paid employment, legal equality, women's organizations, political representation); these ideas are found among women in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Arab region, Europe, and North America. Third, the United Nations Decade for Women and the

Beijing Platform for Action represent an international and cross-cultural consensus on women's 'critical areas of concern' and the means and mechanisms needed to achieve women's economic, social, and political empowerment. Fourth, Arab women have developed a number of priorities, strategies, discourses, and ideologies to draw attention to problems and to attain rights, including socialist, liberal, and Islamic feminisms – all of which, in my view, are presented in a distinctly Arab idiom.

3. In my view, Islamic fundamentalism is on the wane in most of the Arab region as a major oppositional political movement (although it is rising in other regions, e.g., sub-Saharan Africa and perhaps southeast Asia). It has been shown to be very violent in countries like Algeria and Egypt (and non-Arab countries like Afghanistan); where it has been in power, it has been unable to solve any major problems (e.g., Sudan). On the other hand, there is a strong strain of religious conservatism among Arabs (in contradistinction to Iranians), and this is of course a major threat to any of the 'new' social movements, such as women's movements and human rights movements. Any form of religious conservatism, whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, is often antithetical to progressive social movements.

No Islamist movement has produced anything resembling a theory or practice of democracy, human rights, or women's rights. On the other hand, Islam does have egalitarian and emancipatory elements to it, as do Christianity and Judaism (the other Abrahamic religions). For this reason, women have identified themselves with their religions – thus, Christian, Jewish, and now Islamic feminisms. What is clear, however, is that no religious state or religiously-based legal frameworks can provide equality for all citizens, because religions tend to favor their own and to privilege men over women. Islam, for example, at least as far as it is currently interpreted and practiced around the world, privileges Muslims over non-Muslims and men over women; hence the inequality of non-Muslims and of women in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, etc. The same goes for Judaism, hence the inequality of non-Jews and women in Israel.

It may be that the problem of Israel was one of the factors in the emergence and spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the Arab region (the other factors being political authoritarianism, the

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failures of economic development, and the emergence of 'public women', considered offensive by conservative men of the petty bourgeoisie). The solution to the problems of the region, however, is not religious revivalism but a rights-based development strategy and regional cooperation.

4. I think you mean Arab women's NGOs. Social movements tend to be diffuse and diverse, with various organizations undertaking different activities – all, however, directed towards the same goal. If Arab women's organizations within the broad Arab women's movement(s) are undertaking social work, adult literacy, research, legal counseling, etc., toward the goal of enhancing women's status and promoting their empowerment, then these diverse activities complement each other and have a positive cumulative effect. If, however, these activities are carried out in a routine and bureaucratic fashion, as a substitute for social-service delivery by the state rather than as a political act to empower women, then the activities serve to foster the state rather than women's empowerment.

5. Isn't there already struggle going on around this issue? Certainly this has been the case in Algeria and Morocco – and in Palestine, as well, until the second Intifada. Reform of family law is at the forefront of Arab women's movement demands, as it should be. Different movements have used different strategies – examples are the confrontational stance of Algerian feminists, the consensus-building strategy of Egyptian feminists, and the 'social dialogue' with the state in which Moroccan feminists participated.

6. I'm not convinced that Arab women's movements have looked to the West for models and affiliations, but they should in any event form relations with women's movements elsewhere. In fact, I believe that one weakness has been the lack of formal affiliation with transnational feminist networks – that is, those organizations that unite women from three or more countries around a common agenda, whether it be a feminist critique of economic policy, or Muslim women's human rights, or women's reproductive health and rights, or peace and conflict-resolution. Feminists in Africa, India, Pakistan, and Latin America are more deeply involved in TFNs (for example, they have regional offices as well as 'movement intellectuals') than are feminists in the Arab region.<sup>1</sup>

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7. Historically, women's rights/feminist movements have been middle-class movements. Working-class women are more likely to be involved in trade unions, where they try to raise feminist issues (e.g., women's equality and participation in decision-making in the unions, a better deal for women in the labor market, etc.). However, there have been alliances between feminists in women's organizations and women activists in trade unions in a number of countries (India, the US, European countries, Mexico). I believe that some cooperation in that area has occurred in Morocco and in Turkey. I believe there should be forums, meetings, or other activities to encourage dialogue between the middle-class women's organizations and the women trade unionists so that they can reach consensus on strategies for the realization of women's civil, political, and socio-economic rights.

8. Again, I believe you mean Arab women's organizations within the broader movement. I am not as familiar with decision-making processes in Arab women's NGOs as I am with other women's organizations (e.g., the TFNs that I have been studying). Certainly one of the defining features of women's organizations in the West has been their non-hierarchical structure and democratic form of decision-making. If the Arab women's organizations are personalist, and decision-making is unilateral, then that would reflect the larger society and existing political processes, wouldn't it? In any event, if the women's organizations regard themselves as part of the larger movement for democratization (as well as for women's rights) in the Arab region, then it is important that they adopt democratic structures and practices. This would help them develop theories of women's rights and democratization.

9. Change within the family is a good measure of the efficacy of the women's movement and the success of its members/activists. The extent of such change in the Arab region is an empirical question, and I don't have enough information about it to be able to comment on it. Have gender relations and practices changed in the Arab region, and is the Arab women's movement responsible for it? Certainly patriarchy is in crisis in the region, and has been for some time (hence the Islamist backlash), but that is largely the result of longer-term, structural changes such as women's educational attainment, lower fertility

rates, and their involvement in the public sphere. In some countries, however, the women's movement has raised public awareness about women's rights and gender relations in very visible ways – eg. in Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco (also Iran and Turkey, among non-Arab countries).

**10.** One of the deficiencies has been the neglect of issues pertaining to the rights of non-Arab or non-Muslim minorities. Also, the rights of migrant workers, and especially women migrant workers, should be promoted by the Arab women's organizations.

**11.** I'm not sure that there is an 'Arab feminism' in the sense of a homogeneous and undifferentiated women's movement across the region. Again, consider the differences between Algerian feminism and Egyptian or Syrian feminism. Algerian feminists are much more likely to use the language of modernity and of citizenship in their public pronouncements than are women activists in Egypt or Syria; and they have engaged in 'direct action' which we have not seen in Egypt or Syria. At the same time, there is a kind of 'Arab idiom' that is inevitable, given the region's history and culture. For example, Arab feminists are more likely to cooperate with men than are feminists in some other regions; they do not regard the family as the source of oppression, even though they call for the modernization of family laws; and they are not hostile to religion (as opposed to fundamentalist movements), as feminists in some other regions have been.

**12.** The UN Decade for Women exposed Arab women's organizations to international feminisms and allowed them to engage in some international networking. The International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in September 1994 had perhaps the greatest impact, in that it imparted to Arab women's organizations a forum and legitimacy. The Beijing Conference continued this process and provided sources of funding, additional opportunities for international networking, and a forum for the exchange of ideas and strategies for women's empowerment. UNIFEM may be regarded as a 'movement agency' in that its Executive Director comes out of the transnational women's movement and is committed to promoting women's rights across the world. European donor agencies also got involved in the UN Decade and the Beijing process, and they have been a source of

support (and funding) for women's organizations in the Arab region.

**13.** This can only have a positive effect, inasmuch as more women will become involved in the Arab women's movements.

**14.** Political obstacles: state repression and in some countries the influence of Islamist parties. Cultural obstacles: fear of being labeled 'Westernized', and the constant need to defer to religion. Economic obstacles: the fact that Arab women participate less in the paid labor force than in other regions of the world-economy means that they have not articulated the sort of economic grievances that have led feminists in other countries to develop ideas about women's socio-economic rights. Organizational obstacles: there needs to be coordination, cooperation, and coalition-building across countries, and deeper involvement in transnational feminist networks (such as DAWN, WLUM, etc.).

**15.** I would have a working conference of women's organizations across the region to discuss an array of issues; and I would form some arrangements with transnational feminist networks.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Samia Tabari's review of [Women@Internet](#) in this issue.

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#### Emily Naffa:

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**1.** I think the greatest achievement of Arab women during the 20th century — the century of struggle for women's rights — was the attainment of the right of girls to education. This achievement has been a decisive factor in women's progress, especially in the labor market, leading to economic emancipation.

The Arab women's movement has had another great achievement, in being one of the major Arab social movements of the 20th century that brought changes in all aspects of daily life in the wake of the national liberation struggle.

#### Emily Naffa

On the other hand, the women's movement has failed to a shocking extent to become part of legislative and political decision-making bodies, so as to bring about real change in the laws related to women's rights, especially family law.

**2.** This charge is not justified since the movement for the liberation of women is international. As far back as 1910, socialist women in Copenhagen adopted March 8 as International Women's Day to commemorate the struggles and sacrifices of women all over the world for their rights. One example is working women in the United States who were burnt in a factory for demanding an 8-hour working day. It could be that the struggle for women's rights started in the industrial countries, but it has spread all over the world. We cannot ignore the effect of the struggle of the Egyptian or Algerian women on the common struggle of the international women's movement, as well as the effect of the achievements of women in the former Soviet Union, or the struggle in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The best response is to say that social progress is the fruit of all and for all, a world heritage. At a certain point in history the leading feminist activists were from the 'progressive West' not the 'conservative West'. The West is not one. It has classes, and the struggle for women's rights was led by middle class and working class women activists, and progressive forces of men and women world wide.

**3.** The factors that account for the spread of religious fundamentalism are mainly: poverty, backwardness, illiteracy and lack of democracy and general freedoms. Religious revivalism threatens the achievements of the Arab women's movement because it calls for re-imposing segregation of, and discrimination against, women, as was the case in Afghanistan.

**4.** Today, women's NGOs find themselves working among communities that are becoming more and more marginalized, especially the women in them. There is an urgent need to emphasize the importance of poverty-eradication, and the participation of women's NGOs in taking action against the feminization of poverty. Much is still needed to be done in eradication of adult literacy, legal counseling, research, and other fields, as part of the march for women's emancipation.

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**5.** Yes. Much needs to be done to obtain progressive family laws. The research is done. Women know what urgent changes are needed. Struggle should be directed to decision-makers to adopt reforms in spite of the growing conservative trend in the Arab world. At the last Arab Women's Summit, a Jordanian declaration amending the Nationality law came from the head of state, after years of struggle by women activists.

**6.** The Arab women's movements were, and still are, affiliated to international progressive women's movements such as the International Democratic Federation of Women, which include in their ranks women's organizations from the East, eg Iran, and India. Women worldwide struggle together and exchange experiences in their endeavors to promote women's status. It is now an urgent need to build relations between women in the North and the South to face the negative impact on women of neo-liberal globalization.

**7.** Historically speaking, it is known that the agent of social change is the middle class. So it is normal and logical that educated upper middle class women activists have taken the leading role in the struggle up to now. But with the massive education revolution of recent years, newcomers from the lower middles and working classes are joining the movement. Therefore, change in leadership is coming.

**8.** The whole liberation movement in the Arab world, whether at the level of politics or of social change, has been the victim of non-democratic leaders or, in more precise analysis, from the absence of institutionalization of the movement. It is high time to impose reform on the liberation movement as a whole. It is not fair to generalize. Most of the leaders and the active members of the Arab women's movements have been victims of non-democratic measures practiced against them by the authorities and reactionary elements in society. It has always been necessary to struggle for reform in the structures of the women's NGOs.

**9.** All that has been achieved in this respect is not enough. Much should be done with the support of civil society organizations.

**10.** Principles of democratic governance should be adopted to solve the problems of minorities,

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