

whether of language or of ethnicity. The Arab women's movements are progressive in demanding the end of all discrimination and inequality. Therefore they must adopt a position against discrimination against minorities, and for equality for all. They should support the demands of minorities to have special schools, and TV and radio programs in their own languages. Thus minority children will learn about their own culture and keep their own identity within the Arab world. Their representation in legislative bodies is also a must.

**11.** The content of the term is what is most important. 'Arab feminism' is broader than 'Arab women' and it cannot be replaced. Whatever term is used, we should make it clear that gender equality is our target, and that we don't struggle against men. We struggle against discrimination, and for equality and justice.

**12.** The UN Decade for Women, the pre- and post UN International Conferences, and the UN specialized agencies have been decisive in giving momentum to the struggle of women activists in the last quarter of the 20th century. It has helped counterbalance the extremely negative effect of Islamist fundamentalism on the women's cause. It has helped the Arab women's organizations to focus on problems that hindered the advancement of women; and to adopt their own platforms of action and long-term strategies. In addition, it has launched awareness campaigns among women, and demanded the modernization of laws that govern women's rights in society, family and work.

**13.** It has helped increase the representation of the Arab women's movement in the different social sectors, and to create the image of successful working women. It has also increased the number of women activists struggling for the advancement of women in the political, economic and social fields.

**14.** Many obstacles are still in the way, old and new. First; the absence of democracy, an old obstacle that is still blocking the way, and needs to be achieved to open better opportunities to fulfill the agenda of the women's movement at its beginnings in the last century. Second, the fundamentalist mentality is becoming a strong new obstacle that is trying to reverse all the achievements gained up to now. New strategies are needed to confront this new phenomenon, because it is difficult to face those who use the

teachings of an essentially tolerant Islam to create an intolerant atmosphere against social progress, and against women in particular. Thirdly, there is a new obstacle in threats to women's NGOs from Arab governments and conservative forces, because NGOs are seen as part of the human rights and progressive civil society movement that is building ties with the international anti-globalization movement.

**15.** In future, the Arab women's movements need to struggle against old and new obstacles, and to change all laws that discriminate against women, especially family law, to put an end to the multiple miseries of women at the grassroots level; and enable women to reach decision-making posts especially in parliaments.

Email: awo@nets.com.jo

### Zoya Rouhana:

*Founder and director of the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women.*

*Translated from Arabic by Lynn Maalouf*

**1.** It is difficult to say that there is one great achievement we can consider as primordial. Rather, there are a number of achievements that have been attained through years of work, and that have been instrumental in changing women's situation in society in general. The Arab women's movements have succeeded in imposing their existence on society, and in crystallizing certain women's issues. As a result of this, most Arab states have admitted the necessity of reducing elements that discriminate against women in their laws by ratifying the UN Convention to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, even though the articles of the convention have not yet been implemented.

Regarding their failure: I would rather use the term inadequacy since I see it as lying in the inability of the women's movements to put enough pressure on their governments to implement the articles of the convention and change local laws in accordance with these articles. Another inadequacy lies in the fact that most of the women's movements are not protesting against the Arab states' reservations concerning the articles of the convention that touch on personal status laws. This means that they accept

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the status quo, although these laws have to do with the core of women's issues.

**2.** Women in the world suffer from different problems: some are common to them all, and some differ according to the particular circumstances of each society. However, all these problems, whether they be general or particular, and regardless of differences of religion, race, country or culture, have one source, and this is the patriarchal social system which exists in all parts of the world, and which is the reason for the subjection and subordination of woman, while it has established man's almost complete authority over all areas of decision-making, whether in society, economy, law, culture, etc.

We believe that many issues unite us to women in other parts of the world, for example the problem of violence against women, a phenomenon that shows the patriarchal system at its worst. There are also problems from which women in other societies used to suffer, and which they were able to overcome, unlike women in less developed societies who still suffer from the same problems, such as laws that discriminate against women. Besides this there are some issues that pertain to specific societies only, or that take on different aspects in different countries, such as so-called 'honor crimes' or female excision.

**3.** There are probably several reasons for the spread of religious fundamentalism in Arab societies, the most important of which are social and economic crisis, and deterioration in living conditions, besides the military defeats the Arab world has suffered in its wars against Israel. All these factors have added to the resentment of the Arab masses, while their undemocratic rulers do not permit this resentment to be expressed. It is necessary to introduce the changes the masses consider indispensable to put an end to the crisis. If we add to this the weakness, or even the absence, of democratic and secular forces that could replace the existing regimes, the masses find no way to express their resentment other than taking refuge in religion. This is a sensitive issue but we have to tackle it. The essence of both Christianity and Islam call for social justice, respect for people and their rights, redressing corruption, and other similar reforms that in fact express the needs of the subjugated masses. Our problem is that the extremist fundamentalists have appointed themselves as replacement for the present

*Until now the Arab women's movements have not been able to reach a consensus around priorities ...*

regimes, but are no less repressive than them. The main problem for the women's movements when facing the fundamentalists is their mental stagnation, and their refusal to change rules and customs set hundreds of years ago.

**4.** To improve the situation of women in the Arab countries we might need even more diversity than we have at present, due to the enormous dimensions of women's needs. But for this diversity to yield better results, women's organizations should evaluate what are the most urgent needs of women today. Until now the Arab women's movements have not been able to reach a consensus around priorities, nor about how to develop a program that will encompass the different services, nor how to work toward clear aims with definite time schedules, and according to the priorities agreed upon.

Here we have to take note of a sensitive point, which is that the programs of some of the NGOs are subject to the donor's agenda. Indeed some of these organizations have been established according to this agenda, regardless of whether it complies with the people's needs or not.

**5.** We believe that family law, or personal status law, is one of the major issues, if not *the* major issue, on which the work of the women's movements in all the Arab countries should be centered. It should also be a priority of Human Rights organizations, and all those calling for democracy. How can we call for democratic institutions without establishing the bases of democracy inside the family, which constitutes the nuclear cell of society? The personal status laws are not based on equality between man and woman, or on a relationship of complete partnership between them. They are based on the man's almost complete power over his family, including his wife and female 'subjects'.

**6.** This description of relations between the Arab women's movements and the West is probably exaggerated. In the past there were more energetic frameworks than today encompassing the women's movements in the Arab world, and there also were universal frameworks joining women from various countries, western as well as Second and Third world countries. However, there is no doubt that women's organizations in the West have succeeded, due to their general economic and social development, in realizing

*... the problem of violence against women is a phenomenon that shows the patriarchal system at its worst.*

achievements that women's movements in the Arab countries have been unable to reach; and this is why the West became for some an example to follow. But this does not eliminate the need to open up to women's movements in other parts of the world, especially those working in social and cultural conditions closer to those in our Arab countries. This is important in order to exchange experiences and benefit from the very significant experiences of women's movements in the East, as well as in Latin America.

7. It is not surprising that a higher awareness of women's issues should have first crystallized among educated women, some of whom were able to raise essential issues and basic problems from which women in their societies suffer, creating an awareness among women of different social classes and backgrounds. Here we can point to the large demonstration which Moroccan women organized on March 8, 2000, coinciding with International Women's Day. The number of women and men participants was close to a million. But this does not eliminate the other side of the problem, which the question has overlooked, ie. the charitable work that women in Arab societies customarily undertake. Limited to women from the educated and well-to-do classes, such work could not be transformed into a movement calling for women's rights, or spreading awareness of women's issues among the different social classes. This limitation applies to most women's organizations either close to the ruling political elites or affiliated to them.

8. Undemocratic procedures are not restricted to women's movements alone, but are prevalent in many NGOs, parties and associations of civic society. The weakness of democratic practices and the absence of accountability is a problem in all Arab societies, and comes to the fore in the electoral system, wherever there is one. It is thus not surprising that these weaknesses should prevail in civic society in general including women's associations. However, this does not excuse civic society organizations, especially those calling for change, from setting an example of democratic procedures within their framework, and seeking to ensure an appropriate environment for the human development of their members, and raise their level of group responsibility, as well as ensuring an atmosphere appropriate for questioning, and a sense of responsibility and accountability towards the issues that are raised.

*The UN's adoption of women's issues proved that the problems from which women suffer are international.*

9. The use of the word gender is still relatively new in Arab societies, although its content was not completely unknown to femininist discourse in the Arab world. But this discourse has not yet been able to bring about the desired change in social relations. This is due, on the one hand, to difficulty in realizing the desired cultural change in understanding gender roles, and on the other to the fact that many of the women's societies are themselves affected by the patriarchal social system and do not call for radical change to this system. Thus their proposals only touch the superficial forms of this system and do not tackle its essential problems, such as the personal status laws, for example.

10. I do not think that that the Arab women's movements have a single policy towards the minorities in their countries. These policies depend on the intellectual, cultural and political structures of these movements. It is not a secret that some of the women's movements support their governments in the repression of which the minorities are the victim. As a matter of principle one cannot deny the right of minorities to preserve their language, culture and traditions, as embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and it is not admissible that women's movements which are supposed to defend women's human rights should deny other women these rights.

11. The meaning of this question is not clear to me.

12. The United Nations Decade for women greatly helped the Arab women's movement, especially in raising the pattern and tone of their demands for legal reforms, and in pressuring their countries to sign the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women. The UN's adoption of women's issues proved that the problems from which women suffer are international, and this has had a positive effect on the role of women's organizations in their societies.

13. There is no doubt that we are in need of research either directly on women's conditions, or on the conditions affecting women indirectly, such as poverty, the economy, and health, among others. Undertaking research that is 'gender-sensitive' will contribute to giving us a clearer understanding of women's social and economic conditions as well as women's needs. We

**Fatima Sadiqi**

hope that the new researchers will tackle issues that have still not been sufficiently dealt with, such as family relations as affected by law, beliefs, traditions, etc, and their effect on women's daily lives.

14. The instability that many Arab countries face, and that has reached a peak in Occupied Palestine, as well as the possibility of a war against Iraq with all its likely repercussions on the Arab region, these are conditions that relegate women's issues to second place. But we cannot overlook the spread of the fundamentalist movements which call for our isolation from the world on the pretext of fighting the West. This is a current of which women will be the first victims.

15. What we aspire to is for the women's movements to be more down-to-earth, and to break away from theory and 'superiority discourse'. They need to be more aware of the real problems that women in the Arab world face, and thus be more capable of raising essential demands, ones that have priority, and so be able to attract larger numbers of women to their ranks.

Email: lecorvaw@inco.com.lb?

**Fatima Sadiqi:**

*Senior Professor of Linguistics and Gender Studies, Fes University.*

1. In my view, their greatest achievement is making women in the Arab world aware of their position in society and of their rights. This is most visible at the academic level: in addition to a plethora of associations dealing with women's issues and women's rights, there are two graduate units of gender/women studies which will certainly ensure continuation. There is also a great number of publications (articles, books, seminars, conferences, etc). The women's movement has indeed opened the door for women to reach positions of decision-making and public power, and this is no small step. If we consider the profile of any Moroccan women in decision-making positions today, we notice that most of them have espoused the core aims of the movement; all of them still struggle for the same aims.

The greatest failure of the Arab women's movement is the tendency to exclude men in societies

*The greatest failure of the Arab women's movement is the tendency to exclude men in societies where they still lead the show.*

where they still lead the show. Men should be more involved at this stage, as we still need credibility at the social level. In my view, struggle for women's rights in the Arab-Islamic world is different from this struggle in the Western world, whose literature reaches us most. I think it is too early to focus the struggle on 'women only'; focus needs to be put on women but not by excluding men, because our societies are built on the family and not the individual.

2. Yes and no. Western feminism is like Western mathematics or Western physics. We cannot simply ignore them. I think we need to make a clear distinction between studying phenomena for the sake of knowledge, and applying these phenomena to our societies. In the latter case, we have to take culture into consideration. The accusation is part of the overall international atmosphere where tension has shifted from the Cold War between two major powers (the ex-Soviet Union and the USA), to the new world order where Islam is being used by some US leaders as the indispensable 'demon' other. Because such leaders focus on gender and victimize Arab/Muslim women to legitimize their 'civilizing' mission, we need to empower women in our countries by making their voices heard.

3. International causal factors should be placed first: the 'success' of the Iranian Revolution, the fall of the Soviet Union, the increasing power of the US, wars in the Middle East, poverty and disillusionment. Religious revivalism is not a reaction to liberal feminism, it is the result of the causes mentioned above. I have no clear strategy of how to deal with it, but I certainly know that we have to find a way around it. Revivalism is backed by political power (influential men) and the Arab women's movements are not. We need to tackle this issue more seriously.

I may also add that religious fundamentalism is part of a global turn towards conservatism. The spread of extremist fundamentalism is nourished by the already poor and deteriorating economic conditions of Arab Muslim populations.

4. I think it is good. Social policies in Morocco are becoming more and more the territory of civil society, and the private sector. Women are more active in civil society. By engaging in this type of work, the women's movements will become closer to the people.