Dismantling Bridges, Building Solidarity: Reconciling Western and Arab Feminisms

By Azza Basarudin

Abstract

This article attempts to address how Western and Arab (North and South) feminists are able to envision solidarity and empower women across local and national boundaries through (1) connecting local and global gender issues and (2) reconciling Western feminist scholarships and Arab women’s culturally specific positions in international and cross-cultural frameworks. Given the historical background of the Middle East, we understand multiple factors such as class, nation, race, sexism, colonialism and imperialism that influence Arab women’s struggles for liberation. Arab women’s struggles cannot be confined and situated in a context that removes the diversity of their historical experiences, location, religion and cultural factors. I would like to examine how Arab women are marginalized within the sphere of Western feminism’s because they have been portrayed as passive victims instead of active participants seeking mobility and changes in society. In dismantling the binary construct of East/West, liberated/oppressed, colonizers/colonized and progressive/backwards in global feminism, we may locate an urgent need for a cross-cultural dialogue between Western and Arab feminisms in order to create space that allows different experiences to be recognized and examined, and crafting a meeting point for women to relate across their differences. For Western feminists trying to make sense of Middle Eastern issues and Arab women’s struggles, solidarity will remain elusive unless they recognize that women’s experiences and struggles cannot be separated from race, class, nation, colonization and imperialism.

Introduction

Feminism is seen as a political and philosophical movement, which challenges all power structures, laws, and conventions that keep women servile and subordinate. Various Western feminist theories such as Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Marxist Feminism and Post Modern Feminism have been formulated with an effort to better understand and overcome women’s oppression. There is no doubt that the struggle of Western feminist movements have brought changes in the lives of women since Mary Wollstonecraft wrote her masterpiece, Vindication of the Rights of Woman in 1792, which became the foundation of modern feminism. Today, feminism has crossed the boundaries of the Western world and has become transnational. Women’s response to their social, economic and political situation varies from location to location and their empowerment strategies are also diverse. Originally, feminist theories were an effort to bring insight from the feminist movement and from various female experiences together with research to produce new approaches towards understanding and ending female oppression (Humm 1992: 173). However, the Western feminist movements have fallen short in comprehending and conceptualizing the diversity of women around the globe. This is partly due to the fact that the discourses of Western feminisms are “largely shaped by gender relations in capitalist cultures and by the exhausted paradigms of Western social thought” (Majid 1998: 334). Approaching Arab women’s rights, struggles and liberation thoroughly, Western feminists agendas cannot be effective because these agendas were cultivated in a different environment based on Western history, needs, experiences and values. For feminisms to be accepted in the Middle East, Arab women need new liberation movements that are based on their experiences and values with some acceptable feminist ideas and practices.

The dominant ideology of feminism as cultivated by the West, and the idea that women everywhere experience a ‘common oppression’ is a dangerous platform that is narrowing the debate of women’s oppression. Borrowing Chandra Mohanty’s term, Western feminists should start “theorizing from women’s struggles” instead of assuming that women around the globe suffer from the same kind of patriarchal domination (e.g., patriarchy operates differently from different countries, regions and cultures without regard to history, racism, sexism, colonialism, imperialism and monopoly capital). Despite having struggled for social, economic and political changes for decades in the Middle East, Arab women have been marginalized because they are portrayed as passive victims of society who have no control over their lives. By focusing on Middle Eastern women’s vulnerability, passivity and subordination, Western academia, media and feminists have created the image of the “other.” The category of the “other” has denied the recognition of Middle Eastern women’s active participation in the public arena (e.g., Iranian women’s participation during the Islamic Revolution, Arab women’s participation during the Gulf war, Palestinian women’s role in the Intifada). There is a wide gap between Western feminist discourses and the actual and practical needs of women from various ethnic, religious, cultural and social backgrounds. Therefore, it is crucial for the survival of feminism(s) to devise new approaches that acknowledge individualities and particularities of each woman and feminist movement.

Beyond Borders: The North-South Dialogue

Nawal El-Saadawi, the founder of AWSA, believes that “solidarity can only grow in the light of knowledge and understanding” (1997: 28). In envisioning solidarity with Arab women, Western feminists should utilize the vast resources and knowledge available in dismantling global oppressions, which include not only gender apartheid, but also social, economic and political conditions to understand how Arab women have continued to be victims of racism, colonialism, and imperialism. Western feminism(s) tend to focus more on individual rights of women (although there are some women’s groups that take up structural, social, cultural and global issues), whereas many Arab feminism’s, while recognizing the importance of these individual rights, also stress the problem of oppression “in the Arab world as a whole due to social, structural, cultural and global factors. Most Arab women’s groups place their struggle against gender oppression within the overall context of social and global problems and inequities. Gender issues are very important to address, but is that enough? Focusing on gender relations alone is insufficient to bring about a liberation of women. Women of the South would no doubt argue that gender issues and feminism, in actuality, is a concept that is associated with power and power. How can women of the South talk about feminism(s), when they are faced with poverty, starvation, unequal access to education, resources and ideas from where all women can build upon and confront the existing power structures that sought to dis-empower women.

However, we should remember that this cooperation should not be perceived as a triumph of Northern groups over Southern based organizing and issues. I would argue that the exchange should never be in the terms of “how Northern feminists should help the Palestinian women under Israeli occupation?” But how can women of the North understand why women of the South are not overtly concerned with the importance of a woman’s individual autonomy and why their struggle for solidarity was structured within the concept of nation-state, globalization and (neo-)colonialism? How can Northern feminists begin to develop an understanding of the complex web of connections and the social, economic and cultural effects of discourses of colonialism in the context of race, class and gender?

From these questions, we are able to look at how women’s groups and movements, and in particular how women coming in community-based political, social or economic concerns, are able to promote activism on the local level, and connect it to the global arena. There has been considerable evidence that despite the local/global divide, women have come together around diverse issues, and are able to cut across regional, national and international differences in solidarity, demonstrating a powerful global vision that transcends lines of division. For example, in armed conflict such as in Palestine, local and international women have come together as activists and peacekeepers, embodying and challenging the Arab/Israeli or other divisions that have defined the conflict. In another example, activism on the part of Arab women about the practice of honor killing, which started off at grassroots levels has now been framed as a global human rights issue. Although a local problem, the practice of honor killing has not only gained international attention but has also increased awareness about an issue through connecting local and international women’s groups. As El-Saadawi (1997: 19-20) has stressed, “Women in the South have to cooperate with the progressive forces in the North who are fighting the same battle (of oppression and discrimination), but resistance starts at home. We cannot change the international order by each one of us, step by step, changing the system in which we live.” In this case, the diversity of women’s organizations is a rich pot of resources and ideas from where all women can build upon and confront the existing power structures that sought to dis-empower women.
oppressed Southern women in their struggles. It should be about understanding and respecting our differences, while meeting at a point where we (North and South) would be comfortable in facilitating dialogues and exchanging information. Arab women should not hesitate to take the lead in defining the international women’s movement and what should be on its agenda. Solidarity with Northern feminists is important, but they must be willing to broaden their framework to include issues such as social, economic, political and global interests in addition to gender. As Bell Hooks (1984: 65) wrote:

Women do not need to eradicate differences to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppressions to fight equally to end oppression. We do not need anti-white sentiment to bond us together, so great is the wealth of experience, culture, and ideas we have to share with one another. We can be sisters united by shared diversity, united in our struggle to end sexism oppression, united in political solidarity.

Therefore, in the struggles for liberation, Arab women should not be robbed of their identities, culture, history and beliefs as they struggle for empowerment and self-determination.

The Veil - Between Sexism and Racism

I have chosen to discuss the veil in this paper because there is a need to reconsider Western feminists’ discourses on issues of the veil, a discourse that has witnessed veiling as a sign of submissiveness and male domination. The images of most Arab-Muslim women in the eyes of Western feminists (inherited and kept alive from the days of colonialism) are ones that are oppressed, secluded and hidden behind the veil. They are the nameless, faceless and voiceless victims of culture, religion and tradition, which can be taken as a symbol of women’s passive and insignificant existence, warranting little or no recognition of individuality.

The relationship between the East and the West during the period of colonialism is best defined in this phrase, “We came, we saw, we were horrified, we intervened” (Ghosh and Bose 1997: 189). In the Middle East, colonial rule not only gave birth to ethnic nationalism but also heightened female consciousness. Leila Ahmed (1992: 154) states that, “the idea of Western feminism essentially functioned to justify morally the attack on native societies and to support the notion of the comprehensive superiority of Europe.” As women were seen as transmitters of social values within the private sphere of the home, they were the key to converting the so-called “backward” and “savage” Arab society into a “civilized” Western existence by Colonial patriarchs and missionaries. Islam was attacked and accused as one of the primary reasons for Arab-Muslim society’s inferiority, and the veiling of women was seen as the most visible form of oppression. The colonial rule sought to Westernize Arab-Muslim women by unveiling them, encouraging women to adopt Western ideas and culture, reject Islam and the Arab culture completely. As a result of this, veiling has not only become the most visible marker of cultural identity, but is also entangled with issues of colonialism and imperialism.

By defining the veil as a form of cultural oppression, Western feminists are subjecting themselves to the role of racists and oppressors, perpetuating an oppression that is considered “taboo” in the feminist movement, of women oppressing women. However, Western feminists would undoubtedly deny this by saying, “I’m a feminist, therefore I could not be a racist,” or “I am also oppressed as a woman, so how can the oppressed become the oppressor?” As Joan Wingfield wrote, “Other indigenous women can understand a lot better than most Whites...We’re not all the same, we have differences but they can accept the differences without trying to change us to be the same as them...Many Whites don’t accept differences” (cf. Bulbeck 1998: 216). In other words, Western feminists are asking Arab-Muslim women to choose between fighting racism and sexism. That is, in their contradictions, cross-cultural inquiry will remain a relationship of domination, and feminist solidarity will continue to be elusive (cf. Ghosh and Bose 1997: 203). For feminism(s) to succeed in Arab society, it must be an indigenous form of feminism, rather than one conceived and nurtured in a Western environment with different problems, solutions and goals. I leave you with this quote:

“It would seem that if the outsider wants you to understand how she sees you and you have given your account of how you see yourself to her, there is a possibility of genuine dialogue between the two” (cf. Bulbeck 216).

Feminism has crossed the boundaries of the Western world and has become transnational

By forcing Arab-Muslim women to choose, Western feminists are forcing them to reject feminisms in their struggles. Did Western feminists ever stop to think that in an intricate tradition where culture, history, and religion are closely intertwined, the veil might be a tool for women’s liberation? Hence, universalization of the veil solely as a manifestation of patriarchal domination is unjust, creating a “double oppression” for some Arab-Muslim women. Western feminists have laid the foundation for accomplishment in women’s social, political and economic standing, and therefore should assist Arab women in their struggle for liberation instead of “forcing” them to rank their oppression.

The Future of Global Feminisms

The International Decade for Women (1975-1985) taught Western feminists that their priorities, interpretations and political solutions are not acceptable or adaptable for women from other various ethnic groups and backgrounds. The United Nation’s Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995 was an important catalyst for Arab feminists as the conference not only increased their visibility and activism, but also the opportunity for open interaction with Western feminists. Building solidarity while acknowledging and accepting the differences of women from diverse ethnic groups and backgrounds would produce a coalition that would be beneficial to the feminist movement. The ultimate challenge for feminist movements is providing new ways of linking the particulars of women’s lives, activities, and goals to inequalities wherever they exist. A cross-cultural dialogue between Arab and Western feminists might overcome the cultural blindness and help develop a deeper understanding of the two different feminisms. Western feminists should look at themselves and see what other women see in them. They should also look at the “other” women and see those women in their own social, cultural and historical context. Without accepting Arab women as subjects in their own right, and “making way for them to come forth not as spectacles, but in their contradictions”, cross-cultural inquiry will remain a relationship of domination, and feminist solidarity will continue to be elusive (cf. Ghosh and Bose 1997: 203). For feminism(s) to succeed in Arab society, it must be an indigenous form of feminism.
By Rana Husseini

AMMAN — Toujan Al-Faisal, the first and only woman to ever be elected to the Jordanian Lower House of Parliament, who recently was pardoned by HM King Abdullah for slandering the state and its officials, vowed to continue her political struggle by running in the upcoming elections expected to be held in the Spring of 2003.

Al-Faisal, 53, made history in 1993, by ending male monopoly in the Lower House by becoming the only woman to be elected to Parliament. She served for four years, but lost her re-election bid in 1997. Al-Faisal, claimed vote rigging for her defeat.

Al-Faisal, made history again in March when she sent an email to King Abdullah accusing the Prime Minister, Ali Abul Ragheb, and his family of benefiting from a recent decision by the government to double car insurance premiums.

Al-Faisal’s email, which was also published on the -Arab Times- website prompted the state to take action against her. State Security Prosecutor filed a case against the former deputy accusing her of defaming the state and its officials. Al-Faisal was imprisoned in mid-March but was released on bail on March 27, to be rearrested two days later for attempting to hold a press conference to describe her arrest and case circumstances.

On May 16, Al-Faisal was sentenced to 18 months in prison on charges which included publishing material deemed harmful to the country’s reputation and that of its citizens, and tarnishing the state. She was also convicted on charges of uttering words [while detained at the women’s prison] deemed to be detrimental to religion.

As a result, Al-Faisal stopped eating prison food in protest and subsequently, was admitted to hospital after her health deteriorated. Local and human rights activists and organizations described Al-Faisal as a ‘prisoner of conscience’ and sent appeals to the King and the government calling for Al-Faisal’s release.

Islamists, whom Al-Faisal clashed with in the past over issues such as polygamy, stood next to her this time and called on the government to release her since she was tried under a temporary law introduced in October 2001, which many said was aimed at limiting freedom of speech and expression.

Almost a month later, King Abdullah pardoned Al-Faisal by a Royal Decree the day after the Chechen-Circassian community, to which she belongs, appealed for her release on humanitarian grounds. “It was a tough experience which only motivated me to go further,” said Al-Faisal, a mother of three. Al-Faisal said her main concern now is to prepare for the upcoming elections although she was convicted with a criminal offence.

The Royal pardon did not order the reversal of the conviction, which may block Al-Faisal from running in the next parliamentary elections, according to legal experts. Under the law, those convicted in non-political cases and receive prison sentences over one year are ineligible to run for office. But Al-Faisal said this does not apply to her because she considered herself as a “prisoner of opinion.” “This is a political verdict and I am not worried about it. I have already started working on the coming elections,” said Al-Faisal.

Al-Faisal rose to fame in the early 1990s with battles with Islamic groups in Jordan over subjects like polygamy and later on in the Lower House over dress code. In 1989, Muslim groups declared her an apostate, and called on Jordanian courts to annul her marriage and grant immunity to anyone who shed her blood, charging that she was calling for an end to polygamy. In the end, the court dropped the case, claiming it was outside its jurisdiction.

When Al-Faisal made world news headlines by becoming the first woman ever to be elected for the Lower House, a fellow Islamist deputy welcomed her by offering sweets and 10 Islamic robes if she stopped wearing make up and started wearing Islamic dresses. However, Al-Faisal ignored his remarks and said she will devote her time to fight for the rights of people to enjoy a decent life and full democracy.

Al-Faisal had said that her liberal upbringing with its atmosphere of equality helped her achieve most of her goals. But most importantly, Al-Faisal was always proud to be elected by the people and not appointed. “I wanted to tell everyone that I was the deputy of the nation, not a deputy for a certain constituency or group,” said Al-Faisal, who holds an MA in English language and literature. “I came from an open-minded family that offered responsible freedom and never discriminated against women,” she said.

She also received full backing from her father and husband. As time went by, Faisal said she rebelled against any rule or law she felt was unfair or illogical. “I never bowed to any law I felt was unfair without questioning it,” she said.

But the real challenge for the former deputy was her first encounter with corruption, when she started working as a Jordan Television presenter of a series about the women’s affairs. Al-Faisal was removed from her job and the government calling for Al-Faisal’ s release. Activists and organizations described Al-Faisal as a ‘prisoner of conscience’ and sent appeals to the King and the government calling for Al-Faisal’s release.

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A “Learning” Gathering of Women Civic Activists to Promote a New Concept of Leadership and Learning

Imagine an advocacy coalition campaign to amend personal status laws in Morocco led by a women’s organization. Amina Lemrini, an activist in the Association Democratique des Femmes du Maroc (ADFM), based in Rabat and Casablanca, gave a detailed account of how a civic organization led by women and dedicated to women’s issues successfully developed a coalition of nine organizations that ultimately put on the national Moroccan agenda the issue of the reform of age-old laws that restrict women and are basically unjust. ADFM led the “Le Printemps d’Egalite” (Spring of Equality) Coalition, a mobilization for the rights of women. Amina asked the participants in the “leaming” gathering — Why should we reform laws? Laws are what govern our lives and when we have a discriminatory law, it prohibits women’s participation. So the coalition’s aim was a strategic one to reform the laws, and thus amend the mechanism that will ensure women’s rights and participation in civic life in Morocco. She outlined the strategy, vision, mission and tactics of the 9 - organization coalition. ADFM has been also successful in lobbying for the creation of 30 seats in the Moroccan Parliament for women members of Parliament. This will encourage Moroccan political parties to include women candidates on their electoral lists in the next elections in September 2002.

Women’s Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace (WLP) recently brought together 17 women leaders from Afghanistan/Pakistan, Cameroon, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco, Nigeria, Palestine, and Uzbekistan for a week-long conference on enhancing women’s rights, leadership, and political participation. So the coalition’s aim was a strategic one to reform the laws, and thus amend the mechanism that will ensure women’s rights and participation in decision-making and civil society. This was an excellent opportunity to network with other organizations, improve our facilitation and communication skills, and strategize about ways to collaboratively empower women in our communities, commented Mishka Meshabber of Lebanon at the conclusion of the Institute.

WLP’s concept that inclusive, horizontal, and participatory leadership empowers women and leads to the development of gender equitable and democratic societies forms the basis of the Roaming Institutes for Women’s Leadership and is described in WLP’s collaboratively developed manual Leading to Choices: A Leadership Training Handbook for Women. Trainers from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East simulated scenarios on conflict-resolution and negotiation, women’s political participation, and gender-sensitive leadership styles. The simulations enhanced participants’ facilitation skills and emphasized country-specific successes and challenges experienced when implementing this alternative leadership concept. For example, WLP’s partners in Afghanistan conducted a role-play scenario that encouraged participants representing diverse Afghan ethnic groups to communicate and negotiate across cultural barriers to achieve a shared goal for girls’ education and advancement. WLP’s Jordanian partners facilitated a session in which participants analyzed challenges to women’s involvement in local and national elections, and strategized on ways to motivate women at the grassroots level to become politically active.

The Institute also focused on skills training necessary to plan and conduct media campaigns, communications strategy development, and cross-regional democracy building. The communications training included conducting, critiquing, and evaluating individual simulations on conflict-resolution and negotiation, and establishing community networks. Participants also learned from one another by sharing the strategies they use in grassroots advocacy campaigns, mobilization initiatives, and establishing community networks. For example, WLP’s partners in Malaysia discussed their mobilization and advocacy efforts to raise public awareness and influence politicians in order to improve legislation on violence against women. WLP’s Moroccan partners discussed their initiatives in creating dynamic local and regional networks to change legislation and bring women’s rights within the family. Following these sessions, Asabe Audu of Nigeria said, “I appreciated the comprehensive communications and advocacy training— a number of strategies that were discussed will be useful to my organization’s campaigns.”

The Institute concluded with a session during which participants developed strategies to implement future national and regional Roaming Institutes. Participants agreed that the goals of future Institutes are to enable women in Muslim societies to claim their human rights, develop leadership skills, and become strong participants in the social and political developments of their communities and nations. Future Institutes will accomplish this by using a variety of methods, including organizational capacity-building, training of trainers, and the development of further collaborative leadership learning materials such as interactive videos, on-line training manuals, and distance-learning courses. National Roaming Institutes are being planned in Afghanistan/Pakistan and Morocco, and regional Roaming Institutes are being planned by WLP’s partner organizations in Jordan, Nigeria, and Uzbekistan.

“Our experience here at the Institute with workshop simulations, development of communications strategies, and advocacy training will be extremely useful to my organization and others in my community,” commented Amina Lemrini of Morocco. Asma Khader of Jordan concluded, “I have a renewed sense of purpose and belief in the implementation of the women’s leadership program, and eagerly anticipate the Roaming Institutes to come.”