If women’s rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet [Muhammad], nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite.

Fatima Mernissi

Margot Badran is a scholar-activist and specialist in gender studies in the Middle East and Islamic world. She is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. She was recently Edith Kreeger Wolf Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Religion Department and Preceptor at the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa at Northwestern University. She has lectured widely in academic and popular forums in the United States, as well as in Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. She is also the author of numerous scholarly articles on feminism and Islam, and writes on gender issues for Al Ahram Weekly.

I first met Margot Badran at a conference in Oldenburg, Germany, in 2002, where she gave a keynote address on Islamic feminism. Energetic and passionate about her current research on Islam’s and feminisms, she spoke on how Islamic feminism is not an oxymoron because it offers a holistic solution for women activists and/or intellectual-activists who are invested in gender justice but who are not interested in separating religion from their struggles. According to Badran, Islamic feminists are self-identified women who are interested in balancing women’s human rights claims within the boundaries of their faith. Interested in the topic, and already familiar with her scholarly work, I approached Professor Badran for an interview on the topic of Islamic feminism. Three years later, I caught up with her on the same topic. The following are the original and follow-up interviews.

Islam and Feminism: An Interview with Margot Badran (2002)

1. There has been tremendous interest in the West and the Muslim world on the debate on Islam and feminism. Why do you think there is so much interest in this subject? What does this debate mean for Muslim women and feminism/s (as an ideology and movement)?
If there is now great interest in debates on Islam and feminism, this is not as novel as it may seem. For a long time “Islam and feminism” has been considered an oxymoron in both the Muslim world and in the West, although for different reasons. In the Muslim world feminism has often been considered Western, irrelevant, and invasive, or simply a very large and intellectual and academic circles. In terms of the broader society I would put any interest in feminism and Islam within the context of a heightened interest in Islam post-South Africa. Having said this, however, by far the greatest interest in Islam (often obsession) has been ignited by concern about peril and danger. If there is anything said about feminism and Islam I have noticed ears prick in a large and intellectual and academic circles. In terms of the broad debates in the mid-1990s as debates widened and took new turns in the Muslim world in the context of the continuing spread and reining of Islamic resurgence and the growing attention to issues of religion and culture. Most of these debates are not based on a real historical and academic understanding of Islam but on a simplistic understanding of Islam. The term “Islam and feminism” has been committed and “legitimized” in the name of Islam – and because this oppression has also become a very important feature of the lives of Muslim women – this allowed to demonstrate that oppressive behaviors and attitudes toward women are not only not Islamic but are anti-Islamic to have some effect. If some people do not mind committing zulm against women (or others) these people do not want to be seen as “zulm” is seen either as doing this in contradiction of Islam; this does not bring honor. Of course, discourse – a new discourse in which I will not change women’s lives. Discourse needs to be accompanied by organized collective activism and everyday acts of feminism. But to have a wider understanding of the full amplitude of religion on your side is no small thing.

2. Many have questioned the interaction between Islam and feminism. Some deny the need for any type of feminism within the Islamic framework as Islam gave women their rights some 1400 years ago, others argue that they are mutually exclusive. What is your opinion? Can you offer a comprehensive definition of the Islamic feminism which you are discussing?

Islam did give women human beings (like men) their rights 1400 years ago and it is high time women enjoyed these rights. The Qur’an actually being utilized in Muslim societies is proving that women enjoyed these rights. Feminism, in its simplest definition includes an awareness that some human beings are deprived of rights or are subjected to discrimination and oppression (zulm) simply because they are female, a rejection of this thinking and practice, and forms of activism aimed at achieving lost rights. Islamic feminism is an affirmation of the rights Islam and the Qur’an actually being utilized in Muslim societies and an affirmation of the gender equality and social justice embodied in the Qur’an. It is not that feminism and Islam are mutually exclusive but that (rights-depriving) patriarchy and Islam are mutually exclusive.

3. A very important part of many Muslim women’s feminism is the process of ijtihad (rereading and reinterpreting the Islamic texts). How effective is this strategy when it comes to the reality of Muslim women’s lives? Are the reinterpretations of the Qur’an actually being utilized in Muslim societies?

The connection between a feminist hermeneutics of the Qur’an with Muslim women’s actual lives is a frequently asked and extremely germane question. It is precisely because so much oppression (zulm) has been committed and “legitimized” in the name of Islam that – and because this oppression has also become a very important feature of the lives of Muslim women – this allowed to demonstrate that oppressive behaviors and attitudes toward women are not only not Islamic but are anti-Islamic to have some effect. If some people do not mind committing zulm against women (or others) these people do not want to be seen as “zulm” is seen either as doing this in contradiction of Islam; this does not bring honor. Of course, discourse – a new discourse in which I will not change women’s lives. Discourse needs to be accompanied by organized collective activism and everyday acts of feminism. But to have a wider understanding of the full amplitude of religion on your side is no small thing.

4. What does/do Islamic feminism/s have to offer, not only to Muslim women, but also to feminist discourse and the larger feminist movement/s?

I have just given an answer to the first part of this question. As I moved more deeply into Islamic feminism – analyzing the discourse of its major articulators and going myself to the Qur’an and doing my own tafsir (explanation) – I see more and more the Qur’an actually being utilized in Muslim frameworks that the Qur’an can also help to dismantle the notion of the Qur’an with Muslim women’s actual lives. The Qur’an can actually be utilized in Muslim frameworks and an affirmation of the gender equality and social justice embodied in the Qur’an. It is not that feminism and Islam are mutually exclusive but that (rights-depriving) patriarchy and Islam are mutually exclusive.

5. The act of naming Muslim women who are working towards raising awareness within the Islamic framework as Islamic feminists can be a somewhat problematic classificatory issue. As the Islamic framework has been associated with colonialism, imperialism, or just because they are uncomfortable with the term and its implications. Does the act of naming people/groups as such sometimes impede their agency. What is your opinion on this?

I am glad you raised the question of naming, or labeling. I think it is important not to call women feminists, or Islamic feminists, etc. if they themselves do not assume such a label. As an historian I have tried to be careful in not assigning an identity where it is not self-assigned. The questions of feminism and feminist identity are so highly charged that it is unfair and irresponsible to foist a feminist label upon persons who reject it. Some women may act or speak like feminists but do not claim, nor like, the label. We can analyze discourse and behaviors and recognize them as “feminist” but we need to be clear that women whom we may see as speaking or behaving like feminists may not identify themselves as feminists. In a paper I wrote in 1990 on Muslim women and feminism I referred to their thinking and actions more neutral as if they are comfortable with the term and its implications. Does the act of naming people/groups as such sometimes impede their agency. What is your opinion on this?

6. You are currently a Visiting Fellow at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World. You are working with some Islamic feminism in the Middle East and Africa. Can...
you elaborate on this project and its impor-
tance in contributing to the discourse on
Islamic feminism?

I am finishing up a book on comparative Islamic feminism’s looking at discourse and experience in Egypt, Turkey, Yemen and South Africa. I have spent quite a bit of time in all four countries interacting with feminists and learning from them about Islamic feminism. There is, as we know, a universalist Islamic feminist discourse circulating most rapidly on the web that is fed from various local points around the globe. Meanwhile, there are local forms of Islamic feminist activism that surface in response to specific local challenges and priorities. In Egypt for example, (unlike in Turkey, Yemen, and South Africa) where women were barred from being judges and Islamic arguments were used to prevent women from holding these positions, Islamic femi-
nist activism helped win the day. In January 2005, the first three women were appointed judges in Egypt, one to the Supreme Constitutional Court. The call for women to be officially appointed as judges in Egypt, one in Johannesbur g. crossfire of lar ger political battles. These examples are just a brief indication of the work of Islamic fem-

7. What do you see in the future for Islamic feminism?

We can say that Islamic feminism is the solution. It is the solution to the problem of Islam and gender equality, and it should take. In other places, such as Egypt, there has been a long ongoing campaign to reform the Muslim personal status law. The still-new khul’ law in Egypt whereby women may initiate an annul-
ment process to end a marriage which includes relinqu-
ishment of financial claims (including any remain-
ing part of the dowry due them) has been acclaimed a success by some feminists but criticized by others as pa
ty. In Turkey women who committed Muslims and feminists are critiquing various patriarchal assen
tions advanced in the name of Islam, including the use of hadith (sayings about the words and deeds of Muhammad) of questionable provenance that are degrading and oppressive to women. In Yemen, in the context of a vibrant university-based women’s studies center, analysis of customary and Islamic gender practices became part of an intellec-
tual feminism without the name. The destruction of the center by hostile forces can be attributed in part to the center’s success, which found itself in the crossfire of larger political battles. These examples are just a brief indication of the work of Islamic fem-
nist in comparative perspective.

Follow-up interview in 2005

1. We spoke about three years ago on the topic of Islam and feminism. How do you see things today? What constitutes feminist projects within an Islamic framework?

I would like to make three observations of change since we last talked.

1. There has been a marked acceleration of interest in Islam and feminism, and particularly in Islamic feminism, a feminist discourse grounded in the re-
interpreta
tion of Islamic religious texts, most impor-
tantly the Qur’an. Muslims, both women and men, are looking at Islamic leadership and engaging in a transformative force in the lives of their societies and in their own individual lives. Non-Muslim Wiednerings are showing greater interest in Islamic feminism and have become aware that Islam and feminism are not contradictory as they had assumed.

2. Now, much more than before in Muslim societies, Islamic feminists (and they may or may not explicitly identify themselves as such) and secular feminists (who employ a multi-stranded discourse including secular nationalist, Islamic reformist, and humani-
tarian/human rights discourses, and who tend to freely announce their identity) are joining forces in promoting the cause of gender-justice. It is striking how the previous wariness that existed in the past between Islamic feminists and secular feminists has been diminishing.

3. Islamic feminist discourse has been, and continues to be, enriched by ongoing Qur’anic interpretive work. Fiqh, Islamic jurisprudence, continues to be scrutinized from a gender perspective in efforts to reform personal status codes or family legislation based upon the shari’a (Islamic law). Islamic feminism has been taken up by the younger genera-
tion, into the domain of culture in the broad sense of everyday life practices. And also in the sense of the arts: poetry, song, performance, and painting, drawing, and photography – examples come to mind of young Muslim performance artists in Indonesia and South Africa. The younger genera-
tion is carving out new spaces for less constrained lives for themselves within an Islamic society and are
to and insisting on refashioning. Islamic feminism is also expressed through Sufism, which has tradi-
tionally transcended or blurred gender categories, and continues to attract huge numbers of adherents around the world.

2. You have argued that Islamic feminism on the whole is more radical than Muslim secular feminism (Al-Ahram 2002). Can you elaborate on this? What are the ways in which Islamic/Muslim feminist and secular discourses of feminism can be placed in dialogue with each other?

Islamic feminism from its inception (at the end of the twentieth century) articulated a strong stand on gender equality, enunciating the full equality of women and men in public and private, real and virtual or family spher
es, Muslims’ emergent secular feminisms (first formalized in the early twentieth century) articulated a stand on gender equality in the public sphere but acquiesced in the notion of gender complementarity in the pri-
vate or family sphere.

Secular feminism located its notion of gender equali-
ty in the ideals of liberal democracy including the full equality of citizens. Secular feminisms, articulated by Muslims together with Christians, emerged during national independence movements in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. The focus was on “public” gender equality within a secular nationalist framework enunciating the equality of all citizens, whatever their religion, ethnicity, or gender, and asserting the equality of all human beings, rejecting the hegemonic colonial model and its blatant human inequalities. Secular feminisms articulated by Muslims went along with the model of the prevailing patriarchal family, concentrating on the reform of laws governing the family and the reform of men’s behaviors as husbands and fathers without challenging the fundamental paradigm. Toward the end of the last century, secular feminists, becoming increas-
ingly impatient with the gen-
der inequalities in Muslim family law and practice, began to join with new Islamic feminists who could bring to bear the power of a Qur’anic interpre-
tation of the Qur’an and re-
thinking of fiqh in the strug-
ge to effect reform.

Although Muslims’ secular feminisms called for full equality of women only in the public sphere, includ-
ing equal rights in work and the professions, secular femi-
nists did not take up issues of women’s equal access to the religious professions and equal ability to per-
form religious functions. A lack of puritan ideology – inequality – “implying” the concern of Islamic feminism. In arguing for advances on this front Islamic feminist discourse continued the elabo-
ration of the doctrine of full gender equality. In ways just mentioned, Islamic feminism is radicalizing secu-
lar feminism, or we can say, pushing it beyond its pre-
vious limits and limitations. Islamic feminism and sec-
ular feminism are porous and indeed from the start Muslims’ secular feminisms articulated Islamic feminism to stand and Islamic feminists are also situ-
ated in the real world. In strategic and practical ways,
both need to take into account the realities of the particular mundane worlds that they inhabit.

3. Many scholars have argued about the limitation of working within a religious framework to empower women, citing problems when religion is not only personal choice or belief but is legislated at the state level and has the possibility to be co-opted by the state in the service of politics (i.e. Iran and Egypt). What are your thoughts on this?

It is important to point out the practical and political problems posed by working within a religious framework, i.e. within an Islamic feminist paradigm, and this criticism can do, even hostile critics. But why toss out Islamic feminism simply out of fear that it can be co-opted by the state or exploited by conservative political movements? Secular feminisms, historically and in contemporary times, have not escaped co-optation by the state. The whole point, as I see it, is to re-define Islam, along the lines of eliminating patriarchal sexism and male-dominated interpretations of the Qur’an and other religious texts. New readings will be listened to by persons concerned with gender justice, whether or not these interpreters have official religious imprimatures, if they are perceived to be treating the sources with care and offering meaningful expositions. Amina Wadud, whose discipline is political science, comes to mind with her book “Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an.” The persuasiveness and power of her readings have had a wide impact around the world. You asked about my own “positionality.” I suppose you are referring to someone who was not born Muslim and who is not ostensibly Muslim, asking do people listen to my takes on religious texts? As you know, many years ago I was a student at Al Azhar and I return from time to time and engage in debate with some of the sheikhs. They listen to what I have to say, but if I argue, they will agree or challenge them based on what is said, not who is saying it. Of course, I wear no imma (the turban of the Azharite sheikh). I simply share my own ijtihaad. If people get hung up on who is speaking about Islam so be it. Some do. Some don’t. To answer your question: Yes, I am an Islamic feminist, I am a secular feminist, I am both together because, like most people, I use multiple discourses, discourses that support each other, not cancel each other, and inasmuch as discourses - and activism flowing from it - define us, I am both an Islamic feminist and a secular feminist. Yes, I claim both identities.

5. What has been the reception of your work on Islam and feminists by Muslims in general as well as the interpretive communities, specifically the orthodox ulema?

I suppose you must ask others about the reception of my work. But I can say in my travels I have seen that my work on Islam and feminism has resonated. It has produced discussion and debate, more agreement than disagreement. It is the engagement that is important. I also publish essays in the general press, mainly in Al-Ahram. I have had some success in this, because the response is immediate. The piece on “Islamic Feminism: What’s in a Name?” published in 2004-05 where you worked on Islamic feminism has resonated. It came out at the right moment, a moment when a lot of questions were out there. I was invited to the Centre for Islamic Legal Studies at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria to speak on Islamic feminism’s still young history. Nigeria is the only country with Islamic Hudud laws on the books where women have not been stoned to death for adultery. In defending Lawal and Hussein, I didn’t quite know how to take it!
Islamic feminists, Muslims as secular feminists, and other women's rights groups have the common goal of eliminat-
ing patriarchal thought and practices. Strategies and methods at some level are generic, but also spec-
ic to local contexts. Theory travels, including fem-
ism theory; it informs and supports local activist efforts. Thus, Islamic feminist theory grounded in Qur'anic reinterpretation and re-thinking of reli-
gious texts can be applied in specific ways at local levels, and this local experience in turn feeds back into theory. At the moment there are efforts under-
way in various countries that have Muslim personal status codes to achieve changes, or in certain Muslim minority countries. For example in India, Muslim women activists are pushing for limited legislation of Muslim marriage which in their eyes stands to give women protections, whereas progressive Muslim women in Chad have recently successfully fought against the institution of any shari'a-backed law as not serving the interests of gender justice. New interpretations of the Qur'an, and the refinement of interpretative methodologies offer tools for those fighting for gender justice in specific environments. There is not one solution for all. New collaborations are showing helping: Secular Muslims are increasingly linking up with Islamic feminists, as I have already noted. Islamic feminists are taking lessons from the secular movement and activist experience of Muslims' secular feminist movements. Secular feminists are accessing the new women and gender-sensitive religious interpretations of the Islamic feminists. They are pooling and sharing the benefits of new religious knowledge and the lessons of seasoned gender activists. As for cross-communal linkages, these happen at the local or country level – as also just seen in the case of Nigeria – as well as transnationally, regionally, and globally.

The network, Women Living under Muslim Laws, for example, includes women of any religious affiliation who are Muslims. From the start, WLUML has been an effective network for bringing together women from Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. For two decades members of this pioneering network have shared advocacy methods such as mobilization of alerts about violations of gender justice, and letter-writing and publicity campaigns. They have published documents and article collections, and have run innovative training sessions and workshops. An example of regional secular feminist work can be found in the African Gender Institute (AGI) at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, run by women who are committed scholar-activists. The AGI organizes conferences, hosts visiting scholars

and publishes Feminist Africa, a journal that appears online and in print form. The AGI offers a space where all women meet, whatever their reli-
gion – Muslims are among them – or strain of fem-

inism. Feminists in Morocco for playing a role in the most immediate sense work has to be done on the ground and in cooperation with those who will support their goals. Returning to the transna-
tional context, the quickest way Islamic feminists, Muslim secular feminists, and other feminists connect is through the Internet. Muslim secular fem-

inists and Islamic feminists take good advantage of cyber communication through their websites, list-

erves, chat groups and email. One of the most recently created electronic forums is Hot Goals, an online zine, published by the Abu Dharr Collective composed of seasoned theorists and activists resid-

ent in various parts of the globe. It recently successfully fought against the institution of any shari'a-backed law as not serving the interests of gender justice. New interpretations of the Qur'an, and the refinement of interpretative methodologies offer tools for those fighting for gender justice in specific environments. There is not one solution for all. New collaborations are showing helping: Secular Muslims are increasingly linking up with Islamic feminists, as I have already noted. Islamic feminists are taking lessons from the secular movement and activist experience of Muslims' secular feminist movements. Secular feminists are accessing the new women and gender-sensitive religious interpretations of the Islamic feminists. They are pooling and sharing the

benefits of new religious knowledge and the lessons of seasoned gender activists. As for cross-communal linkages, these happen at the local or country level – as also just seen in the case of Nigeria – as well as transnationally, regionally, and globally.

Concerning women's roles in religious life, I had mentioned, as you will recall when we spoke earlier, that a woman had given a pre-khutba, or pre-ser-
mon talk in a mosque, at a Friday congregational prayer, referring to Amina Wadud's talk at the Claremont Mosque in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1994, an act of considerable symbolic value. A step further was made a decade later when Wadud took up the role of imam, leading a Friday congregation-
ral prayer in New York (this time in a church which offered space when no mosque would accept a woman leading prayer) and again a few months later Pamela Taylor served as imam in a Friday con-
gregational prayer at a mosque in Toronto. These latest symbolic acts triggered off debate about gen-
der and the ability to lead a congregation of women and men in prayer.

We can also credit Islamic feminists along with secu-
lar feminists in Morocco and in Turkey for playing a role in accur-
ating the reform of the Moudawwana, the now most

progressive sha'i-backed family law to be found in Muslim countries. However, Indonesian Islamic fem-

inists, as religious specialists on a commission set up within the Indonesian Ministry of Justice, have pro-
posed a still more fully egalitarian draft family code. It remains to be seen when it will be adopted.

Islamic feminism can be then broadly understood as one strategy for Muslim women to struggle for women's rights from within an Islamic paradigm that is compatible with indigenous socio-cultural and religious locations. For if feminist scholarship considers feminism as not restricted to one culture or another, then feminism is indigenous. With indigenous feminism comes a variety of strategies of resistance that might not just entail resisting without complying – this might include understanding creative ways of using the sacred, as those explored in this interview. Women's strategies of resistance are situated as the forms of patriarchal and religious oppressions they encounter, which is how Islamic/Muslim feminists can also contribute to de-essentialist Eurocentric feminists discourse.

Working within the framework of religion and building progressive alliances with secular forms of fem-
inism have produced a new direction for women to engage with religion and feminism that is practical and holistic to their history, social, cultural, and political settings. The liberatory potential that Islamic/Muslims' secular feminists can offer, be it a form of identity, a project to re-examine the gender egalitarianism in Islam, a way of embracing the new modernity of the twenty-first century, of becoming "modern" – not at the expense of religion and culture but within the context of religion and culture, or a tool to push for Islamic reformism in the public sphere, and/or a way of claiming new roles and oppor-
tunities remains to be seen. One aspect we can be sure of: Speaking for and about Islam in this contem-
porary moment of globalization entails radical redefinition of what constitutes Islam and how it can pro-
vide progressive spaces for women to reclaim their religious self-identification in the twenty-first centu-
ry. I leave you with Fatima Mernissi's thoughts, "We Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but is a true part of the Muslim tradition."

Endnotes


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* Cited from Mernissi, F. 1991, “Preface to the English edi-

* This interview was first published in the Newsletter for the Center for the Study of Women (CSW) and Women's Studies Program at the University of California Los Angeles UCLA. Spring 2003, 5-7. Reprinted with permis-
sion.


On Activism: An Interview with Amal Sabbagh*

**Myriam Sfeir**

1. How do you define activism? Tell me about the pioneering work done by the Jordanian National Commission for Women and what it has achieved in the area of women’s political rights?

Sometime during the past few years I came across a webpage that classified terrorism as an activist action. Since that time I have been very careful with the use of the term “activism,” and think that the task of defining it has become a rather elusive and tricky one. This being said, I would rather not define it but talk about some of the work of the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) which can be viewed as comprising a group of activists within the conventional meaning of the word.

Since its establishment in 1992, JNCW considered women’s political participation as one of its priorities. Hence the National Strategy for Women and its update brought the issue to light, gave it a whole domain, stressing both political participation at the grassroots level as well as the national level. At the community level, JNCW’s role was pivotal in paving the road in 1995 for women to run in municipal elections and win for the very first time in Jordan’s history. This was achieved through intensive training of 99 women appointed as members of municipal councils. These appointments were made possible through the initiative of Her Royal Highness Princess Basma bint Talal, JNCW Chairperson.

However, the disappointment of the women’s movement following the failure of any of the 17 women candidates who ran for parliamentary elections to win prompted JNCW to team up with women’s NGOs to campaign for a quota system. Meetings with decision-makers and a two-week petition-signing campaign resulted in collecting 15,000 signatures, and making the issue a public one. The press joined forces and called for a quota for women. In 2002, JNCW held a national conference in preparation for the parliamentary elections of 2003, which demanded the adoption of a quota system. The large base of support that we built was also crucial in:

- a. making the quota system a public issue for debate,
- b. preparing the population in general for the idea.

We realized that the quota system introduced in 2003 was not flawless. In fact, the quota system was used successfully by small tribes, which could not compete with larger tribes except by resorting to the women’s quota system. The electoral system stays as is, or through “winnable” positions if the proportional system is adopted, or a combination of the two. We are seeking to have at least 15-30 percent of the seats reserved for women at different levels. Certainly this would help in creating a critical mass that would hopefully contribute to changing the prevalent stereotype of women’s role in public life. Moreover, it would ensure that women’s voices are heard.

2. What triggered your interest in calling for the adoption of a quota system in Jordan? The current number of seats reserved for women is six and I heard work is being done to secure another six. Can you tell me more about that?

Of course the 1997 elections were a turning point in convincing many women activists, as well as men, that a quota system is needed at least on a temporary basis to break the psychological barrier that exists to women’s representation in parliament. We were convinced that quota systems are effective tools to ensure representation of women in decision-making positions. It is a way of leveling the field, specifically in patriarchal societies, where the woman’s role is confined to the private/domestic sphere.

The quota system is provided for in the Jordanian electoral law. Seats are already allocated for minorities in Jordan (nine seats for Christians and three seats for Chechens/Circassians). In the recent debate over a new electoral law, some voices suggested the elimination of the quota system for all these groups including the quota designated for women. Certainly, this would jeopardize the efforts made by JNCW, as the national women’s machinery in Jordan, in partnership with the Jordanian women’s movement. Lessons learnt from other countries’ experiences demonstrate that the quota system has to be extended for more than one election to ensure effective results. In the Jordanian context, we need a longer time to ensure that the system yields the expected results.

3. What were the major obstacles you faced while working on introducing a quota system and how did you overcome these obstacles?

Working on women’s rights in societies in transition is never easy. In any traditional society undergoing modernization, some aspects may be easier to change than women’s issues. The latter can become very thorny since women are suddenly turned into symbols of a culture that people are afraid to lose.

In working for a quota system, there are also more issues at stake. Would the reserved seats mean less men in parliament, or would they be added over and above those seats already occupied by men? So a new type of hidden power struggle could evolve.

Of course there were some decision makers who dismissed the whole idea on the premise that “women are already equal (!!!), so why should we give them a quota?”

I believe that His Majesty King Abdullah II’s belief in the importance of women’s participation was the needed blessing to tip the balance after five years of advocating for a quota system. The large base of support that we built was also crucial in:

- a. making the quota system a public issue for debate,
- b. preparing the population in general for the idea.

Also the fact that the six reserved seats were added to the 104 seats that the electoral system allowed for rather than deducted, made the issue more acceptable to men parliamentarians.

**Endnotes**

* Dr. Amal Sabbagh is the Secretary General of the Jordanian National Commission for Women. She has held positions within the Ministry of Social Development in Jordan and was Director of the Regional Centre for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in the Near East (CARDNE).
In January 1999 a Jordanian pharmacist approached me following a series of documentaries on so-called honor crimes in Jordan that were broadcast on the American networks ABC and CNN. Because of my participation in those documentaries, the Jordanian Women’s Rights Award that I won, the issue of so-called honor crimes in Jordan was becoming a hot and public debate.

He commended me for all my efforts to bring the issue to the surface and proposed that we start a grassroots movement in Jordan not only to have this issue widely publicized in the foreign media but also to fight these brutal murders and bring them to an end.

The reasons behind his decision, as he stated them, were my expertise and the comprehensive knowledge of this issue that I gained working on it for over six years (back then). I welcomed the idea, since my main concerns were first to see an end to so-called honor crimes in Jordan and second the abolishment of all the laws that discriminate against women, especially laws used by court tribunals to enforce a lenient punishment against criminals ranging between 20 and 25 years depending on the circumstances of the case in question. Article 340, and referred its recommendations to the Upper and Lower Houses for debate. At the same time, the committee decided to toughen the punishment against adulterers “to prevent people from committing adultery.” His Majesty King Abdullah had instructed the government of Prime Minister Abdur-Ra’uf S. Rawabdeh in February of 1999 to amend any laws that “discriminate against women and inflict injustice on them.”

During the same year, the King promised leaders of Jordan’s women’s movement that he would back their drive to amend all discriminatory legislation, by stating that he “would support women’s cause... and considering the discriminatory laws, you have my full support. We should do something to amend them.” We used all kinds of means to collect as many signatures as possible. We used the internet, fax, free and paid ads in the newspapers and interviews on television and public radio to encourage Jordanians over the age of 19 to sign our petition.

Many people approached me personally asking for petition sheets to fill up in their own organizations or towns. We also divided ourselves into groups, visiting deputies, officials and various governorates to lobby against discriminatory laws and urge people to sign our petition.

Moreover, we approached the foreign community in Jordan and explained that we are not seeking any financial support from anyone, but rather a moral one. Our aim was to draw attention to the real positive efforts and changes taking place in Jordan. Besides, we promised to provide them with more information later on in the future.

Many people were convinced about what we were doing and signed our petition. Others argued with us about the whole matter and refused to sign it. Some feared the idea of signing a petition since such activities have always been banned in Jordan and many of those who signed were prosecuted or questioned by the security forces. Others were against what we were doing, arguing that women who committed a “wrongful and immoral act” deserved to die and killers needed to be protected.

This was evident in remarks made by conservative deputies and Islamists who accused the government of Prime Minister Adur-Ra’uf S. Rawabdeh and its discriminator y against women and inflicted injustice on them.

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Because of our drive to amend all discriminatory legislation, by stating that he “would support women’s cause... and considering the discriminatory laws, you have my full support. We should do something to amend them.” We used all kinds of means to collect as many signatures as possible. We used the internet, fax, free and paid ads in the newspapers and interviews on television and public radio to encourage Jordanians over the age of 19 to sign our petition.

Many people approached me personally asking for petition sheets to fill up in their own organizations or towns. We also divided ourselves into groups, visiting deputies, officials and various governorates to lobby against discriminatory laws and urge people to sign our petition.

Moreover, we approached the foreign community in Jordan and explained that we are not seeking any financial support from anyone, but rather a moral one. Our aim was to draw attention to the real positive efforts and changes taking place in Jordan. Besides, we promised to provide them with more information later on in the future.

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A week following our march, the senate reviewed the petition and the signatures to parliament. The public march was organized during that period and we presented it to the senate. With royal and governmental support, a public discussion on the issue started and we succeeded in many other ways.

A few months following the heavy debate in the Kingdom, committee members headed to some popular neighborhoods in Amman to talk to people and see the level of awareness they have regarding this issue. We also wanted to collect more signatures for future activities.

To our delight and comfort, almost 95 percent of the people we spoke to had knowledge of the problem of so-called honor crimes in the Kingdom. Many were eager to sign our petition and the rejection was less than five percent.

Unfortunately, the committee's work weakened following the Palestinian Intifada and the war on Iraq. Despite this, it is my belief that the issue was exposed for good and it is no longer a taboo subject. People in Jordan are proud that one of the most brutal violations against women was heavily debated in public and that people had the will and ability to express their views by signing petitions, which was considered a rare privilege at that point in Jordanian history.

http://www.jordanembassyus.org/Aug2499.htm

As put by Lower House Deputy Mahmoud Kharabsheh when he asked him about the proposed changes by the government: “Women adulterers cause a great threat to our society, because they are the main reason that such acts [of adultery] happen. If men do not find women with whom to commit adultery, then they will become good on their own.”

On November 21, 1999, a sweeping majority of the Lower House deputies rejected the government's proposal to cancel Article 340, describing the move as “legalizing obscenity.”

When the Upper House reviewed the Lower House’s decision, it decided to uphold the government’s amendments and returned it to the Lower House again. On January 26, 2000, and during a quick three-minute debate, the Lower House voted against the draft amendment again. Despite this disappointing vote by the Lower House and strong criticism by many, the campaign continued strongly. By February 2000, we were able to collect over 15,000 signatures. With royal and governmental support, a public march was organized during that period and we presented the petition and the signatures to parliament.

A week following our march, the senate reviewed the draft for the second time and upheld its previous decision, forcing a joint session to vote on this draft law. But a joint session was never held. Many people said that we failed in convincing the Lower House to abolish Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code. But to me, I believe we succeeded in many other ways.

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We launch our campaign by appealing to all citizens to take the initiative and sign this petition. We will also announce our campaign by appealing to all citizens to take the initiative and sign this petition. We will also announce our campaign by appealing to all citizens to take the initiative and sign this petition. We will also announce our campaign by appealing to all citizens to take the initiative and sign this petition. We will also announce our campaign by appealing to all citizens to take the initiative and sign this petition. We will also announce our campaign by appealing to all citizens to take the initiative and sign this petition. We will also announce our campaign by appealing to all citizens to take the initiative and sign this petition. We will also announce our campaign by appealing to all citizens to take the initiative and sign this petition.

The National Jordanian Campaign to Eliminate the so called “Crimes of Honor”

We are a group of Jordanian citizens who have no personal, political, or racial interests, but are gathered with one unifying issue as free individuals, which is our right to a good and safe life, free from violence in a society that protects the rights of all, which abides by the rules of the Constitution which assures equality to all in front of the law in rights and duties.

Through the years, our country has witnessed abhorrent crimes that are refused by every clear-thinking and honest Jordanian. These crimes were committed in the name of honor, and those who have committed them received very soft sentences, which in turn have encouraged their belief and that of others that the crime they committed is socially acceptable.

Since the victims no longer have a voice to raise, and since we jealously guard the life and the safety of all Jordanian citizens (men and women) and the right of each Jordanian to live in peace and harmony based on the respect of human dignity, individual rights, justice, security, fair trial and defense and because these crimes contradicted Islamic Law (shari’a), the Constitution and the International Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), we express our support of the decision of the Minister of Justice Hamzeh Haddad and the government, who, in moving to abolish Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code, have acted according to the spirit of His Majesty King Abdullah’s directives to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women.

Based on these principles, we decided to organize this campaign to practice our civil rights to demand that legislative, judicial and administrative authorities and the various national official sectors take all necessary measures and use all legal, democratic means at their disposal – judicial, legislative, educational and media – to eliminate this ugly phenomenon of the so called crimes of “honor.”

In the name of our sisters, daughters and mothers who do not have any voice, in the name of those who this minute unjustly suffer different forms of violence and injury to protect honor, with no one to protect them and guarantee their human rights, we raise our own voices.

We call for the immediate cancellation of Article 340 in its entirety, which gives reduction and exemptions to those who kill or injure in the name of honor.

We stress the need to implement the law so as not to waste any chance to punish killers and to show society that these crimes will not be tolerated. We stress the need to implement a fair and preventive punishment against anyone who commits crimes against women or a female in the name of honor.

We call on all the concerned citizens of this country to share our work to ensure that this initiative is a national effort which allows Jordanians to express their opinion and help the authorities to become aware of the public's directives in order for the authorities to take the appropriate and necessary decisions to protect the safety of dozens of innocent women who are victims of traditions and social norms that are outside the rule of Islam, the Jordanian Constitution and basic human rights.

We announce that we have prepared numbered petitions which contain five columns including the name, date, number of official document, phone number and signature. Jordanian citizens only, who are legally eligible to vote, will sign these petitions. Our aim is to collect thousands of signatures to emphasize the desire of a large percentage of voters to cancel Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code and to work intensively with all means available to abolish this inhuman practice.

We launch our campaign by appealing to all citizens to take the initiative and sign this petition. We will also announce some of the names of the first groups who lent great support to this national effort, which helped to strengthen our convictions of the necessity of this campaign.
Women’s Activism and Participation in Lebanon was the subject of a round table discussion held at the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World last October. The participants were Linda Abou Habib, Iqbal Doughan, Linda Matar, Mena Khalaf, Zoya Rouhana, and Diana Dabbouss-Senseng. The moderator was Marquie Helou.

Marguerite Helou: The subject of our round table is “Women’s Activism in Lebanon.” Based on your experience, is there a difference between women activists and women participants, and when can we call a woman an activist and when can we call her a participant in the public sphere?

Linda Matar: In order to answer this question I would like to know what are the criteria you are using to measure participation. In other words, what do you mean by participation? Is it more participation in activities organized by non-governmental organizations or demonstrations; or is the participant the initiator who organizes the activities? They initiate activities, and tries to overcome the difficulties. Some women believe in the cause and are convinced that their input can make a difference. However, there are others who only care about personal exposure and visibility. There are many whose sole aim is to be seen. If they don’t get the chance to sit in the front rows they leave.

Zoya Rouhana: Before I answer could you clarify more what you mean by activism and participation?

MH: I am going to propose a simple basic distinction between the two concepts to start with. Activism entails advocacy, strife, and volunteering. It aims at changing the prevalent situation in society. As an activist, I may not be directly suffering from discrimination but I am conscious of what is going on around me and I strive to change the situation by working to help others. I am working for the future to improve society as a whole. Participation, on the other hand, may not entail advocacy taking initiatives or at least it is not consciously intended to change the situation. Voting is one such type of participation.

ZR: I agree with what you said. I believe that participation has its reasons and considerations. I guess the word participation in a way diminishes the effort put in by women. Why should we differentiate between an activist and a participant?

Lina Abou Habib: In my opinion we are talking about different degrees of participation where activism is the utmost level of participation. It is important to highlight what you are participating in and what you are actually advocating. When we take Casablanca as an example, a million women participated in a demonstration that opposed the amendments of the constitution. Women were demonstrating against equality. So basically both participation and activism are for change, yet, this change need not lead to a positive change for women. As a concept, participation has degrees and the highest level of participation yields activism.

Iqbal Doughan: There are different degrees of activism and participation, yet, if we have a goal to change certain issues in society then all the individuals working on this subject ought to be a team. I believe that an activist is a person who is committed to a particular cause and considers it a top priority where it occupies a huge part of her life. However, I also believe that those who participate with her and assist her in her strife are also activists. Activists and participants both participate, yet the time and effort exerted by them differ because participants do not really have the time that activists have. That is why we see less and less young women activists given that they lack the time needed to volunteer. Hence, the levels of participation differ and the activist is the one who devotes all her life to a particular issue. Some participate in terms of their presence, others in preparing and putting forth a plan of action and strategy. Some activists will turn into activists but not all of them will. However, all activists will pass through the phase of participation where they train, learn, and gain experience to participate on some level. I believe that the more committed they get the more they are fit to be called activists.

ZR: A distinction should be made between women who are working and striving to make a qualitative and real difference in women’s lives and those who work for charitable or superficial reasons.

ID: Not all participation is charitable, there are some social aspects related to participation. Women volunteers working with the elderly and striving to improve their situation are bringing about a positive change, and hence can be considered social activists. Nowadays, we shy away from any charitable act and refuse to consider it activism. I believe those are activists in society, they are sacrificing their time and mobilizing their efforts for various causes. They fill in a gap where there is negligence.

MH: Is there a difference between the activists that were working during the independence period and the activists of today? Were they activists without passing through the phases of participation and training?

LM: A lot of the non-governmental organizations at that time were accused of being made up of women who belonged to the high society. The reason behind this was because many of the women who started working social- ly were well to do, bourgeois ladies who weren’t involved in any political work. Most of them had the time and means and were members of organizations that were engaged in social activities such as illiteracy eradication, etc. Their participation was seasonal and periodical. At that time women were allowed to engage in social and charitable activities but politics was a field relegated to men. Yet when the need arose, those same women took to the streets in the fight for Lebanon’s independence. Women from different areas, religions and organizations united, demonstrated and clashed with the occupying army. Even though these women recolled from the word politics refused to engage in any political activity, they were unconsciously very politically active and involved.
when they joined men in the fight for liberation. The fact that they demonstrated for independence was neither a charitable act nor a social one – it was a purely political act. Once independence was gained, those women retreated because they thought that with independence they would gain their full rights. Shortly after, they realized that this was not the case. However, there were certain women who prioritized their political role over their social or economic rights. Some of them were imprisoned, yet when women started to ask for their political independence the whole society approved and encouraged them to take part. So I strongly believe that when the goal is relevant and convenient to women, are encouraged to take part but when they start working on something that would benefit them as women they are fought and discouraged. Men usually use everything in their power to fight women, especially religion.

ID: That is why we should try to link men's issues to ours. The social security law is a good example. We worked for over 25 years to secure social security for those through their mothers. We were calling for the right of women to be considered breadwinners. We encouraged men to join us in our fight given that the amendment of this law would benefit men. And in fact, husbands started backing us because they realized that they are ameliorating the situation of the family given that they and their children were the primary beneficiaries. Mind you, not all issues can be won this way but we have to try. I believe that it is very important to raise men's and boys' awareness of and belief in women's rights.

LM: I agree with what you said, yet I would like to add something: No matter how important the cause is for you, it does not have the same weight – not only for men, but for other women as well. Women sometimes fail to support other women in their plight. Some women are convinced to stay at home and have men spend on them. So we need to enlighten men and women and the youth.

LAH: I agree, given that the ultimate aim is to change the power structure and this is very difficult to alter because men will not renounce their privileges easily. There is a very interesting study conducted by Elizabeth Thompson entitled Colonial Citizens in which the author studies the form and informal women's movement in Lebanon and Syria. According to her research, one of the reasons why women's movement after independence has to do with the fact that men decided to relegate women back to the private sphere. Even in terms of publications the gap is very wide. It is not a coincidence that women were used.

MK: No one mentioned the war Lebanon passed through. There was a momentum of the Lebanese women's movement, yet it had to stop during the war. No one was interested in giving women their rights because there were other priorities at the societal level. So women's issues were more or less ignored for 20 years and until about two years before the Beijing conference. So women's issues were not a priority. Of course there were individuals who were actively participating in the fight, but on the societal level there was no interest.

LM: I don't believe that the starting point was the Beijing conference but rather 1975, International Women's Day, because it was an important event for both the developing countries as well as the whole world. We used to say that the country comes first and then every other issue. Lebanon was represented in all the international conferences even though there was war. We were actively engaged in organizing conferences and seminars even though the war was raging.

MH: If we are to take the war period, we find that there was societal, regional and confessional acceptance of women's participation and activism. Women demonstrat ed, fought and worked. After the war women were asked to go back home.

MK: I disagree. Women didn't actually fight and we can't compare Lebanese women to Palestinian or Algerian women. Women were a support group but they weren't active participants in the war.

LAH: Women did participate in the siege of the camps. They were participants and were a support group.

MH: Why did you become activists? What triggered your interest?

DDS: Given that I was an only girl I wanted my father to love me more than my brothers so I used to compete with them. I was also driven by the desire that I was educated along with them, so whatever they did I wanted to do. Besides, I got involved in women's issues for personal reasons mostly related to my first marriage that ended in divorce.

My personal interest developed and triggered my academic interest in women's issues. I realized that when one is armed with education one has knowledge, can think and solve one's problems. Because I was discriminated against I relate to women who are discriminated against. Academically I can now comprehend the reasons why women accept their fate. To me an activist differs from a participant in that the former has the political knowledge, know how and maturity. Political consciousness gives one an agenda that enables one to analyze the problem and come up with a solution based on experience, political thinking and education. When you tell the participant that it is important for women to win their full rights, she might not fully comprehend all the aspects this involves. However, if I am an activist I am able to know exactly why men act this way and why they discriminate against women, and why they don't want them to work. Working to spread empowerment and independence, which in turn strengthens one's personality. I used to know that what was happening to me was wrong instinctively, yet, when we figure that there are more involved academically I was able to understand why. When one is in an abusive relationship one feels very weak and vulnerable. Abusive men rob women of all their privileges because they know that this is the only way they can control and terrorize them.

ID: Just like Dima, I was brought up with six other broth ers. I was the only girl and had special treatment from everyone in my family. My brothers supported me a lot. When I was 13, I joined a political party. This political party taught me how to be disciplined, work in a group and become a planner. It also influenced the formation of my personality. I remained a party member until I got mar ried. I had to quit my political work because of family issues. Yet I still felt the need to improve the situation of women. Since a young age I was interested in working on women's issues and I believe that as long as the personal status codes discriminate against women nothing will change. Hence, we are trying to amend the discrimina tory laws in the Lebanese legislation.

I strongly believe that women who work are more capa ble of changing their situation. They are capable of mak ing decisions on their own. Unfortunately, despite the fact that the situation of women has improved, the ingrained habits of the mind are still the same and so are the stereo types and discriminatory laws; they hardly go away or change. As a result we decided to found the Women's League in Lebanon. The purpose was to ameliorate the situation of working women by encouraging them to unite and join syndicates. We realized that women working outside the home are more eager to change things than women who are at home. We faced many difficulties at first in terms of logistics, funds and attitudes. A major problem we still suffer from is shortage of funds given that most of the funding we get is condi tional. We try to manage with our own resources but that is not easy. Besides, stereotypes prevail when one is fight ing for women's rights. Women are ridiculed and const antly criticized when they ask for their rights. For exam ple, once a politician made fun of the fact that we were trying to incorporate a clause related to sexual harassment in the labor law.

MH: To what extent are women politicians working on women's issue?

ID: MP Nayla Mouawad and MP Bahia Hariri have worked...
MK: It is our fault. We should be more involved and plan ahead of time if we are interested in being elected. We should look to do it now if we want to participate in the 2009 elections. We should start formulating a plan of action and publicizing our electoral program. Most essential is that we should work as a team and support each other. We should back those among us whom we think would represent us well. I disagree that men are not allowing us to enter politics; we are not helping ourselves.

ID: The electoral system is not helping either. Let's face it. I agree we are not working hard to pursue our rights but the system doesn't help.

LAH: The basic reason I got interested in women's issues was Aunty Georgette. She was a neighbor and a very good friend of my grandmother. Every two days she would flee to our house because her husband used to beat her up. We were young and didn’t comprehend what was happening. But we knew something was wrong given that Aunty Georgette always fled to our house with torn clothes. She told me that she wasn't safe in her house and it was a traumatizing experience to see her in such a state. Given that the beatings were recurrent we sensed the discrimination early on. Also when you attend a convent school you either try to abide by the system or rebel. One thing I wanted for my daughter was to put her in a nonreligious school.

MK: I too am an only girl. It was very fortunate to have three fantastic men in my life: my father, my husband and my son. I was born in 1947 and then attended the American University of Beirut. Yet, I do not feel that the convent school affected me negatively; because with time I needed five years to get the license from the government because such an issue was considered a family matter. One of the women who was summoned to court by her husband came into the house and threw my wife from the balcony. I can do it and no one has the right to interfere.

LM: My experience is totally different from the others. Since I was young I was very pampered but I was brought up in family that could hardly make ends meet. At every phase in my life I had question marks about so many things. My father was very liberal for his times, he wanted me to choose my spouse when the time came, which was according to his words, not before 20. But I fell in love and got married at the age of 17 to an Armenian guy against my brother’s will. My husband was very supportive.

I could not tolerate discrimination and I will recount one incident that affected me and made me interested in defending women’s issues. Prior to 1953, women were not granted the right to vote. During the 1953 elections, I saw our neighbor, who was physically and mentally retarded, being carried to vote. I was outraged because the poor guy knew nothing about what was going on around him and his vote was counted as a valid one whereas I wasn’t even allowed to vote. Around that period I was visited by two women roaming around collecting signatures for a petition that called for granting women the right to vote. I signed the petition and asked them if I could join them in collecting petitions and they agreed. In one of the houses there was a lady who told us, and I quote: “I am not signing anything, I don’t want any more rights. I have everything I need. I have all the jewelry I want, I have a car, and I have a maid at home. What do I want more?” Since that day I decided to join the League of Lebanese Women and founded a center in my area. With time I advanced and was elected president of the League and I am still president till this day. I also joined the Communist Party but after I became president of the League I didn't have time for the two so I left the Party.

MH: How flexible were parties in promoting women?

LM: Promoting women in parties stems from women’s willingness to invest time. Women sometimes don’t have the time to stay late and attend party meetings. Most parties and syndicates hold their meetings at night and this depends on the woman and how much she is willing to participate. No matter how understanding husbands and parents are they will not allow women to stay out very late.

ID: I disagree with you totally Linda, you are trying to give excuses why parties refuse to promote women.

LM: This is your opinion, but when I was a member of the Communist Party they tried to help me advance and give me the chance to occupy decision-making positions but I refused because I didn’t have the time.

MK: I know two women who wanted to move forward in the Communist Party, yet they were fought and they ultimately left. Each party has a few token women who rarely occupy decision-making positions.

MH: What about personal status codes, are you working on amending these laws?

LM: Religious laws prevent us from adopting a civil law. The personal status codes of all sects agree to discriminate against women. We are trying to amend some provisions within the personal status codes. What we are working on is increasing the child custody age. We are finding a lot of difficulty in doing so because religious figures are fighting against it. For example, in Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Yemen, and Iraq amended their laws on custody age. Only two sects in Lebanon managed to amend this law and they are the Greek Orthodox and the Evangelicals.

MH: Amending personal status laws is next to impossible. So don’t you think that women’s activism is condened as long as it is in conformity with the customs and traditions? When one addresses issues that are outside the scope of what is acceptable all hell breaks loose.

ID: There are issues that may be amended but others that are taboo, such as inheritance. If you decide to touch this issue with Muslim clerics you are considered a heretic.

LAH: Patriarchal systems are in favor of personal status codes. Hence, given that we are discriminated against we try to make do with what is available. Even though we might not reach any developments now or in the near future, the struggle has to continue. This should be our aim.

ZR: One has to admit that familial relations are unde-mocratic, controlling, and authoritarian in nature. Given that these relations are the norm, there is no way soci-ety will develop lest these relations become egalitarian. Women are the caretakers and they should enjoy equal opportunities to relay egalitarianism to their children. Activism should adopt as a starting point human rights in general and not just women’s rights.

MH: While bringing up their children, women sometimes reinforce the same culture by ascribing to their daughter everything relating to the private sphere.

ZR: We have to acknowledge that there is a prevalent patriarchal culture that is affecting men and women equally. Hence, our fight should be directed towards consciousness-raising to both men and women. Women and men are the victims.

ID: I agree with you but it’s the woman’s cause and women should work harder to attain their rights.

MK: Women are the ones who bring up the children be they boys or girls. It is thus their duty to raise their sons and daughters in a way that would put an end to the stereotyped and gender distribution of roles. It is only if they do so that there would be some hope for a positive change in the prevailing norms and traditions.

ID: How can you empower women who have no deci­sion making power at home, who are battered and dis­criminated against? Even if women succeed to raise their children in an egalitarian manner she will fail because she has no influence over her children. The children will be influenced by the father and learn what is right and wrong from him.

LAH: When you say the solution is in raising awareness and the target group is women, one is under the impression that women are the problem and this is not the case. I agree that raising awareness is very impor­tant but the focus should be on both genders not just women.
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An Untapped Resource with Growth Potential

... over the last decades, there has been an emergence and growth of women-owned businesses as an economic force.

Women in the Middle East and North Africa (MNA) comprise a large untapped economic resource. Indeed, a 2003 World Bank Report concludes that had MNA countries utilized their female labor force potential as other regions did, per capita income would have grown by an additional 1.7 percent during the 1990s. This would also have translated into a 20-25 percent increase in net family income had women worked outside the home. But the reality is starkly different; gender unemployment gaps in the region are the highest in the world with the female unemployment rate being six percentage points higher than the male rate (2003). This indicates that women in MNA are clearly at a disadvantage when attempting to access formal labor force markets. Despite remarkable gains in human development indicators – health and education – that put MNA ahead of other developing regions, women’s empowerment indicators (as measured by female labor force and political participation) lag behind. At 32 percent, women’s labor force participation is the lowest in the world. This is most likely due to the dearth of job opportunities in the public sector and the limited size of the private sector – which tends to absorb primarily men, who are still considered the main breadwinner in many MNA countries. Furthermore, women who manage to be employed by the private sector tend to occupy lower level jobs and earn less for the same work than their male colleagues – a situation that is common throughout the world.

International experience shows that the promotion of small- and medium-sized enterprises is key to economic growth and leads to improving the welfare of the poor and the underprivileged segments of the society through its impact on income. More specifically, over the last decades, there has been an emergence and growth of women-owned businesses as an economic force. For example, in the United States women-owned businesses continue to grow at twice the rate of all U.S. firms. The United Kingdom’s Department of Trade and Industry also recognized that female entrepreneurship is a key driver of economic growth. The Department concluded that if the U.K. had the same rate of female-owned startups as the U.S., the U.K. would have 750,000 more businesses with a major impact on productivity growth. Moreover, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Research Program (which measures differences in the level of entrepreneurial activity among countries) concludes that increasing the participation of women in entrepreneurship is critical to long-term economic prosperity and that (for most countries studied) the largest and most rapid gains in firm startup rates can be achieved by increasing the number of women participants in the entrepreneurial process.

Women’s entrepreneurship in MNA can be a solution to creating jobs for women (and men) and to promoting economic growth. Women in the MNA region increasingly aspire to participate actively in the formal labor force and to become entrepreneurs, investors and producers in their own right, casting aside the traditional image of women as restricted to the home. Given the great human resource potential of women in MNA (who are in increasing numbers graduating from post-secondary institutions), women’s entrepreneurship is a solution to women’s (and men’s) unemployment. In fact, women in MNA are also more likely than men to hire women (“female employment multiplier”). According to preliminary findings from investment climate assessments, women do in fact prefer to work for women-owned small- and medium-sized enterprises.

Women’s entrepreneurship appears to be increasing throughout the region, with the number of women entrepreneurs varying from 3 percent in some countries to 18 percent in others. One difficulty in determining the exact number is linked to the fact that the definitions of small and medium-sized enterprises vary from country to country – sometimes different definitions are even applied within one country. Moreover, many businesses in MNA are informal and not registered, or are registered as women-owned businesses without the women actually running the business – in order to retain the man’s privileges, employment, for example. Most female-owned businesses tend to be smaller than male-owned ones. Furthermore, there appears to be a positive relationship between educational attainment levels and female entrepreneurial success rates.

The majority of female entrepreneurs in the region are owners of informal micro and home-based businesses, mainly in the service sector. While many of these entrepreneurs have benefited from poverty alleviation programs, they did not sufficiently benefit from formal support structures. Studies indicate that the majority of women entrepreneurs’ gathered valuable experience through previous employment in the private sector – sometimes managerial positions provided them with the skills needed to set up their own businesses. While most female-owned businesses tend to focus on the services sector, they cover all sectors. For example, in Yemen as many as 77 percent of women-owned businesses are operating in the service sector; in Egypt, 59 percent of members of businesswomen’s associations are in the service sector. And in Morocco, the largest segment of women-owned business is also in the service industry (77 percent), while 31 percent of its female businesses are trade-related, and 21 percent are in the industrial sector. In Saudi Arabia, women’s 2002 aggregate investments were made mainly in industrial and service projects.

A number of surveys suggest that, surprisingly, financial incentives are not the key motivators for successful businesswomen to start their business. Women entrepreneurs’ contribution to the household income is a key factor in ensuring the important family support to MNA businesswomen. And the moral and practical support of male family members appears to be critical for the success of women-owned businesses. This, however, does not imply that MNA businesswomen are “less serious.” As in countries where women are highly educated, women’s main motivation for starting a business in MNA is the desire to be independent and to be able to apply all creative skills. Thus, not surprisingly, successful women entrepreneurs in MNA tend to be fairly young when they start their business and in general have more than a high-school certificate. Indeed, there is a trend in MNA countries that successful women entrepreneurs are more Internet savvy than their male counterparts, indicating that pushing the boundaries and moving into new growth sectors.

Women in MNA have the education and adequate resources to start their own businesses, but they are at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing networks and credit. Moreover, MNA businesswomen lack the supporting infrastructure.

Often, social-cultural barriers seem to be among the important obstacles to women’s entrepreneurship as they impact women’s mobility, and their access to labor markets. And in some instances they can include the requirement of male agents for business registration. It is not clear whether the marital status of businesswomen fur-
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Why are women so there are micro-credits with an aim of promoting poverty alleviation – which is reflected by the fact that women are known to be most reliable in repaying loans. Moreover, there are many instances where women have personal savings accounts that are used in private, lateral. In Saudi Arabia, for example, women are said to control up to $26 billion that is lying idle in Saudi bank accounts. And even career-oriented assisted, that women's personal saving accounts are – on average – larger than those of men, but are not being used for investments.

Yet, new opportunities for women's entrepreneurship in MNA are on the horizon. Commercial banks are increasingly realizing that targeting women customers makes a lot of business sense. For example, the Commercial Bank of Dubai has launched a “Shahrazade Ladies Banking Program” which – among others – offers discounts from department stores, preferential rates on personal loans, and access to car loans and overdraft facilities. This program also plans to provide networking opportunities to its female customers. But for the time being, few financial institutions in MNA are targeting women specifically – although some MNA banks (especially in the Gulf countries) have special women’s sections that are physically separated from service desks for men. What appears to be lacking, however, is that bank officers are not adequately trained in how to accommodate women’s financial needs. Sometimes it is just the type of women-run business (mostly in the service industry) that requires a different understanding of the proposed business plan (where, for example, inputs and outputs are not measurable goods as one would expect in an industry-focused business plan). New initiatives include the Moroccan women-run business program, which is a major effort to support women-owned small enterprises. One initiative is to improve access to networks and knowledge to market their goods outside of informal businesses. The survey found that women lack access to information, markets, social networks and financial capital which is partly due to new norms of gender appropriate behavior: informal businesses which are increasingly restricting Aden women to the home. Many such women choose to continue marketing because of being restricted to selling to other women and to having limited networks and knowledge to market their goods outside of their own neighborhoods. Women are more likely to license their male-dominated bureaucracy and public space was often cited as an impediment to entering the formal sector.

While access to finance remains a business constraint for both men and women, anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that women are facing higher hurdles. To begin with, most initiatives targeting women in MNA offer micro-credits with an aim of promoting poverty alleviation. This approach by itself has promoted a view that women are not capable of being borrowers of larger loans – which is reflected by the fact that women themselves are not confident to apply for larger amounts of financing and that bank officials don’t have the tools and skills to start small businesses, training, mentoring, and business information services.

Even though women in MNA are highly educated, (which has a positive impact on women’s technical skills as well as their competencies to run an enterprise, self- and co-operative development) women entrepreneurs across MNA are expressing a need for greater skills development services. This is also partly due to a lack of available market relevant (demand-driven) education. In the absence of entrepreneurial skills development centers, technical assistance to women entrepreneurs is increasing increasingly being offered by national businesswomen’s associations. The Moroccan Association des Femmes Chefs d’Entreprises has, for example, offered skills development courses ranging from management training, public speaking, and project management, to marketing and accounting. One notable public-private partnership initiative is the Dubai Women’s College and the Mohammad Bin Rashid Establishment for Young Business Leaders which is a new initiative between the College and the Government with a focus on entrepreneurship services. Currently donor support providing this kind of technical assistance is still limited, and not many entrepreneurs have been able to take advantage of such assistance in the past. Yet, it should be noted that the International Finance Corporation PEP-MENA Facility (located in Cairo) is planning to launch a two-year technical assistance program called the “Gender Entrepreneurship Markets (GEM) Program,” starting in September 2005 – with a focus on the underserved segment of growth oriented women entrepreneurs. Other technical assistance initiatives are also being planned by the US-funded Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI).

Conclusion

Educated women in MNA represent a large economic resource in the region, and increasingly women are successfully entering the formal labor market (and creating employment for others) by establishing their own businesses. Women face the same business constraints as men, but in addition they are having more difficulties in overcoming obstacles arising from bureaucratic, admin-
The book issues from workshops held in Africa between 1998 and 1999, and the body of empirical studies that feeds its theorization is mainly — though not entirely — African. Papers presented at the Johannesburg conference (1999) “confirmed that violence against women has reached unprecedented heights globally” (Pillay: 35). Pillay asks: What underlies violence against women? Why does it increase in “transitional” periods? She argues that violence against women is rooted in gender hierarchy and power inequality, giving it a widespread social acceptance, including both the political and the psychological: “The aggressive elements of “maleness” are linked to institutional violence before war begins, what is it all sites of struggle.” (61). Other contributors concur that “women must inhabit all sites of struggle.”

Though national liberation, civil wars, identity conflicts may have different effects for women, the aftermath of all types of war seem to lead to a loss of gains made by women during them. Codou Bop weighs social, economic and political gains and losses, and tries to explain “the fragility of women’s gains compared with the acuteness of their losses” (33). Though context may make a difference — e.g. ethnic or factional conflicts offer fewer gains to women than wars of national independence — the key factor Bop proposes lies in the “absence of a political perspective for transforming relations between the sexes” values but not sexist beliefs deserves our attention: Why is this so? (83)
The editors propose a theory of the "critical moment" as key explanation of why women fail to maintain gains made during war: "We came to the conclusion that the reconstruction phase is the time for women to assert themselves" (Meintjes, Pillay, Turshen: 10). Gender issues must be raised at the cuisp between war and peace. The acceptance by women's organization leaders of a subordin- ated status during conflict inequitably means their margin- alization in the aftermath. Because conflict reinforces the norms and values which have for so long served to devalue women, they tend to be more excluded from decision-making during war - even if they are combatants and leaders of combatants - and thus no longer negotiate. This exclusion may be decisive in negating their wartime gains.

Though a strong, unified women's movement appears to be a necessary condition for long-term gains, as in the case of South Africa, it may not be sufficient. As the Eritrean case suggests, a women's organization formed in a liberation war does not necessarily represent women's interests in the aftermath. Women leaders may be reward- ed by positions in the state apparatus, but to others - especially younger women - the state may bear the brunt of this transformation. Women's organizations may have to reconstitute themselves to regain influence in the post-war period. This may involve women's groups aligning themselves with men, or even giving up their autonomy to male leaders. In addition, women may find it difficult to maintain their influence during the transition period, especially if they are not part of the political leadership.

The focus of an earlier generation of feminist scholars on the ideology of national movement leadership is replaced in The Aftermath by attention to relations between the political, economic, and social spheres. This move has been made necessary by the perception that where the outcome of war for women is concerned there is little to choose between the political and civil spheres. The war may bring about a new order, which may bring about a punitive re-imposition of "gender normality." Women's unconsciousness of their war time gains and the need to defend those gains against the possibility of loss, also the breaking-up of women's "communities" formed during war, and the difficulty of translating women's grassroots activism to the national political level.

Since the "crucial moment" is likely to be lost by all women's organizations except those matured by long struggle (as was the case in South Africa), it is necessary to look at cases that appear to be exceptions to this rule.

Why in Haiti and among the Ogoni of Nigeria were women's organizations able to grow and develop under regime oppression, without any clear transitional moment? Why were rural women in Namibia able to demonstrate their continuing determination to defend their gains? These women have been in the domain of politics, and this is as true for women as it is for men. The presence of women peace activists in the "Aftermath" workshops can be felt in a number of cases, particularly Sideris, "Problems of Identity, Solidarity and Reconciliation." Two kinds of peace potential are signaled out in this chapter: i) in the reconstruction of war-torn societies; and ii) in relations building with other women across hostile national or ethnic boundaries. Yet the gen- eral micro-or macro-political resources needed to sustain the role usually assigned them in reconstruction is the passive and oppressive one of restoring "normalcy." In spite of many examples where women have acted energeti- cally to prevent or assuage conflicts, whether across national, ethnic or factional boundaries, as in Kashmir, Yugoslavia, and Nagaland, there is more here about frustra- tion than about accomplishment of political potential for postwar reconstruction lies in their unique relation to domestic institutions. Yet, paradoxically, "the very insti- tutions that play such a crucial role in the continuity of society embody the relations of power that perpetuate the subordination and vulnerability of women" (Sideris: 56). Postwar reconstruction will be incomplete if women and women's organizations are not included in these processes.
considering alternative effects of war on men's identity, either erosion of their manhood through inability to protect their families, or an aggregated masculinity that may find itself frustrated by peace. Either way men are likely to reassert their masculinity and power in the only sphere available to them postwar, that of the home. Cases that follow in the empirical section find strong correlations between male class subordination and domestic violence. Hence emphasis is placed throughout on attention to the creation of economic opportunities for men as well as women.

The editors of The Aftermath have targeted it primarily at international agencies, policy-makers, because of their conviction that international and national policies to stem violence against women have failed to tackle its deepest causes. “Our point of departure was dissatisfaction with many of the rehabilitation programmes, which are based on one of two approaches... either human needs or power.” (4). The Aftermath is written both for international agencies and against them, in the sense that global rather than national or local actions may create the conditions in which gender inequalities are exacerbated, or in which aid agencies, through faulty analysis, apply failing remedies. The human needs and human rights approaches lead, the editors argue, to advocating legal reform, protecting individual survivors, trying to change individual behavior, or offering material aid, none of which attack national, local or international frameworks that produce gender inequality. Indeed the policies of powerful actors such as states and international aid agencies, in conjunction with the “globalization effect,” are likely to exacerbate gender hierarchy: “wars and structural adjustment policies do not impact equally on women and men” (Boffo). Consideration that national policies is especially necessary because of increase in conflict and in international interventionism. Meniltes notes how World Bank and IMF policies increase the poverty of many Third World states, diminishing their capacity for re-training or employing demobilized women; World Bank pressures towards decentralization fosters the re-emergence of local customs, including female subordination. As Sideris remarks, international aid agencies need to recognize the social/political/economic causes of violence and men’s “in the discourse that legitimates male domination and female subordination” (Sideris 153).

The Aftermath also speaks to local women activists in the belief that they have much to learn from each other’s experiences, and from an analysis that covers both structural and ideological causes of inequality while including women’s actions and changing consciousness. Feminist activists outside war zones are called on to participate through understanding and solidarity in building new gender relations.
doesn’t want a complete stranger barging into her home with a journalist (who happens to have a camera on her shoulder) while she has guests! It beggars belief why it did not cross Khoury’s mind that this scene ought to also be cut from the documentary, which is a shame because the film’s subject matter is unusual, important, and interesting.

The most fascinating and shocking aspects of this film are the interviews with the three middle-aged women about their activities in the Palestinian national movement, their experiences in prison, and their relationships with their families during and after their internment. Aysha Odeh, a strikingly beautiful woman in her youth, was subjected to sexual torture (similar to the stories one hears today from Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and Abu Ghrabi in Iraq) which included being tied up and displayed naked (in front of male officers who touched her), as well as being beaten and raped. At one point Aysha alleges that she was violated with a stick:

No matter how much I screamed, they would not stop. I remember the pain. It seemed like it came out of the belly of the earth and would come through my body like a twister reaching up to the sky.

Despite the passage of time, the sexual torture made it difficult for Aysha to have a normal sexual relationship with her husband. So when he was exiled to Jordan it was a relief for her. But the pain did not stop there. Aysha’s sister, Rasmieh was also subjected to sexual torture. The Israelis used torture to force the sisters to confess against one another. In the film, Rasmieh describes an incident when she was brought into a room and made to watch a male prisoner get electrocuted after she herself had been tortured and stripped naked. The man died from the shocks. But for Rasmieh, the worst was yet to come:

Even though I was stripped naked and tortured in front of others, in front of my father the situation hit me at a different level. I was worried about my father; this was a very sensitive issue. I was worried he would die from this incident, as though something major inside him was destroyed.

Walls and fences have become a familiar sight for many Palestinians in the West Bank who have discovered that prison seems to follow them wherever they go. When Rawda Basir makes the difficult journey from Ramallah to Jerusalem to visit her friend Terry Bulata, Khoury skillfully uses the camera to portray the concept of imprisonment that most Palestinians have to live with now. And Aysha put it most pertinently:

You discover that you cannot get prison out of you. You carry it inside you. It confronts you with every detail. Your life in prison dictates to you your behavior to the outside world. In other words, you didn’t leave prison; you actually carried it with you.

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The film explores a fascinating subject but it is too long. At least 15-20 minutes could be cut. Khoury needs to keep the viewer engaged and interested. There is too much incidental information in the film that is not necessary for the message she is trying to convey. Khoury also presumes that viewers are familiar with the Palestinian question, and with the story of Jamela Abu Hared, when in fact they may not have any previous knowledge whatsoever of the Palestinian struggle for social justice. And since it is presumed that this film is primarily aimed at a Western audience (since it is subtitled in both English and French) more background information is required. This could be achieved with a voiceover or with maps and supplying additional material on the DVD.

Sadly, Khoury does not quite manage to convey the plight of the Palestinian people in the film, nor the pivotal role Arab women have played in Palestinian society and in their struggle for independence. Having said this, the film does contain rare and invaluable testimony to the appalling treatment meted out on Palestinian female detainees in Israeli prisons in the last quarter of the twentieth century.