

Re-defining Feminism/s, Re-imagining Faith? Margot Badran* on Islamic Feminism

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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.

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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 feminism/s, 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)²

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 has not always been the case. For a long time "Islam and feminism" has been considered an oxymoron in both the Muslim world and in the West, although for rather different reasons. In the Muslim world feminism has often been considered Western, irrelevant, and invasive, or simply redundant since Islam is acknowledged as giving women all their rights. In the West, feminism is deemed to be beyond the pale of an Islam that is seen to be excessively and irredeemably patriarchal. But more recently in both the West and the Muslim world, as you have observed, this has changed. In the West we must distinguish between society at 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-September 11. 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 and eyebrows raise in exclamations of surprise or disbelief. As for interest in Islam and feminism in the academy and among public intellectuals in the West, a rising increase can be traced to the mid-1990s as debates widened and took new turns in the Muslim world in the context of the continuing spread and ripening of Islamic resurgence and the growing attention to issues of religion and culture. The printed debates of public intellectuals in post-Khomeini Iran in the

You ask what this new debate and the wide interest in it means for Muslim women and feminism/s. Increased attention paid to debates on Islam and feminism/s provides the opportunity for protagonists to extend the reach of this discourse. At the same time it elicits a counter-attention that challenges these feminism/s. I think, however, that the increased visibility and attention is all to the good: feminist discourses within Islamic frameworks are enormously powerful and far more compelling than the counter-discourses based on limited arguments and tired platitudes. So I see this heightened focus on Islam and feminism as positive and as auguring well for the future.

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 as human beings (like men) their rights 1400 years ago and it is high time 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 gave to women as human beings and an affirmation of the gender equality and social justice embedded 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/s is the process of *ijtihad* (rereading and reinterpreting the Islamic sacred 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 – and because this oppression has also been linked to notions of honor – that a clear demonstration that oppressive behaviors and attitudes toward women are not only not Islamic but are *anti*-Islamic stands to have some effect. If some people do not mind committing *zulm* against women (or others) these people do not want to be seen to be doing so and certainly do not wish to be *seen* to be doing this in contravention of Islam; this does not bring honor. Of course, discourse – a new discourse in and of itself, 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 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 its clear declaration of the notion of full equality of human beings. The notion of the absolute equality of all human beings whether female or male alongside the recognition of biological difference and the roles of both sexes in procreation is powerfully stated. It took us as second wave feminists in the US and other parts of the West some time to work out issues of difference cum equality. Human beings are created male and female for the procreation of the species and as partner or *zawj* to the other (the same word is used for each member of the pair); they are biologically different but fully equal. The Qur'an relates that it is only through performance – the achievement of *taqwa* or "God-consciousness" (sometimes called piety), that the practice of the principles of gender equality and social justice into action distinguishes human beings from each other. I think that explicating the way gender equality and social justice are conveyed in the language of the Qur'an can contribute to the ongoing task of the elaboration of a universalist feminist discourse. An examination of the Qur'an can also help to dismantle the notion of the incompatibility of religion (as such) with feminism and can help us grasp the inter-meshing of the religious and secular in Islam and stimulate discussion about how this might work in other religious traditions and what the implications of this are for gender.

5. The act of naming Muslim women who are working towards women's empowerment within the Islamic framework as Islamic feminists can be a somewhat problematic classification (as the "F" word has been associated with colonialism, imperialism, or just because they are uncomfortable with the term and its implications). Imposing feminist labels and naming people/groups as such can 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-ascribed. 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/s when I saw some women behaving in ways that could be recognized as "feminist" but who adamantly refused the label I referred to their thinking and actions more neutrally as "gender activism," indicating that I was simply using this as a descriptive category. At that time I had never heard the term used but later, while in South Africa where I met women from different African countries, I noticed that some referred to themselves as "gender activists." This distances them from association with the term feminist, which for many still holds unacceptable colonialist connotations. Yet, other women refuse to toss out the powerful word feminism or feminist with the colonial bathwater. Indeed, some feminists in Egypt stress, "We had "feminism" before colonialism" and refuse to get bogged down in etymological debates. Women know the environments and historical moments in which they are operating. If they feel a label will be used against them they may prefer not to assume it. Yet, others may believe it crucial to name and claim their feminism and find this is integral to the empowerment process.

6. You are currently a Visiting Fellow at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) working on Islamic feminism in the Middle East and Africa. Can

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1990s on Islamic feminist questions certainly stimulated interest. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the waning of the hold of communism and socialism and the demise of the Cold War, a good number of leftist secular intellectuals and activists in Muslim societies embraced the ideology of feminism that they had formerly eschewed as "a luxury" or as diverting attention from leftist ideologies. Debates on Islam and feminism in parts of the Muslim world and in some circles in the West expanded in the context of a growing consciousness of the limitations of secularism and a critique of secularism that questioned the whole notion of the binaristic thinking that produced the "secular-religious" split in the universe of Islam.

you elaborate on this project and its importance 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/s. 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 feminist 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 *muftis* (those who dispense religious readings in response to specific questions posed) is, however, a cause yet to be won. In South Africa there has been a vibrant mosque movement aimed at expanded participation of women in congregational worship. Islamic feminists, who include women and men, have supported the practice of women delivering pre-*khutba* (or pre-sermon) talks at Friday congregational prayer. This has met with success in at least two mosques: one in Cape Town and one in Johannesburg.

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There has also been a move for women and men to occupy parallel space in the mosque during congregational prayer, instead of relegating women to the back of the mosque, to mezzanines, or to outside space, and indeed, this has become the practice at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town.

In Egypt, Yemen, and South Africa debates around Muslim personal status law are feminist issues that can and must be argued in the discourse of Islam. At the moment the question in South Africa is whether there should be a separate religious code regulating personal status for Muslims and what form this

should take. In other places, such as Egypt, there has been a long-standing campaign to reform the Muslim personal status law. The still-new *khula'* law in Egypt whereby women may initiate an annulment process to end a marriage which includes relinquishment of financial claims (including any remaining part of the dowry due them) has been acclaimed a success by some feminists but criticized by others as paltry. In Turkey women as committed Muslims and feminists are critiquing various patriarchalist assertions 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 intellectual 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 feminism/s in comparative perspective.

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 ridding Islam of gender and related oppressions, or *zulm*, committed in its name. Islamic feminism is the path towards recuperating the rights women are granted in Islam. It is a way to move from mantra to reality – toward the enjoyment in practice of the gender equality and social justice embedded in the Qur'an. Islamic feminism is on the roll. It has met with successes and will continue in this direction. This does not mean that the work ahead will be easy. It will not. But, whether we are Muslims or not in this globe of intermeshed peoples, Islamic feminism bodes well for all of us.

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-interpretation of Islamic religious texts, most impor-

tantly the Qur'an. Muslims, both women and men, are increasingly seeing Islamic feminism as a potent transformative force in the lives of their societies and in their own individual lives. Non-Muslim Westerners 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 humanitarian/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 is being taken, especially by the younger generation, 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 generation is carving out new spaces for lesser constrained lives for themselves within an Islam they are holding on to and insisting on refashioning. Islamic feminism is also expressed through Sufism, which has traditionally 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/s (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 realms – posited as a continuum rather than sharply divided

spheres. Muslims' emergent secular feminism/s (first formulated in the early twentieth century) called for gender equality in the public sphere but acquiesced in the notion of gender complementarity in the private or family sphere.

Secular feminism located its notion of gender equality in the ideals of liberal democracy including the full equality of citizens. Secular feminism/s, articulated by Muslims together with Christians, emerged during national independence movements in the early and middle decades of the last 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 feminism/s 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 increasingly impatient with the gender inequalities in Muslim family law and practice, began to join forces with the new Islamic feminists who could bring to bear the power of their re-interpretation of the Qur'an and re-thinking of *fiqh* in the struggle to effect reform.

Although Muslims' secular feminism/s called for full equality of women and men in the public sphere, including equal rights in work and the professions, secular feminism/s did not take up issues of women's equal access to the religious professions and equal ability to perform communal religious functions, a last bastion of public inequality – this would become the concern of Islamic feminism. In arguing for advances on this front Islamic feminist discourse continued the elaboration of the doctrine of full gender equality. In ways just mentioned, Islamic feminism is radicalizing secular feminism, or we can say, pushing it beyond its previous limits and limitations. Islamic feminism and secular feminism are porous and indeed from the start Muslims' secular feminism/s included an Islamic reformist strand and Islamic feminism/s are also situated in the real world. In strategic and practical ways,

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both need to take into account the realities of the particular mundane worlds that they inhabit.

3. Many scholars have argued about the limitations 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).³ 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 critics 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 feminism/s, 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 Islamic feminists are doing and not simply let patriarchalists continue their centuries long hi-jacking of Islam and casting it in their own misogynist image. If states and political movements were to take up the Islamic feminist vision of Islam and apply it for its own sake that would be excellent. But the possibility for states to use Islamic feminism, or bend it to their ends, as I have mentioned, is something to be rightly concerned about. States have done this in

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the past with secular feminism/s but no one proposed dumping secular feminism because of it. States need to be monitored and made accountable. Islamic feminism does not need to be jettisoned – this I see as another form of capitulation.

4. The debates on Islam and feminism beg the question of who has the right to speak for and about Islam. Can you comment on this question by taking your positionality into consideration? Do you/can you consider yourself an Islamic feminist?

Anyone can speak about Islam. If a person has knowledge and discernment he or she will be more

readily listened to. Anyone can undertake *ijtihad* or critical engagement with religious sources. If, for example, persons make cogent readings of the Qur'an others may take notice; they may think about the interpretation and consider arguments. The readings carry their own weight. Many of the new interpreters of Islamic religious sources, men and women alike, were not trained in the religious sciences as students in seminaries and Islamic universities like Al Azhar. Those who articulate gender-sensitive readings of the Qur'an and other religious texts will be listened to by persons concerned with gender justice, whether or not these interpreters have official religious imprimaturs, if they are perceived to be treating the sources with care and offer meaningful expositions. Asma Barlas, 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, to my arguments, 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 *ijtihad*. 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 also 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 feminism 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 Weekly* which I like because the response is immediate. The piece on

"Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name?" published in 2002 spurred interest and was translated into several other languages. It came out at the right moment, a moment when a lot of questions were out there. I was trained as an historian and my main interest has been to chart and analyze feminist experience in Muslim, and trans-communal, contexts. Although, like many others, I do my own *tafsir*, interpretation of the Qur'an is not my primary work. I do believe, however, that *ijtihad*, (rational investigation of Islamic religious texts) is open to anyone and that our understandings are enhanced by our own direct examination. You ask about interpretive communities and receptivity of my work. If you speak about the new interpretive communities, especially women, then I would say I feel that my work on Islam and feminism/s in Muslim societies, historically and contextually grounded, is generally well received. I have felt there is some kind of appreciation – maybe even relief – that someone raised outside the Islamic tradition has taken the trouble to study Islam, its ideas and lived experience, and to probe issues of gender justice in an Islamic context. But, of course, in my travels I have met those who think it is presumptuous or preposterous that, as they see it, an "outsider" should meddle in their religion and culture. But in secular contexts, turf wars in the heyday of identity politics in the 1980s were even fiercer. It goes with the territory. Several years ago I had an audience with the Sheikh Al Azhar, Muhammad Tantawi, (on a return visit to the institution that taught me) and gave him a copy of my book *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, which is an historical treatment of the secular feminist movement in Egypt (which had an important Islamic modernist dimension) in the first half of the twentieth century. He instantly ordered a member of his staff to read it and examine what it said about Islam and women. Later when the sheikh so charged told me that the book had been pronounced *halal*, I didn't quite know how to take it!

6. You were the recipient of an award by the Fulbright New Century Scholars Program for 2004-05 where you worked on Islamic feminism in Nigeria – can you tell us more about that project?

I wanted to look close up at the cases of two Muslim women – Amina Lawal and Safiyya Husseini – accused of adultery and condemned to death by shari'a courts under the new Hudud laws or Islamic penal laws in their respective states in the north of Nigeria and who were later acquitted in higher Islamic courts of appeal. I wanted to know how the

stories of these cases passed into local legend: how they were retold and the lessons drawn. I wanted to know more about the impressive and daring campaign mounted by women and men, and Muslims and non-Muslims, in the legal profession, scholarly community, and NGO world to defend the women and prevent them from being made facile victims or convenient scapegoats. In moving around the north and middle belt of Nigeria, I saw how the stories of the two women going from victim to victor had had a profound effect on people, women and men. Issues of gender and class were intertwined. There was wide offense that women and the poor should be victimized and made to pay prices from which men and the wealthy and powerful few in this poverty-stricken country were exempted. Debates around justice for citizens engendered by the two adultery cases and articulations and application of a progressive reading of *fiqh* constitute a milestone in 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 Husseini it was necessary to work within the framework of the Islamic penal code as formulated in the two northern Nigerian states where they were arraigned. This did not necessarily mean that their defenders, and people at large, had favored the enactment of Islamic penal law; indeed, there has been considerable opposition to this. It is to show, rather, the breadth of *fiqh* and how it can serve social justice if it is not bent to serve other ends. Last March, women and men across the professional and social spectrum gathered to continue debates around Islam, gender justice, society, and the state, that the two adultery cases ignited, at a conference organized by the Centre for Islamic Legal Studies at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria and the Security, Justice and Growth Programme.

7. What strategies and methods do Islamic feminists and Muslim secular feminists use, and how do they link up with other feminists in Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia? Are the strategies and methods similar or different? What does this mean for transnational feminist organizing?

Nigeria is the only country with Islamic Hudud laws on the books where women have not been stoned to death for adultery.

Islamic feminists, Muslims as secular feminists, and other feminists share the common goal of eliminating patriarchal thought and practices. Strategies and methods at some level are generic, but also specific to local contexts. Theory travels, including feminist theory; it informs and supports local activist efforts. Thus, Islamic feminist theory grounded in Qur'anic reinterpretation and re-thinking of religious 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 underway 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 Muslims in Canada 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 interpretive methodologies offer tools for those fighting for gender justice in specific environments. There is not one solution for all. New collaborations are also proving helpful. Secular Muslims are increasingly linking up with Islamic feminists, as I have already noted. Islamic feminists are taking lessons from the longer organizational 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, although most 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 circulation 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 religion – Muslims are among them – or strand of feminism. Feminists, of whatever kind, recognize that 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 transnational context, the quickest way Islamic feminists, Muslim secular feminists, and other feminists connect is through the internet. Muslim secular feminists and Islamic feminists take good advantage of cyber communication through their websites, listservs, chat groups and email. One of the most recently created electronic forums is *Hot Coals*, an online zine, published by the Abu Dharr Collective composed of seasoned theorists and activists resident in various parts of the globe. Muslims as secular and Islamic feminists from their diverse locations offer and receive instantaneous support. For the first time in history, patriarchal states are having a hard time continuing with impunity to perpetuate misogynist ideas and agendas, although they are doing their best to hold on.

8. In our first interview when I asked what you see in the future for Islamic feminism, you mentioned that it is “the path towards recuperating the rights women are granted in Islam... Islamic feminism is on the roll. It has met with successes and will continue in this direction.” Can you speak about this? Can you give specific examples?

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-sermon 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 congregational 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 congregational prayer at a mosque in Toronto. These latest symbolic acts triggered off debate about gender and the ability to lead a congregation of women and men in prayer.

We can also credit Islamic feminists along with secular feminists in Morocco for playing a role in achieving the reform of the *Moudawwana*, now the most

progressive shari'a-backed family law to be found in Muslim countries. However, Indonesian Islamic feminists, as religious specialists on a commission set up within the Indonesian Ministry of Justice, have proposed a still more fully egalitarian draft family code. It remains to be seen when it will be adopted.

Islamic feminism is above all a process. It is a path with significant milestones, but always a path and one that needs to be paved with the help of like-minded others. Islamic feminism's consciousness-raising has been effective and widespread. The pressing challenge is greater application.

Afterword Azza Basarudin

Islamic feminism can then be 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/s is indigenous. With indigenous feminism/s comes a variety of strategies of resistance that might not just entail resisting without complying – this might include understanding creative ways of resisting such 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-essentializing Eurocentric feminist discourses.

Working within the framework of religion and building progressive alliances with secular forms of feminism 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 feminism/s can offer, be it a form of identity, a project to re-excavate 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 opportunities remains to be seen. One aspect we can be sure of: Speaking for and about Islam in this contemporary moment of globalization entails radical redefinition of what constitutes Islam and how it can provide progressive spaces for women to reclaim their religious self-identification in the twenty-first century. 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

* Margot Badran holds an MA from Harvard, a Diploma from Al Azhar University, and a D.Phil. from Oxford University. Among her books are *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton University Press, 1995) which appeared in Arabic as *Raidat al-Harakat al-Niswiyya al-Misriyya wa al-Islam wa al-Watan* (published by the Supreme Council of Culture in Cairo in 2000) and *Opening the Gates: An Arab Feminist Anthology* (first published by Indiana University Press in 1999 and as a new expanded version in 2004) which she co-edited. Badran is currently completing a book on secular feminism/s and Islam, from an historical and contemporary perspective. She is also working on a book on comparative Islamic feminism/s for which she has done research in the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia.

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1. Cited from Mernissi, F. 1991, “Preface to the English edition”, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, New York, Perseus Publishing, ix.

2. 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 permission.

3. See Moghadam, V.M. 2002, “Islamic feminism and its discontent: towards a resolution of the debate”, in *Gender, Politics and Islam*. eds T. Saliba, C. Allen & J. Howard, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 15-52.

4. Mernissi, op. cit. p. viii.



On Activism: An Interview with Amal Sabbagh*

■ Myriam Sfeir

IWSAW

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 web page 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 municip-

pal 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 executive authority to introduce a quota system. Providing a quota system for women in the 2003 parliamentary election was one component of the "Jordan First initiative," which was developed by a royal commission.

Currently the government is considering a new electoral law, the debate on the most suitable law is still ongoing, JNCW and its partners decided to provide decision-makers with three scenarios that may fit any of the suggested proposals. Our demand is to have a quota system; this will enable women from all governorates to participate if

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.

We realize 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 sys-

tem. Our new proposals to the government try to circumvent such loops that may be abused.

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.

... women are already equal so why should we give them a quota?

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).

Combatting Crimes of Honor

■ Rana Hussein

Journalist, *Jordan Times*

In January 1999 a Jordanian pharmacist approached me following a series of documentaries on so-called honor crimes in Jordan that were broadcasted on the American networks ABC and CNN. Because of my participation in those documentaries and the Reebok Human 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 offer leniency for murderers in such crimes.

We decided to email our respective friends and any potential volunteers. Many people expressed interest and

over 20 people showed up for the first meeting.

Brain storming meetings were held on a weekly basis to come up with the best approach for raising public awareness, draw up strategies, and at the same time lobby the government to abolish laws that discriminate against women.

The number of people meeting regularly declined to 11 within a two-month period. A few months after our initial meeting, we decided that our first step and one of the best means to raise public and politicians' awareness was to organize a nationwide petition signing campaign. Such a petition was to be presented to parliament upon collecting a large enough number of signatures.

Another step was to hold a series of activities, which included preparing pamphlets that included information and statistics about the size of the problem in Jordan and holding lectures in public and private arenas to raise people's awareness about the issue and to encourage them to sign our petition.

The group also voted against working under any organization's umbrella or establishing our own organization

because we feared that going into such a matter could divert us all from our real goal: fighting for the right of life for women.

In August 1999 we held our first press conference, appealing to the public to join in and support our campaign by signing a nationwide petition. We wanted each and every Jordanian to know that he/she bears a responsibility in fighting for this noble cause.

As such we highlighted the fact that the numbers of women killed in Jordan annually in so-called honor crimes ranged between 20 and 25 and stressed the need to abolish Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code. (Eleven women were reported killed in 1999 until the day we launched our campaign.) We also explained that Article 340 includes two clauses. The first stipulates: "He who discovers his wife or one of his female relatives committing adultery (with a man) and kills, wounds, or injures one or both of them, is exempted from any penalty." The second states: "He who discovers his wife, or one of his female relatives with another in an adulterous situation, and kills, wounds or injures one or both of them, benefits from a reduction in penalty." The origins of Article 340 (copied from French Law by the Ottoman Turkish rulers, and incorporated in turn into our laws when the Kingdom was established) and its discriminatory inhumane aspects and implications were also stressed.

During the press conference we also pointed out a second article, 98, that was being used by the courts to enforce a lenient punishment against criminals ranging between three months and one year maximum depending on the circumstances of the case in question.

Article 98 stipulates: "He who commits a crime in a fit of fury caused by an unlawful or dangerous act on the part of the victim benefits from a reduction of penalty."

We finally announced that around 380 petitions had been distributed in the Kingdom and that group members and other supporters had managed to collect around 3000 signatures over the last two weeks before the official launch. We urged people to sign the petition to collect as large a number of signatures as possible to be submitted to His Majesty King Abdullah, Prime Minister Adur-Ra'uf S. Rawabdeh (then) and the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament to emphasize people's desire to abolish Article 340.

A month before the campaign was launched, a special

committee at the Ministry of Justice decided to cancel 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 concerning 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 urging 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 succumbing to Western pressures that aimed at destroying the Jordanian cultural values, tradition and women.



Rana Hussein



As put by Lower House Deputy Mahmoud Kharabsheh who told me when I 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 deci-

sion, 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.

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>

Forthcoming: The Role of Higher Education in Empowering Arab

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.



Round Table: Women's Activism and Participation in Lebanon

■ Myriam Sfeir

IWSAW

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 Lina Abou Habib, Iqbal Doughan, Linda Matar, Mona Khalaf, Zoya Rouhana, and Dima Dabbous-Sensenig. The moderator was Marguerite 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 mere participation in activities organized by non-governmental organizations or demonstrations; or is the participant the initiator who organizes the activities? How do you define an activist, the person who organizes the event, and who is the participant, the one who participates by the mere fact that she got invited?

MH: This is what we are trying to find out. We have no

set definition. We are hoping to come up with one once this round table is over. So basically my question is: In your opinion who qualifies to be an activist? And how is an activist different from a mere participant? What are the criteria we must use to make this distinction? Does it have to do with initiative, volunteering, or level of participation?

LM: There are two categories of participants. The first group is made up of women whose participation is generally sporadic and restricted to specific activities, either because of personal choice or due to lack of time. Members of the second group are more involved. Their participation is more the active rather than the passive type. Their involvement is permanent and they are active at all levels. This group – or at least a significant number of them – can be considered activists. They initiate activities, are highly devoted to the cause, and usually volunteer on a full time basis.

Defining activism and participation is very difficult because there are degrees of participation and activism. Some women may be considered active participants by the mere fact that they are present. Others are regarded as participants because they are involved in the discussions, sug-

gestions, and recommendations taking place. Hence, the degree of participation of these two groups is not the same; it differs with the commitment demonstrated. If a woman constantly participates in women's activities and has a positive impact in terms of her suggestions and opinions then I think you can consider her sort of an activist. An activist in my opinion is a woman who has volunteered to serve and be active in the fight for women's rights. No matter how difficult the task is, she plunges in 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 a 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 actively advocating. If we take Casablanca as an example, a million women participated in a demonstration that opposed the amendments of laws. 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 levels 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, etc. So some participants 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 socially 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 recoiled from the word politics and 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 that was not the case. However, there were certain women figures who played an important role in granting women their political rights, such as Ibtihaj Kaddoura, Laure Tabet, Emily Fares Ibrahim to mention a few. I remember when I joined the League of Lebanese Women's Rights, even though I was young and new in the field of politics, I knew that every social action or work to be realized needed to be backed by a political decision. So the question here is aren't we really involved in politics? This was the general trend.

Mona Khalaf: Which years are you talking about?

LM: 1976

MK: But in 1948 women were very much involved politically and denounced the occupation of Palestine. Those women went to Egypt and the Arab Women's League was formed under the leadership of Huda Shaarawi. The first pioneers had an upper hand because they were activists in the real sense of the word. They paved the way for us. In the early 1900s you were sometimes imprisoned because you were an activist. Back then there was no backup from the United Nations, there was no Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, no UN convention renouncing violence, no support from men or politicians, etc. Women were accused of importing Western values.

MH: Is the level of backup women receive related to the issues they are fighting for?

Lina Abou Habib: There is no doubt that the Beijing conference was a turning point. How things deviated over the years is something else. Yet, the international agenda does influence which issues and women's concerns are prioritized.

MH: When women participated in the fight for Lebanon's independence the whole society approved and encouraged them, yet when women started to ask for their political, social and economic rights there was disapproval. Is the level of acceptance and backup provided linked to the issue one is fighting for?

LAH: Yes, it is related but it is a double edged sword. The more important the issue, the more it is fought. If you can find support for an issue that does not mean that it is important for everyone.

Dima Dabbous-Sensenig: When women are fighting for a cause that benefits men or coincides with their interest it's ok because women can be used to take to the streets when they are needed. However, men expect them to go back home, sit aside and attend to matters in the private sphere when the goal is achieved. Hence, when she is needed she is used and after she helps out she is put on the side and robbed of all her privileges. So I strongly believe that when the goal is relevant and convenient to men, 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 children through their mothers. We were calling for the right of women to be considered breadwinners. We encouraged men to join in our plight 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 they 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 formal and informal women's movement in Lebanon and Syria. According to her, the regression of the 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 that stopped as a result of the war. Society usually views women as the ideal candidates to take care of the hungry, the wounded, etc. There was an agenda for the 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 demonstrated, 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 and wanted to prove to my father that I was equal to 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 attain most of their 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. Work leads to 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 I got 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 brothers. 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, think, and become a planner. It also influenced the formation of my personality. I remained a party member until I got married. 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 discriminatory laws in the Lebanese legislation.

I strongly believe that women who work are more capable of changing their situation. They are capable of making 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 stereotypes and discriminatory laws; they hardly go away or change. As a result we decided to found the Working 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 conditional. We try to manage with our own resources but that is not easy. Besides, stereotypes prevail when one is fighting for women's rights. Women are ridiculed and constantly criticized when they ask for their rights. For example, 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

a lot and they support us in all our requests. Yet, there are a lot of women in decision-making positions who are not interested in women's issues or in advancing the situation of women.

MK: It is our fault. We should be more involved and plan ahead of time if we are interested in being elected. We should start working from 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 Auntie 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 Auntie Georgette always fled to our house with torn clothes, bruised and crying. She would hide in our 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. I was very fortunate to have three fantastic men in my life: my father, my husband and my son. I went to a convent school and then attended the American University of Beirut. Yet, I do not feel that the convent school affected me negatively; because with time I succeeded in sorting out the values I was taught. I grew up in a family where I never felt discriminated against. My father treated me and my brothers on an equal footing, except when it came to going out at night. When I graduated from AUB with a B.A. I was offered a job as a research assistant. I was overjoyed so I rushed home to tell my mum. My aunt was visiting when I arrived and after I told them the good news my aunt couldn't help but say, and I still recall her exact words: "God keep your father safe and able to provide you with financial support. In our family, girls do not work." The prevailing mentality at that time was that if you could afford to stay at home then you should not work. Having a university degree at that time was a plus which enabled you to marry well and raise children adequately. My mother never worked and neither

did any of my relatives or people in my milieu so it was a shock to them. When my father came home, I told him about the good news. He was thrilled at the idea and supported me all the way. So ever since I never felt discriminated against. I also majored in Economics, a field that was a man's domain. I recall my professor encouraging me and the other two girls majoring in Economics to shift to Education.

ZR: I am an only girl. I was my father's favorite. I didn't experience any discrimination within my immediate family though my extended family is very conservative and patriarchal. There was a contradiction between the way I was brought up, within my own family and my milieu. I recall that it was the end of the world when girls in the family used to be born.

I got interested in women's issues at an early age. I was a member of the League of Lebanese Women until 1995. A turning point for me was when the Arab Women's Court convened in Beirut. The Court was a forum where women came to testify about the violence they were subjected to. My husband is very supportive and so is my family. The issue of violence against women was a touchy subject and our organization had a hard time getting a permit. We needed five years to get the license from the government because such an issue was considered a family matter. One husband told me: "It's no one's business if I want to throw 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 according to him was 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 one of the 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 a top ranking position within the party 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?

ID: 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 limit. We are finding a lot of difficulty in doing so because religious figures are fighting us. Many 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 condoned 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 taboos, such as inheritance. If you decide to touch upon 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 undemocratic, controlling, and authoritarian in nature. Given that these relations are the norm, there is no way society 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 educate 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 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 this woman tries to raise her 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.

Women Entrepreneurs in the Middle East and North Africa Region

An Untapped Resource with Growth Potential

■ Carmen Niethammer

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Women in the Middle East and North Africa (MNA) comprise a large untapped economic resource. Indeed, a 2003 World Bank Report¹ concludes that had MNA countries utilized their female labor force potential as other regions did, per capita income would have grown by an additional 0.7 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).²

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

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.³

International experience shows that the promotion of small- and medium-sized enterprises are 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.⁴ 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 other women ("female employment multiplier").⁵ According to preliminary findings from investment climate assessments,⁶ 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.^{7,8} 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 either not registered, or are registered as women-owned businesses without the women actually running the business – in order to retain the man's privileges of government 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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 businesses is also in the service industry (37 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.¹¹

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 assuring 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.¹² 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 women are increasingly 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.¹³ It is not clear whether the marital status of businesswomen fur-

Educated women in MNA represent a large economic resource in the region...

Special Features

thers or hinders women's entrepreneurship: Findings from Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen seem to suggest that marriage has an impact on the success of the women-owned business (possibly facilitating access to family networks and an appropriate work-life balance).¹⁴

The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor found that role models exert a powerful influence on prospective entrepreneurs in many of the countries studied. Historically, women in MNA have not occupied many high-level decision-making positions – either in the public or in the private sector. Although this number is notably increasing,¹⁵ MNA women entrepreneurs today still lack successful role models and access to businesswomen's networks. The good news is that some successful businesswomen's committees and support organizations have been forming and that women role models are becoming more visible.¹⁶

Having recognized that women are reluctant to register their businesses with chambers of commerce, there has been a recent trend of either targeting businesswomen specifically or establishing "women's departments" within chambers of commerce, which in turn has increased women's access to networks and role models. In October 2001, the Bahraini Chamber of Commerce and Industry elected its first woman board member, an active member of the Bahraini Business Women's Society. The 18-member Chamber also established a special businesswomen's committee within the Chamber with the objective to further develop the role of women in the country's economy.¹⁷ In Saudi Arabia, the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry has recognized women's important role in the economic sphere and women's business needs. To this end, the Chamber now targets businesswomen's issues by providing business services for women and by advocating their case.¹⁸ Government agencies focused on promoting women in general have also taken an interest in supporting women's economic participation. In Egypt, the National Council for Women established a Women's Business Development Center which functions as a "one-stop-shop" by providing businesswomen with the tools and skills to start small businesses, training, mentoring, and business information services.

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 officers put women's loan applications under higher scrutiny. This is despite the fact that

women have proven to be excellent re-payers of loans – certainly given the global micro-credit experience where women are known to be most reliable in repaying loans. Moreover, there are many instances where women have personal savings accounts that are not being used as collateral. In Saudi Arabia, for example, women are said to control up to \$26 billion that is lying idle in Saudi bank accounts. And in Yemen, one commercial bank observed 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 members special 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 to understand and 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 Regional Investment Center for the region of Kenitra which is embarking on establishing a special partnership with women entrepreneurs. In Iran, the Women's Employment Bureau of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs has allocated 40 percent of a competitive "Graduate Support Fund" to women entrepreneurs.

Even though women in MNA are highly educated,¹⁹ (which has a positive impact on women's technical skills as well as their competencies in entrepreneurship and business 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 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 Mohammed Bin Rashid Establishment for Young Business Leaders which is a new initiative between the College's business school and the private sector. Currently donor support providing this kind of technical assistance is still limited, and not many entrepreneurs have been able to access donor funded 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 related to access to finance, administrative and regulatory barriers, lack of skilled labor, and socio-cultural barriers. On a positive note, governments and private institutions (such as businesswomen's associations and banks) are moving in the right direction to support the new women entrepreneurs. The challenge for the region will be to ensure that such support is sustainable. To this end, the focus on skills services to women entrepreneurs and support initiatives that enhance women's professional networks are likely to play a key role.

Endnotes

1. World Bank. 2003, *MNA Regional Development Report: Women in the Public Sphere*.
2. ILO. 2004, *Global Employment Trends for Women*.
3. A July 2005 article in *The Economist* "Why are women so persistently absent from top corporate jobs?" cites a study that found that "women had 45.7 percent of America's jobs and more than half of master's degrees being awarded. Yet 95 percent of senior managers were men, and female managers' earnings were on average a mere 68 percent of their male counterparts."
4. See "UK strategic framework for women's enterprise" available at www.sbs.gov.uk
5. A 2005 International Finance Corporation (IFC) *PEP-MENA GEM Yemen Study* concluded that women-owned small enterprises create as many jobs as male-owned businesses (12 on average), but women were twice as likely to hire other women.
6. Investment Climate Assessments are used to identify and prioritize investment climate constraints, benchmark reform progress, provide cross-country comparisons of investment climate indicators, and help countries forge broad consensus on priority areas for reform. These country assessment reports ultimately feed into World Bank operations and technical assistance.
7. World Bank. 2005, *MNA Women Entrepreneurship Institutional Study*, draft report, June.
8. According to a 2003 study by Women in Business International, recent figures from Dubai indicated that over one third of new business registrations were made by women. (See "The role of women in the modern Arab world" by L. Hamed & A. Suleiman.)
9. According to the 2005 IFC *PEP-MENA Gender Entrepreneurship Markets (GEM) Study*, most successful women entrepreneurs had a tertiary education.
10. World Bank. 2005, op.cit.
11. Chamliou, N. & Yared, R.K. 2003, "Women entrepreneurs in the Middle East and North Africa: building on solid beginnings", paper prepared for the Annual Joint Seminar 2003 of

- the Arab Fund on "Arab Women and Economic Development", World Bank, Washington, DC.
12. World Bank. 2005, op.cit.
13. According to a 2005 World Bank Report entitled *Republic of Yemen: Women in the Local Economy of Aden* there are major impediments to increasing returns on women-owned 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 which are increasingly restricting Adeni women to the home. Many surveyed women cited problems with 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 neighborhood. Obtaining the necessary licenses in a male-dominated bureaucracy and public space was often cited as an impediment to entering the formal sector.
14. *ibid*
15. Moreover, having been persuaded of the business case for diversity, private companies like Shell Egypt are promoting women to high-level management positions – most likely in order to improve the company's performance based on the notion that mixed groups are better at problem solving than like-minded ones, and in order to reflect the diversity of their customers.
16. The Center of Arab Women for Training and Research's (CAWTAR) first Arab Women Development Report 2001 *Globalization and Gender: Economic Participation of Arab Women* points out that in 1999, the Arab Business Women's Council (ABWC) was established with which national businesswomen's associations from various Arab countries have associated.
17. UNDP-AS, SURF. 2003, "Women and chambers of commerce: case studies from the Gulf", April.
18. In Syria, women's committees within the Chambers of Industry and Commerce were established in 1999. In Yemen's Sanaa and Aden Chambers of Commerce, the establishment of women departments is more recent.
19. Girls' tertiary education doubled since 1980: Nowadays, 14 percent of girls vs. 20 percent of boys go to university.

The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation

Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and
Meredith Turshen eds.,
London: Zed Books, 2001.

■ Reviewed by Rosemary Sayigh

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H-NET MEDIA REVIEW - Published by H-Gender-MidEast <http://www.h-net.org/~gend-mid/> (June 2005)

This is an important book that takes up the questions left by a generation of studies that celebrated gains made by women during national liberation or revolutionary struggles. This generation of feminist scholars found reasons for optimism in the visibility of women in these struggles, and in the progressive gender ideologies and practices of many Third World leaders. With Algeria as a paradigm of the frustration of such hopes, the editors of *The Aftermath* begin from the basic question: Why is it that the gains made by some women during conflict are very seldom sustained after conflict ends? Where the first generation of "women and war" scholars privileged national leadership ideology as the primary causal factor in women's emancipation (or its absence), the editors of *The Aftermath* bring into their analysis a wider range of contributory factors: international donor pressures; national and local economies; the state, its policies and relations with civil society; structures of class, race, ethnicity, and sect; women's organizations, networks and consciousness; social constructions of male and female identities; and the way these factors interact and change through historical transitions. At the same time, their concern with a theory of causes has an undertow of practical urgency, as violence against women increases, and as conflict spreads throughout the South/Third World.

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, silencing women and subjecting them to blame, especially when the setting is domestic. There is a need for a gender analysis that goes beyond individual acts of violence to less visible forms of economic, cultural, and political violence. Indeed, a focus on the violence perpetrated against women during war may deflect attention from "normal" gender inequality and "invisible violence" in time of peace.

The ambivalence of the effects of conflict for women is expressed in the editors' introduction as well as in the case studies that follow. The observation that some women in some liberation struggles have made collective gains during war is set against another reality that can be stated as "there is no aftermath for women," or in other words,

that violence against women precedes wars, and continues during and after them, even if from different sources and in different forms. Thus, though the editors agree that there are different gender outcomes from different types of conflict (anti-colonial/national, inter-ethnic, class), yet even where leaderships advocate and practice gender equality in war zones (as in the case of Eritrea), the overall outcome of war's aftermath for women is usually the restoration of the gender status quo ante.

Theoretical explanations of male violence proposed here include both the psychological and the structural: "In socializing men to repress all that is feminine within them, society also requires men to repress and oppress all that is feminine outside of them" (Pillay: 43). Masculinity constructed in this way is raised to a peak by wartime conditions. Sideris also discusses the effects of war on male identities: "the institutions of war constitute exclusive male clubs, which are defined by hierarchy, authoritarian control, aggression and violence" (151). A deeper structural explanation is that in the most patriarchal societies, women are regarded as property whose value lies in their productive and reproductive labor. These vital bases of male dominance are controlled through controlling women's sexuality. A psycho-structural analysis suggests that male violence against women will not lessen until men have found a positive identity alternative to the aggressive model. The introduction of gender identities offers a way of connecting the levels of ideology and material conditions, retrieving a failed Marxist prediction of gender equality following women's entry into employment.

The paradox raised here in relation to gender and violence is that women are sources of value (e.g. material goods, offspring), yet their centrality to social survival and reproduction brings them neither power nor status. There is a similar paradox in relation to rape, that while communities and families consider it a heinous crime, it has only recently begun to be recognized as such by national and international law, and still finds little redress or personal compensation. These apparent paradoxes become understandable through "the recognition that patriarchal societies regard women as property," therefore necessitating control. One form through which societies and men assert rights to women's productive and reproductive value is through control of their sexuality. Any post-war challenge to men's control is likely to arouse male violence in proportion to their expectations of a restoration of the domestic status quo, i.e. the subjection and silencing of women. Not only men's expectations of peace are at stake, but their gender identity. War is a masculine business, and the aggressive elements of "maleness" are brought out through the practice of destruction. Turshen's comment that war erodes many "traditional" community

values but not sexist beliefs deserves our attention: Why is this so? (83)

The type of war itself also influences the degree of violence against women, whether during or after. War in general emphasizes collective identity, with women allocated special roles in its conservation, hence likely to be subjected to a "re-traditionalization" promoted whether by the weakness of the new state, international agency pressure, or the re-emergence of local custom (Turshen: 80). But as the wars of national liberation that marked the post-World War 2 period give way to wars of ethnic nationalism, identity becomes even more heavily involved and takes on an even greater potential for generating violence, as clearly manifested in the cases of Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, Congo, Mozambique, and Kashmir.

Important questions thus become: If women's gender identity makes them "internalize" the role of the victim, what can be done to modify this aspect? What conditions encourage women to stop silencing themselves, and to report violence? Since in many instances (e.g. Sudan) violence against women during and after war seems to be linked to institutional violence before war begins, what can be done to raise awareness of these less visible forms? Women must struggle for economic equality, since it is economic marginalization and poverty that most subject them to violence. But since the basis of violence against women is ideological as much as material, to focus on building up women economically (e.g. through micro-credit schemes) is insufficient, and may even be provocative. Comparing women's experiences of rape and sexual violence in Mozambique and South Africa, Sideris proposes a broad band of solutions: enforcing constitutional and legal rights; transforming local justice systems; increasing the presence and profile of women in political decision-making structures; ensuring the economic empowerment of women and men; supporting women's grassroots networks as well as their national, regional and international ones; and addressing social constructions of masculinity (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"

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(33). The most extreme and long-lasting of losses has been in the domain of politics, and this is as true for Europe after World War 2 as in the contemporary South. One important reason is that women themselves have accepted that women's interests are subordinate to collective national interests. Especially in national and revolutionary struggles in the South, the Maoist concept of principle and secondary contradictions has been deeply influential. Women's organizations formed during anti-colonialist struggles have had "satellite status;" in turn "their lack of autonomy has contributed to the absence of a political and ideological vision... to transform gender relations" (31). In the negotiations that end wars, "gender issues are virtually ignored." This suggests that an essential condition for long-term change is a "strong women's movement... that bears a plan to transform gender relations" (34).

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 too late for women to assert themselves" (Meintjes, Pillay, Turshen: 10). Gender issues must be raised at the cusp between war and peace. The acceptance by women's organization leaders of a subordinate status during conflict inevitably means their marginalization in the aftermath. Because conflict reinforces the non-transparency of (male) leadership, women tend to be more excluded from decision-making during war – even if they are combatants and leaders of combatants – and from the negotiations that follow. This exclusion may be decisive in negating their wartime gains.

Though a strong, unified women's movement appears to be a necessary condition for sustaining 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 rewarded by positions in the state apparatus, but to others – especially women from rural areas – peace may bring a punitive re-imposition of "gender normalcy." Women's unconsciousness of their war time gains and the need to defend them may be another cause 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 for their inheritance rights without the backing of a strong women's movement? Perhaps we should ask whether observation of women's movements that win victories in adverse conditions may offer useful models to others in terms of structure and modes of operation? A second objection we might raise is that possibly no change in gender relations, whenever it is achieved or whatever form it takes, can be final and permanent. Current conflicts and their aftermaths do not offer a sufficient time span to judge this question. The contributors to this volume rightly remind us of the tenacity of sexist beliefs, and of women's collusion in reproducing them. Even in cases where women have made real legal and political power gains, as in South Africa, violence against women has increased. In other cases such as the Ogoni, the end of conflict merely meant a shift in perpetrators of violence from forces of the state to members of the community. Yet whether or not it is validated by time, the theory of the "critical moment" has value as a warning to women's organizations to resist "secondarization" and formulate their demands without delay.

Women's networks formed during war may also be a source of empowerment, for example in refugee camps or, as in Kashmir, in communities under siege. The post-war break-up of these associations as women return to home and domesticity is seen by the editors as "at the heart of the failure to consolidate wartime gains" (Meintjes, Pillay, Turshen: 10). Though national women's unions generally survive the end of conflict, they easily become hierarchized, and lose their wartime capacity to mobilize women at all social levels.

The focus of an earlier generation of feminist scholars on the ideology of national movement leaderships is replaced in *The Aftermath* by attention to relations between the post-war state and civil society. 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 post-war regimes, whether progressive, Marxist, or neo-colonial. Similarly an earlier attention to the expansion of women's roles in wartime, and relations between men and women combatants in the battle zone, has shifted to what awaits women as they return (or are prevented from returning) to "home." Change in gender ideology among a leadership stratum does not necessarily lead to broader societal change. Hence Turshen's essay on the state and civic society begins with the dual regime that regulates women: "At least two legal regimes govern women's lives simultaneously: the statutory regime of the nation-state and the customary regime of their natal household or clan" (78). The second is hardest to change. Whereas new states sometimes feel obliged to enact progressive gender laws, these may be resisted at the local

level, and by customary courts. It is in the aftermath of war that resistance to gender change is strongest among most men and senior women, cropping up even in democratic states such as Zimbabwe. Whatever its ideology or enactments, the state is generally unprotective of women's claims. Indeed Turshen argues that there is a close relationship between women's centrality to productive and reproductive labor on which the state depends, their invisibility in politics, men's control over women's sexuality, and the role of social violence in maintaining this control. Post-colonial states often carry on systems rooted in colonial regimes, for example the way these increased men's economic resources in order to increase productivity, taxes, and capital accumulation. By entrenching gender hierarchy, states are able to lower the cost of reproducing labor.

An earlier generation of feminist scholars observing activist women in anti-colonial struggles viewed them as agents of social change: as transmitting progressive gender ideology from political leaderships to families; as models for younger women; as enacting a new model of woman, actively engaged in the public arena yet respectable; and as forming organizations expected to articulate women's claims in the era of reconstruction. But war conditions may conceal deep reservations that publics may hold about gender change, so that obstacles blocking change in society at large only appear after conflict ends. These aftermath studies reveal many sources of limitation to the influence of activist women and their organizations. They underline: i) the gap in gender ideology and practice between battle zone and hinterland; ii) the absence in most national and revolutionary movements of programs of gender change directed at society at large; iii) post-war decline of ruling party interest in, and support for, women's organizations, with a variety of other consequences. For example, the "women's wing" of the Marxist-inspired EPLF (Eritrea), was loaded with social tasks as well as "women's issues" but at the same time under-funded (Hale in this volume). Demobilized non-elite women militants could not find jobs, nor re-integrate themselves into rural communities; men and senior women demanded that they return to pre-conflict norms of women's domestic labour. Finally, though a few women leaders found jobs in the new state, the marginality of the women's union left women as a collectivity with minimal influence or representation, in spite of their long history of militancy.

The desire for "normalcy" shared by most members of war-torn societies is a powerful factor in weakening wartime campaigns for gender change. Local systems of gender hierarchy are likely to be strengthened by factors such as the poverty of new states, their narrow popular bases, and World Bank policies favouring decentralization.

Ethnic conflicts fought around "identity" are most likely to lead to "re-traditionalization." As a powerful influence in the restoration of "normalcy," religion may emphasize women's centrality as pillars of moral order; in Sudan the NIF government mobilizes women as "markers of Islam," dissolving the boundary between state and civic society. Concepts of "normalcy" differ along gender lines: Men define it as a return to the gender status quo ante; women may want to build on wartime gains, or they may feel that pre-war values that supported them have been irretrievably lost. The local level becomes devalued in peacetime: Women may have been crucial to community survival during war, as household-suppliers, or grassroots activists, and afterwards they may be active as NGO organizers. But the restoration of "normalcy" is likely to mean marginalization of women at both state and local levels.

Restoration of gender "normalcy" is not only harmful for women, it stunts their potential for peace building, an important consideration for the contributors to *The Aftermath*. The presence of women peace activists in the "Aftermath" workshops can be felt in a number of texts, 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 general marginalization of women after conflicts' end means that the role usually assigned them in reconstruction is the passive and oppressive one of restoring "normalcy." In spite of many cases where women have acted energetically to prevent or assuage conflicts, whether across national, ethnic or factional boundaries, as in Kashmir, Yugoslavia, and Nagaland, there is more here about frustration than accomplishment of this role. Women's potential for postwar reconstruction lies in their unique relation to domestic institutions. Yet, paradoxically, "the very institutions 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 restoration of normalcy disempowers individual women, while national women's unions have not assumed or been allocated an active role in post-war reconstruction. This in spite of many types of healing activity that women in conflict have undertaken, from forming prayer groups, to appealing to international authorities (Bop: 23).

The failure of most postwar reparation systems to include women or compensate them for loss is well substantiated here. Women are seldom compensated for losses suffered during war: of home, relatives, or property, or damage through rape. Loss of home is a blow that many women do not recover from. Most truth commissions established so far have not given women either compensation or jus-

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tice, because their "gender neutrality" has not encouraged women to participate or, if they do, to speak of personal loss or damage.

Gender identity, men's and women's, recurs as a theme through all the theoretical chapters, indissolubly linked to other major themes – violence against women in war and peace, social reconstruction and peace building, state/civil society relations, gender inequality. Arising from consideration of female identity are questions with implications for gender change activists around women's potential for agency: most women experience violence done to them as part of their gender identity – is victimhood therefore a constituent element of women's identity? Can they resist subjection? Does it serve women's interests if they use specific aspects of their identity, for example motherhood, thereby expanding their social and political role? What contextual factors encourage women to report violence against them or actively claim property rights? What makes one woman choose an identity as peacemaker while another in the same society chooses to be a militant nationalist? A point underlined by all the writers is the need to pay attention to variation in women's situation produced by local and historical specificity. Yet one senses an implicit question underlying all the others: Is the universality of women's subordination a sufficient condition for their solidarity across frontiers to prevent violence? Recognition of the power of structure over consciousness prevents even posing this question. Yet the text of *The Aftermath* is seamed with instances of struggles affirming women's capacity to overcome socially imposed passivity.

In countries of the South, elements of women's "traditional" identity – especially the maternal component – is often a basis of mobilization, legitimizing women's action in the public arena. This has been the case in Nagaland, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Kashmir. Speaking about their experience of war, Mozambican women "identified mothering as a fundamental source of resilience" with the result that "their consciousness of themselves shifted to include a sense of strength and capacity" (Sideris: 50). The transition from war to peace may allow women to lead healing movements or resume ritual roles (Turshen: 83). The reservations of some feminists and progressives about this phenomenon are carefully weighed by de Alwis in her paper on Sri Lankan "Ambivalent Maternalisms," and defended within a perspective of historical contingency.

Consideration of violence inevitably raises the question of male as well as female identity. Male identity as a topic recurs throughout the pages of *The Aftermath*: in relation to colonialism, war, violence, "normalcy," social hierarchy, property, leadership. Several contributors call for work on alternative, more positive models of masculinity. Sideris

considers alternative effects of war on men's identity, either erosion of their manhood through inability to protect their families, or an aggrandized 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 reconstruction programmes, which are based on one of two approaches... either human needs or human rights" (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 behaviour, 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" (Bop: 28). Consideration of the effects of external policies is especially necessary because of increase in conflict and in international interventionism. Meintjes 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 against women "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.

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Women in Struggle

Buthina Canaan Khoury
Palestine: Majd Production Company, 2005.
56 minutes, 1 CD-ROM. \$150

Reviewed by Victor Kattan

Arab Media Watch, London

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"I am not the person responsible, the occupation is."

Buthina Canaan Khoury tackles a difficult subject in her first feature documentary *Women in Struggle*. The film is about four Palestinian women imprisoned in Israeli jails for various offences, ranging from the serious, (providing safe houses for members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, surveying targets and planting bombs), to the less serious (waving the Palestinian flag, which was prohibited before the 1993 Oslo Accords).

Most of the film centers on the lives of three middle-aged women: Aysha Odeh and her sister Rasmieh Odeh, who were both sentenced to life in prison but spent ten years in detention; and Rawda Basir, who spent eight years in prison. These women joined the resistance in the 1960s and 70s, after Israel occupied what remained of Palestine in the June 1967 war. Towards the end of the film a younger Palestinian woman called Terry Bulata is interviewed. She was imprisoned several times in the 1980s during the first Palestinian intifada – a national civil uprising that lasted from 1987-93.

The film starts off strangely, with Aysha Odeh watching a movie on a TV set where a young girl is tortured and

thrown into a bucket of water. In the next scene, Odeh is driving the car while Khoury is filming. On approaching a checkpoint (one of hundreds scattered throughout the West Bank), Odeh and Khoury enter into an argument with an Israeli soldier. The soldier is complaining because Odeh didn't bother to queue up with the hundreds of other Palestinians who had been waiting at the checkpoint all day. Instead she overtakes them on the wrong side of the road and then enters into a pointless argument with the soldier. Khoury's intention was probably to elicit the viewer's sympathy by highlighting the suffering and misery caused by Israel's prolonged and belligerent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and its impact on Palestinian life (such as restrictions on movement). But entering into a semi-coherent argument with an Israeli soldier (who probably does not want to be there) over the rights and wrongs of the occupation is not the best way to go about doing this. This scene as it is adds nothing to the documentary and it should have been cut.

Similarly, the next scene with Rawda Basir is out of place. In this clip, Khoury follows Basir from Nablus where she currently lives, to see her former home in the old city of Arab East Jerusalem. Rather embarrassingly, the current occupant, a Christian Palestinian woman called "Mary,"

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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 Ghraib 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.

The film explores an interesting 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.