

Arab Diaspora Women

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Portraying the lives of North African and Middle Eastern women and girls in places as diverse as Argentina, Canada, France, India, and the United States accentuates the artificiality of the concept "Arab diaspora." As many of the articles in this file point out, a constructed sense of group identity was initially externally imposed. It was based more on the defining power of host societies than on any common denominators easily recognized by the respective Arab immigrant communities themselves.

Historically, Arab pioneer migration was predominantly Eastern Mediterranean and Christian, either from Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, or Palestine. These first generation migrants often had more in common with neighboring, early 20th century Greek, Southern Slav or Italian diaspora communities in the Americas, Australia or Western Europe than they did with the predominantly Muslim societies from which they came. This was nowhere more obvious than with the issue of gender.

Until the collapse of the European colonial empires after World War II, Arab emigrants settled mainly in the traditional countries of immigration, i.e. North and South America, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. As

Europe began to recover from the effects of the Second World War, the ensuing shortage of labor led to a large scale recruitment of young, able-bodied men from North Africa, South Asia, the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caribbean. A significant number of these new immigrants were Muslim and as the "guest workers" stayed on to form immigrant communities, migration became increasingly feminine. This laid the foundation for one of the most contentious issues surrounding Arab migration to the West, i.e. the role of Islam in determining the position of women in industrialized, liberal democracies.

This issue of *Al-Raida* covers a wide variety of topics, encompassing seemingly unrelated issues such as war, the arts, forced migration, motherhood, the ICT communications revolution, the anti-colonial rebellions in the Middle East, and the roles played by religion and politics in the self-construction of Arab diaspora community identities. It deals with a timeframe of over 100 years and, with the exception of Australia and Africa, covers all significant regions of immigration. On the surface, most of these articles share only one common denominator, i.e. their focus on women and girls from North Africa and the Middle East. As editor of this file I hope, however,

that the reader will soon realize that these contributions also reflect the manner in which Arab diaspora women have gradually begun to take control of their own fate; defining themselves in opposition to both the prejudice inherent in their host communities and the entrenched gender traditions still predominant in their countries of origin.

In the first four articles of this file, the authors deal with the often politicized nature of the role of Arab women as seen from within their immigrant communities and from the perspective of the majority populations in the West. María del Mar Logroño Narbona deals with the conflicts that rocked the Syrian and Lebanese communities in Argentina with respect to French occupation of the Middle East after World War I. She highlights how this issue impacted the portrayal of Arab women in the diaspora print media. Along similar lines, Nina Sutherland deals with the collapse of the French colonial empire in North Africa and how refugee and migrant women from Algeria began to gradually redefine themselves. Rachel Epp Buller introduces four artists, from Algeria, Iran, Morocco, and Palestine, who deal with the thorny issue of the Muslim women's covering in very personal and contradictory ways. The hijab, like no other symbol, clearly marks the transition from the historical, predominantly Christian Arab emigration of the past, to a modern, overwhelmingly Muslim exodus.

Gunther Dietz and Nadia El-Shohoumi deal with a phenomenon which is typical of the traditional countries of emigration in the northern Mediterranean. As they gradually became more modern and secular in the late 1980s and 1990s, countries like Greece, Spain and Portugal experienced a wave of predominantly Muslim labor immigration for the first time. Drawn by job openings in the burgeoning Spanish economy, as a result of European Union accession, North African women were caught in a triangle of cultural alienation, which they shared with post-fascist indigenous women.

These four case studies, which all make important points about the history of women in the Arab diaspora, are followed by two articles with a strong cultural-sociological emphasis. In "Arabs, Copts, Egyptians, Americans," Phoebe Farag demonstrates how current day Egyptian Christians are torn between multiple identities, which have unique implications for Copt women in the United

States. Helen Vallianatos and Kim Raine report on the way giving birth in Canada can contribute to a mutually experienced sense of Arab female identity. In both articles, the authors offer insights into the way being "the Other" in a largely benign environment makes Arab women aware of the costs and benefits of living away from a "homeland" that they largely only know from a visitor's perspective.

The final section of this file is dedicated to personal, anecdotal, and self-reflective opinion pieces, interviews and reports about distinctive aspect of the Arab diaspora. In an interview with Guita Hourani, *Al-Raida* managing editor Myriam Sfeir asks LERC's director how her experience as a refugee and emigrant in North American and Japan, during and after the Lebanese Civil War, has affected her work as an administrator and scholar in the field of diaspora studies. In "'Aqlah Brice Al Shidyaq: A Woman Peddler from Northern Lebanon," Guita Hourani tells the story of a pioneer Lebanese migrant to the United States, whose individual courage, perseverance and integrity laid the foundation for her family's future. Hourani illustrates that 19th century Arab emigration was also feminine. During the 2006 Summer War in Lebanon, the Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC) monitored the mass evacuation of Lebanese dual nationals and summer visitors of Lebanese origin. In "Gender Mainstreaming Forced Migration Research," Hourani and I reflect on the difficulties inherent in developing gender sensitive research methods in the midst of a crisis situation.

Rita Stephan recalls how the introduction of the internet transformed the nature of Arab-American feminist activism over the last two decades. Based on personal experience, she underlines the link between the anti-colonial Arab struggle and the fight for gender equality.

Running parallel to Stephan's portrayal of Arab female activism, Nancy Jabra tells the story of Lebanese activist women in southern California. In a personal opinion piece, Jehan Mullin deals with the exclusion of Lebanese daughters of foreign fathers from Arab society, because of the sexist nature of Middle Eastern citizenship laws. Finally, Naine Athalye, an Indian graduate student, describes how she "discovered" the Arab diaspora community in her native town of Pune City, and discusses how Muslim Arab female students rediscovered and redefined their own identity in a largely Hindu environment.

