



Arab Women and Activism

Activism is a term widely used to describe a broad range of activities carried out by individuals, groups and organizations. No single definition of the concept is fully comprehensive or universally accepted. While certain activities may be termed activism by some, they may not be considered as such by others. What constitutes activism is a controversial issue and is likely to remain a culture- and time-bound concept.

In planning for this issue, it was our hope that it would cover as many of the Arab states and of the various types of activism as possible. This proved difficult to achieve. The articles that we received in response to our call for papers covered only six Arab states. Despite this, they provide valuable information and material for comparative research. The issues treated by the contributors, the questions they raise and the information and analysis they provide constitute an important addition to the literature on the topic and an incentive for future research.

The file on women's activism starts with an attempt at defining activism and highlighting some of the issues and questions worth investigating.

Leslie Lewis's article on women's activism in Egypt compares secular-oriented women's activism with Islamist activism within their social and economic, and political contexts. A comparison is made between motivations, goals, obstacles faced, as well as the underlying assumptions and explanatory frameworks guiding their work. The author raises the question of the ability of action-oriented activism to cross class boundaries and affect political change, thus leaving us to wonder whether Islamist action-oriented activism is a form of political activism or not.

In her study on Palestinian women's activism in the post-Oslo period, Sophie Richter-Devroes provides a summarized account of all types of Palestinian activism. She shows that while the original motivations of Palestinian women activists were national-political rather than feminist, the social restrictions imposed on women have led to the rise of a feminist consciousness out of a female consciousness. How much the challenge posed by this to the patriarchal structure, accepted during times of conflict, will continue to be accepted during times of peace is one of the issues raised by the author.

Two important questions are also raised in this article. The first is that concerning the nature of and prospects for the success of joint Palestinian-Israeli peace activism. The provided discussion of the problematic assumptions underlying this cooperation can be helpful in investigating the ability of action-oriented activism to cross class boundaries and affect political change within the same state and culture (raised in the article on Egypt) given the impact of fundamental power inequalities and different socio-economic backgrounds on such ventures.

The second question is one for thought. Is *istishhad* (martyrdom), whether carried out by men or women, a form of activism?

An issue that has had too much bearing on Arab women's activism, mainly secular-oriented activism, is having to deal with accusations of inauthenticity, Westernization and sometimes heresy. This is due to a real or perceived incompatibility between Islam and feminism both in the West and the Arab world. This issue, raised directly or indirectly in almost all the works included in this file, is the subject of the interview with Margot Badran conducted by Azza Basarudin. Emphasis is placed by Badran on the need to distinguish between religion and culture so as not to attribute to Islam the anti-Islamic practices resulting from the patriarchal culture. The change in Western attitudes towards Islamist feminism and the possible contribution of the latter to the elaboration of a universal feminist discourse are discussed reflecting Badran's optimism regarding the narrowing of the gap between secular and Islamist feminism.

Zangana's article on Iraq is an important study. It raises the question of how NGOs can be real or perceived instruments of foreign policy and the implications of this in its work. This question is increasingly raised in international and local politics and in almost all third world countries. It is becoming a weapon by which governments fight NGOs and vice versa.

NGOs are nowadays major recipients of foreign funding. They are considered partners in development. Public perception of their roles, goals and funders determines their chances of success or failure in achieving desired objectives. The issues raised in this article are not restricted to the relation of the inside with the outside. Similar ques-



tions can be raised on how much organizations, especially in the pluralist interest groups system, can become instruments in the hands of local politicians in the struggle for power. This article leaves us wondering whether the Arab world needs more NGOs or a functionalization of, and more cooperation and coordination among, the existing ones. It directs attention to the need for objective research on such issues.

From Jordan, Rana Hussein reports her experience in mobilizing public and political support for bringing crimes of honor to an end. The obstacles faced are highlighted, especially that of working against established socio-cultural norms and values, a problem faced in almost all Arab countries. In her account of her experience Hussein, directly or indirectly, draws attention to the difficulty of enacting change in favor of women's rights in male-dominated decision-making centers.

This falls in line with the interview conducted with Dr. Amal Sabbagh which concentrated on the "quota for women" demands in Jordan. Sabbagh also highlights the need to include more women in the decision making circles as a prerequisite for change in public attitudes towards women as well as in the content of the laws on the rights of women.

The personal status laws, a hot and controversial issue in Lebanon, are the subject of Nisrine Mansour's article. Adopting a broad definition of, and a developmental

approach to activism, linking it with participation and empowerment, Mansour investigates the institutional factors that affect women's participation in personal status issues. She explores the official and nongovernmental discourses as well as the legal and the informal religious and social structures and their implications.

In the study of the women's mosque movement in Cairo Leslie Lewis provides an important perspective on this form of Muslim women's participation. She traces the beginnings of this movement, its social composition and the motivations behind it. The live examples given by the author help highlight the main issues. The author's conclusion raises a question often brought up by scholars in various fields of social sciences: How much did the failure of the secular nation state in living up to public expectations provide the fertile soil for the spread of religious fundamentalism?

The file concludes with a round table discussion which hosted a number of Lebanese women activists. It aimed at investigating the participants' definition of activism, the reasons that were behind their involvement in such activity, and the factors that facilitated or obstructed their work.

It is our hope that this issue of *Al-Raida* will be a valuable addition to the knowledge on the topic and an incentive, not only for further research, but also for real change to ensure gender equality and respect for human rights.

Marguerite Helou

Documentary

Women in Time

Profiles of Activists in the Lebanese Women's Movement up to 1975



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Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World
 Lebanese American University
 P.O.Box 13-5053
 Chouran, Beirut 1102 2801
 Lebanon
 e-mail: iwsaw@lau.edu.lb