

Arab Women in Latin America

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This special volume of *al-Raida* on “Arab Women in Latin America” makes a timely contribution to the scholarship of Levantine migration to what used to be called the New World, and which has inexorably linked the Levant and Latin America for well over a century now. It is well-known that the collapse of the late Ottoman Empire at the turn of the last century and the open immigration policies of Latin American countries were the main drivers behind Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian migration to the region. Much less understood, however, are the experiences of Arab women and the role they played in both cultural preservation and integration into the distinct host societies, in large measure due to a lack of archival documentation and the implicit unreliability, however useful, of oral family histories. It is this largely ignored lacuna that the following pages attempt to address.

Two major themes may be gleaned from the scholarly contributions included in this issue of *al-Raida*. The first is that Lebanese and Arab women’s experience in Latin America, from the Caribbean basin to Latin America’s southern cone, was defined by continuous negotiation between patriarchal values “brought over” from home and those prevailing in the host society, including the appropriateness of women’s labor, even after the emergence of feminism in Latin America. Second, Arab women’s experience was influenced by nationalist self-definitions of the host countries, in turn affecting women’s role in facilitating their family’s integration into the new environment. This is true particularly with regard to the question of race and class in Latin American history.

Authors Stephanie Román and April Mayes join José Najar to note



Mariam Haddad de El Hage with two children en route to Argentina from Lebanon, 1951. Centro Argentino de Investigacion Sobre la Inmigracion Libanesa (CAIIL)

that race functions as a category of considerable cultural anxiety in both the Dominican Republic and Brazil, where large concentrations of African peoples settled from the earliest days of slavery, and has influenced the collective image of Arab women in countries promoting whiteness and modernity. In “A Patriarchal Rite of Passage: Arab Women’s Migration to the Dominican Republic and the Gendered Politics of Immigration History”, Román and Mayes argue that Levantine women were considered sufficiently “white” to fall in line with the prevailing Dominican national ideal, relentlessly pursued by the authoritarian policies of such leaders as Rafael Trujillo, of Europeanizing the island. Thus, Levantine Arab women’s “straight hair” categorized all Arab immigrants as racially desirable in the model nation and facilitated national and economic integration. In “Race, Gender, and Work: Syrian-Lebanese Women in Turn-of-the-Century São Paulo”, Najjar counters previously-made arguments of Syro-Lebanese immigrants as neither white nor black by distinguishing between racial and cultural whiteness (and by extension blackness), a long-standing distinction in Latin American debates about civilization and barbarism that was best articulated in that classic of Latin American letters, Faustino Sarmiento’s *Facundo: Civilización y Barbarie* (1845), which denigrated indigenous culture in favor of a superior Europe. The implications are clear: by occupying an “in-between” space, Arab immigrants were largely spared the structural barriers to national integration proscribed by race.

José Najjar makes a far more critical point in his study, however, one that is doubly relevant for an understanding of Syro-Lebanese women in Brazil. In looking at the figure of the Arab peddler (in Portuguese, *mascate*), a foundational myth in immigrants’ self-image as economic pioneers, he argues that the peddler bears a close resemblance to the Brazilian notion of the *bandeirante*, the colonial-era scout figure who set out to explore and settle the national territory of what later became Brazil. He critiques this masculine ideal of Arab migration historiography by declaring that Levantine women immigrants also served as peddlers at the turn of the century and that they became self-made merchants in their own right, as the case of Lebanese women Josefina Bardawil and Lamia Diab make clear.

From the articles that follow it is clear that scholarship on Arab women in Latin America suffers from the double-edged sword of sparse archival documentation and a marginal, if not an altogether neglected, role in oral family histories, adding significance to Miriam Ayres’ moving family chronicle of multiple generations of Lebanese Brazilian women in “Fading Photographs: Recollections of the Chouf in Caparaó”. In tracing the important, indeed key role, of women in the preservation of family lore and remembrance, she points out that their story is almost literally left out of the frame, like those missing women in the photographs she describes.

If Arab women’s experience is marked by cultural and racial negotiation in the Dominican Republic and Brazil, the case of Levantine women in Chile, most of who hail from historic Palestine, adds further detail to a migratory map of women whose social and political activism in the Americas has been pronounced while running parallel to events in the eastern Mediterranean.

In “Immigrant Arab Women in Chile during the Renaissance (*Nahda*) 1910s-1920s”, Sarah Limorté examines the Chilean Arabic press contemporaneous with late Ottoman

reformism and to find a deep concern with Arab women's education in Chile, a standard trope of *nahda* modernist thought. Limorté argues that women's education assumed political meaning linked to the perceived superiority of European women and the need to present an acceptable picture of Arab women to the Chilean upper bourgeoisie, which Levantine families longed to join. Contradictorily, the article also highlights the cultural anxiety, evident among opinion writers in the Arab press, stirred up by Arab women's loss of virtue as they gained access to a modern education.

By reading Cecilia Baeza's "Women in the Arab-Palestinian Associations in Chile" alongside Limorté's article a narrative of Arab women's gradual engagement in public life emerges. Her study traces the emergence of women-only charitable organizations in the 1920s, which mirror the establishment of similar associations in the Levant during the rise of Middle Eastern nation states. These charitable associations were an important outlet for women's civic engagement in the host society and a training ground for later political engagement. In the 1980s, Palestinian-Chilean women begin to challenge mixed-gender community organizations for positions of leadership on behalf of the Palestinian cause, to mixed success. One of the outcomes of this, the article concludes, is the gradual dwindling of women-only organizations in Chile.

Together, the articles in this special volume of *al-Raida* offer a snapshot of similarities and differences of Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian women's experiences in diverse Latin American settings. Similarities, because in confronting male-dominated cultures both at home and abroad Arab immigrant women were subjected to a double patriarchy, even though women contributed economically as peddlers and petit merchants from the outset of their arrival. The differences are a natural consequence of divergent ideologies among Latin American nations, with differing conceptions of race and ethnicity, and thus with different barriers to social and economic integration. As such, this current volume points in new scholarly directions for the field of Arab Women's Studies, one that bridges Latin American and Middle Eastern Studies to be sure, but also Women's and Gender Studies and the multiple disciplines that make the study of migration a primary focus.

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