1. Chronicling the Work of Women's Rights Organizations

and Feminists from Around the Arab Region: An Introduction to the Special Issue

by Gabriella Nassif

In 2023, the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) celebrated its 50th anniversary. Devoted to the fight against gender discrimination in the Arab States region and beyond, the AiW has been a pioneer in documenting the various ways that women and girls in particular continue to face discrimination in every aspect of their lives. From the personal to the political, the AiW has not only gathered evidence on gender-based discrimination but has produced countless reports, books, and other multimedia products to raise awareness of the general public on the effects of gender discrimination on the situation of women and girls in the region. The Institute has also pioneered the implementation of various projects in Lebanon, where it is located, and beyond, that attempt to bridge the world of academic research with targeted development action. These projects include literacy programs for illiterate women, a mobile library to reach children in remote areas, and empowerment and support programs for incarcerated women, among many others.

It was an easy choice to honor the Institute's 50-year legacy through a special issue of *Al-Raida*. *Al-Raida* is the Institute's flagship journal which has been in production since the early 1970s. *Al-Raida*'s pages are rich with information about the work of the Institute. During the first few years of its publication, *Al-Raida* primarily functioned as a journal that documented the work of the Institute. However, the journal would quickly evolve to feature research articles from regional and global feminists and scholars on issues of gender inequality in the Arab region. *Al-Raida* would also come to include opinion pieces, summaries of key local and regional conferences on women

and girls' rights, book reviews on cutting edge gender research, and information about the future work of the Institute.

The decision to honor the Institute's 50th anniversary through a special issue of *Al-Raida* also reflects a previous special issue commemorating the Institute's 25th anniversary (*Al-Raida*, 1998). Published during the editorial tenure of Dr. Rosemary Sayigh, that issue emphasized the Institute's commitment to celebrating the work of women pioneers in the Arab region. The issue documented the oral testimonies of women living in Lebanon across different religions, ethnicities, and professions, with the aim of "underlin[ing] the pluralism and mobility of the people who live in this geopolitical space [Lebanon]" (Sayigh, 1998, p.3). The goal of the issue was to highlight the importance of feminist oral history methodologies while simultaneously acknowledging the important contributions of "everyday women" in the fight for gender equality.

Framing the Special Issue: The Institute as a Bridge between Global and Local Feminist Discourse

Importantly, much of the work published in *Al-Raida* was (and continues to be) engaged with the growing global discourse on women's rights and the fight against gender inequality (Khoury, 2012). As Nicole Khoury (2018) writes in her research on *Al-Raida*, the focus of the journal in some of its earliest issues included the topic of development and the role that women could and should play in the development of the nation-state. *Al-Raida* published various articles summarizing regional and international conferences focused on women in development and frequently translated the recommendations that emerged from these conferences into the context of Lebanon and the broader Arab region. *Al-Raida* also published on issues such as women's workforce participation and women's education, issues that were key to the global development agenda. Additionally, the journal published thematic sub-sections in certain issues that "followed the UN's International Observance Years," particularly those relevant to significant issues in the Arab region, for example, issues related to aging populations and disability (Khoury, 2018, p. 102). However, as Khoury notes, "an analysis of [*Al-Raida*] journal issues" published on key topics highlighted by the International Observance Years and the UN more generally, "illustrate the rhetorical strategies" used by *Al-Raida* editors and other writers to "remain within dominant discourses while offering more local and contextualized understandings" (Khoury, 2018, p. 103). In other words, *Al-Raida,* and relatedly the Institute, through its work and research, played a crucial role in bringing these international discourses on development to the local levels. They "continued to function as a means for localizing that dominant discourse, as well as informing the international forum about Lebanese women, and situating Lebanese and Arab women within the larger international structure" (p. 103). In this way, "the rhetorical space where the journal operated was neither entirely located in the international forum nor exclusively tied to the local audience, but lay within

both the dominant discourse and the local context simultaneously" (Khoury, 2018, p. 105).

women have endeavored to assert themselves to establish their identity and to communicate their private feelings. The intensity of such effort and its serious purpose deserve social recognition.

When discussing the accomplishments of these women, art critics attempt to base their evaluation on characteristics which distinguish them from male artists. These differences have been summarized by the author as follows:

1. Women are artistically bolder, experiment more with different techniques and materials, and do not hesitate to explore new ideas. In this respect, men are more traditional in the arts.
2. Men are more politically and socially engaged, are more motivated by intellectualism, ideology and problems of the human condition. They are concerned with the world around them, its events and the physical environment, whereas women express a more private vision, are more personal and introspective in their creative intention.
3. Some women artists are exploring areas of sensibility that have not traditionally concerned men in art. Women are expressing very directly the intimate, sensual, and emotional responses they have as women toward the male-female relationship. They don't hesitate to communicate these feelings publicly in their work.
4. In approach, women artists generally are more meticulous and more patient in their attention to detail and the finish of a work. They have greater awareness for the physical properties of their medium.

Study on a Woman Pioneer Writer: May Ziadeh

Rose Ghurayyib*

Since May Ziadeh's works, twelve or more in number, have been reedited by Naufal Publishing House in Beirut, Rose Ghurayyib has prepared a study analyzing the personality and works of this famous Lebanese author who spent most of her life (1886-1941) in Egypt and who distinguished herself as an orator, essayist, critic and stylist. Her wide culture, reflected in her mastery of five foreign languages, besides Arabic, allowed her to write in various languages and her first published work was a collection of poems in French: "Fleurs de rêve" (Flowers of Dream), after which she devoted herself to writing in Arabic. She shared a contribution to the emancipation and modernization of Arabic literature and thought with the Lebanese Emigrant writers who were mainly established in the Americas. She also cooperated with early Arab feminist groups in their pioneering efforts toward the emancipation of the Arab woman.

Her works consisted mainly of essays which had been published in leading Egyptian magazines dealing with travel, literature, art criticism, linguistics and social reform. Some of these works took the form of lyrics or prose-poems about romantic and metaphysical topics. All her writings bear the mark of an original style, characterized by her finesse and sense of humor.

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Figure 1. Page excerpt from *Al-Raida* Issue 2, 1977

The position of *Al-Raida*—as a bridge between international discourse on women's rights and gender equality and the local context in Lebanon and the Arab region—also reflects the broader position of the Institute, and its commitment to women's rights globally and locally. In the other 'direction,' the Institute worked to elevate the profiles of women pioneers from the Arab region to the international stage by publishing their work in English, thus introducing its international readership to the efforts of grassroots feminists. Documenting the achievements and stories of Arab women pioneers has become and remains today a key component of the Institute's work. As early as the second issue of *Al-Raida*, the Institute documented the lives of several Arab women pioneers such as May Ziadeh, Helen Khal, Salwa Nassar, and Najah Attar who, in 1976, was the first woman minister appointed in Syria (*Al-Raida*, 1977).

The Institute continued to write about pioneering women; its commitment to this mission eventually led the Institute to collaborate with KVINFO, the Danish Center for Information on Women and Gender, to develop an online database profiling prominent Lebanese women. Established in 2008 and named "Who is She in Lebanon," this database showcases women from various sectors, such as research, politics, media, culture, and art. It was officially launched on International Women's Day in 2010.

These two fundamental aspects of the Institute's identity – engaging with the international while also foregrounding local/regional activism and engagement – are what drives the focus of this special issue. In honor of the Institute's 50th anniversary, this issue of *Al-Raida* introduces readers to the profiles of various feminist and gender equality actors from the region who are working in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly SDG 5 on Gender Equality. The goal of the issue is, once again, to support the translation of global discourse on gender equality and women's rights into the local context, and to highlight the various ways that the gender equality agenda is being advanced in the region.

With that in mind, the rest of this introductory article will provide a comprehensive overview of the evolution of the international legal framework for gender equality, beginning with

the creation of the Commission on the Status of Women and culminating with the launching of the SDGs in 2010. Subsequently, the article will briefly explore how the global fight for gender equality has been taken up across the Arab region, starting with an examination of the regional legal framework for gender equality. This section will also present a broad review of how women's rights advocates and feminists within the region have integrated the international legal framework in their own work.

International Women's Day: Signing the Memorandum of Understanding & Launching the "Who Is She" online Database

On the occasion of the International Women's Day, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW-LAU) held a ceremony on March 2, 2010 to launch the "Who Is She" in Lebanon online database. The database is a collaborative project between IWSAW and the Danish Centre for Information on Women and Gender (KVINFO).

The ceremony also included the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding between LAU and the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW).

The evening ended with a short film of young Lebanese citizens being asked about some of Lebanon's most influential women. Although the short film was light-hearted, the message was serious: Lebanon's pioneering women are absent from the country's consciousness.

The First Lady of the Lebanese Republic, Mrs. Wafa Michel Suleiman, was the guest of honor for this year and she was offered an LAU shield by Dr. Joseph Jabbra, LAU president, in recognition of her efforts to empower women in Lebanon.

Ministers, deputies, ambassadors, representatives from the Internal Security Forces and the Lebanese Army, prominent Lebanese women, as well as representatives from different NGO's attended the ceremony.

Dr. Joseph Jabbra, LAU president and Dr. Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, IWSAW Director, handing the LAU shield to First Lady Mrs. Wafa Michel Suleiman.

Maitre Fadi Karam and Dr. Joseph Jabbra signing the Memorandum of Understanding between LAU and NCLW.

Figure 2. Page excerpt from *Al-Raida* Issue 128, 2010

A Brief History of the International Fight against Gender-based Discrimination: From the Commission on the Status of Women to Sustainable Development Goal 5 on Gender Equality

Setting the Legal Foundations for Women's Equality: The Commission on the Status of Women and Women in Development

Most historical accounts of the development of the global movement for women's rights and gender equality start with the formation of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which held its first meeting in 1947. The CSW originated from the Sub-commission on the Status of Women, which was originally created as a sub-committee to the Commission on Human Rights founded in the aftermath of World War II. In 1946, the Sub-commission was formally elevated to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Later, the Section on the Status of Women would be established within the Human Rights Division of the United Nations Secretariat, granting the Division some institutional capacity. The Division would later become the Division for the Advancement of Women in 1978 and would ultimately be consolidated into the newly formed UN Women in 2010 (Hannan et al., 2019). From its inception, the CSW retained close ties to civil

society actors around the world and invited non-government organizations (NGO) to attend its various sessions, with some organizations achieving consultative status. The CSW also built strong connection with other newly formed committees and subcommittees within the United Nations, particularly with the Commission on Human Rights and its various subcommittees. Consequently, the CSW ingratiated itself into discussions surrounding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and "drafting the international bill of rights became one of the Commission's first tasks." The CSW's involvement resulted in the incorporation of "inclusive language," with members "arguing against references to 'men' as a synonym for humanity and phrases like 'men are brothers'" (Hannan et al., 2019).

As part of its broader mandate, the CSW aimed to establish new international standards and legal conventions to ensure women's equality and safeguard the status of women worldwide. To achieve this goal, the Commission embarked on extensive research projects on issues relevant to women's equality intending to accumulate evidence that justified the need for these new legal conventions and frameworks. This research, (Hannan et al., 2019) indicate, ultimately led the Commission to draft several key pieces of legislation, including the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952) and the Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (1957) as well as the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (1962).

During this time, women's movements around the world continued to document the discriminatory legal and socioeconomic systems preventing women and girls from accessing their full rights. The growing numbers of organizations and actors dedicated to reporting on these inequalities underscored the urgency of addressing them. The CSW had also begun to recognize and pay more attention to the ways in which this discrimination perpetuated or exacerbated poverty among women and girls globally. Building on Ester Boserup's renowned study, "Woman's Role in Economic Development" (1970), the CSW began to focus on women's roles within development and the actions needed to further promote women's development (as cited in Hannan et al., 2019). During this time, critiques emerged regarding women's role within development programming funded by foreign, Western governments and various international agencies. Feminists argued that women had been excluded from development programming, as foreign donors continued to design programs that perpetuated the gender division of labor where women were not seen as economically productive as compared to men.

From this critique emerged the Women in Development (WID) framework, which promoted a feminist analysis at its core and recognized women as productive economic actors in their own right deserving of targeted development programming. The emergence of the WID framework was contingent on several factors, both global and emanating from countries in the global South, where a growing body of research highlighted how gender discrimination affected women and girls outside of the global North. Such work, including

Boserup's study, reinforced liberal feminist perspectives in the global North that development policies, including the funding mechanisms of major international donors such as the United States, needed to be updated to reflect feminist analyses about issues relative to gender inequality, namely the gendered division of labor (Razavi & Miller, 1995).

Taking Women's Rights to the Next Level: The UN Decade for Women

At the international level, the adoption of the 1967 Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and later, the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) marked a significant milestone for women's rights organizations and feminists globally. The 1967 Declaration built on and included previous international conventions adopted to ensure and protect the rights of women and girls, with the aim of making a comprehensive document that included ways of holding state parties accountable to the demands of the Convention (Somerville & Amalia, 2022), and provided women's organizations and feminists around the world with another key piece of legislation to use when documenting gender discrimination through its new voluntary reporting mechanism.

Yet, it would be several more years before the CSW would be able to finish drafting the CEDAW. By 1975, which marked the UN's International Women's Year and the First World Conference on Women (held in Mexico City), a global demand had emerged for a legally binding and comprehensive doctrine ensuring the rights of women and girls, inclusive of all previous conventions and with key protocols for implementation. Similarly, the UN General Assembly urged the CSW to complete such a document by the time of the Second Conference of Women in Copenhagen in 1980, which would mark the mid-decade review of the UN Decade for Women (UN Women Watch). Finally, in 1979, the CEDAW was adopted by the UN General Assembly (with a vote of 130 to zero, with 10 abstentions).

Following the adoption of the CEDAW at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), the Beijing Platform for Action emerged citing 12 key areas of concern where immediate action was needed to advance gender equality globally. The Platform for Action built on the language of the CEDAW and upheld many of its principles. Additionally, the Platform extended beyond the CEDAW, adding breadth to certain issues, such as explicitly addressing violence against women, which had not been specifically named in the CEDAW (Timothy & Freeman, 2000).

Women in Development: The Millennium and the Sustainable Development Goals

The strengthening of the global feminist and women's rights movement led to the development and adoption of Goal 3 of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, many feminists critiqued this goal,

noting that it remained aspirational at best. They argued that "the simple MDG *promotion* of gender equality seems a rather unambitious goal lacking in concrete or assertive action in contrast to the elimination targets of the SDGs," despite the MDGs' significance to the international history of gender equality (Somerville & Amalia, 171).

During the era of the MDGs, feminists and women's rights civil society organizations (CSOs) found themselves fighting against conservative forces and government backlash. Their involvement in the MDGs was therefore strategic, and often constrained to certain arenas despite their best efforts to mobilize for women's rights and gender equality across all of the separate MDGs. Gita Sen (2019) identifies several areas of engagement for feminists and women's rights organizations during this period, including global review processes related to UN funding as well as the 15-year reviews of key UN Population and Development conferences and the UN conferences on women held, in 1994, in Cairo and, in 1995, in Beijing (Sen, 2019, p. 31). Feminists were also active in the development of, and mobilization around, the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) Campaign (2008-2010). GEAR brought together hundreds of feminist and women's rights organizations worldwide to advocate for the creation of a new UN agency dedicated to gender equality and women's rights. This major mobilization led to the creation of UN Women in 2010; as Sen notes, this "was probably the first time that the UN created a major new body in response to civil society activism" (p. 31). This engagement would, according to Sen, adequately set up women's rights organizations and feminists to participate in the SDGs' era.

At the time of the SDGs, women's rights organizations and feminists worldwide were better equipped to work within this framework due to their work with the MDGs. These organizations had developed strategies for using the SDGs strategically in their work, such as ensuring that their research and advocacy efforts build on or contribute to some of the key indicators listed in SDG 5 on Gender Equality. SDG 5 in particular reflects the hard work of local feminist and women's rights organizations globally, who pushed for tangible demands and indicators to measure progress toward gender equality and hold state signatories accountable. In total, SDG 5 has nine targets with specific indicators for each target (Figure 3) (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs). Progress on these goals is measured annually by several global reports such as *The Sustainable Development Goals Report*, the *Global Gender Gap Report*, and the *Women, Business and the Law* report. Additionally, SDG 5 is measured by key global indices, such as the Gender Inequality Index (GII), which measures gender inequality across multiple dimensions. Despite these efforts, progress toward SDG 5 remains slow, with reports indicating that it will take more than 300 years to achieve gender equality (Figure 4).

Tracking Gender Inequality in the Arab States Region

Today, all Arab States have ratified the CEDAW except for Somalia and Sudan. However, of the countries who have ratified CEDAW, only Djibouti and Palestine have ratified the Convention without reservations. Most Arab States

Figure 3. Goal 5 Indicators. Source: Asian Development Bank

have reservations regarding article 2 (non-discriminatory policy measures), article 9 (nationality rights), article 15 (equality before the law), and article 16 (equality in marriage and family life) (United Nations Development Program/ UNDP, 2019). Additionally, only Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia have ratified the CEDAW Optional Protocol. Broadly, Arab States argue that their reservations to CEDAW are related to *shari'a* law and its precedence over civil law. Several States have noted in reports submitted to the CEDAW Committee that Islam already ensures equality between men and women (UNDP, 2019, p. 27). Other States have indicated in their reservations that implementing CEDAW might further destabilize already tenuous socio-political environments, especially given the "politically sensitive nature of issues related to marriage and family relations" addressed by the CEDAW (UNDP, 2019).

Alongside CEDAW, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its various Optional Protocols similarly protect children from violence. Today, all the Arab States have ratified the Convention, although several have submitted reservations.

In addition to the CEDAW, Arab States have largely acknowledged the importance of Goal 5 of the SDGs, which addresses gender equality. Under SDG 5 ("Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls"), Target 5.1 ("End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere") and Target 5.c ("Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels") highlight States' commitments to advancing gender-equitable legislation and

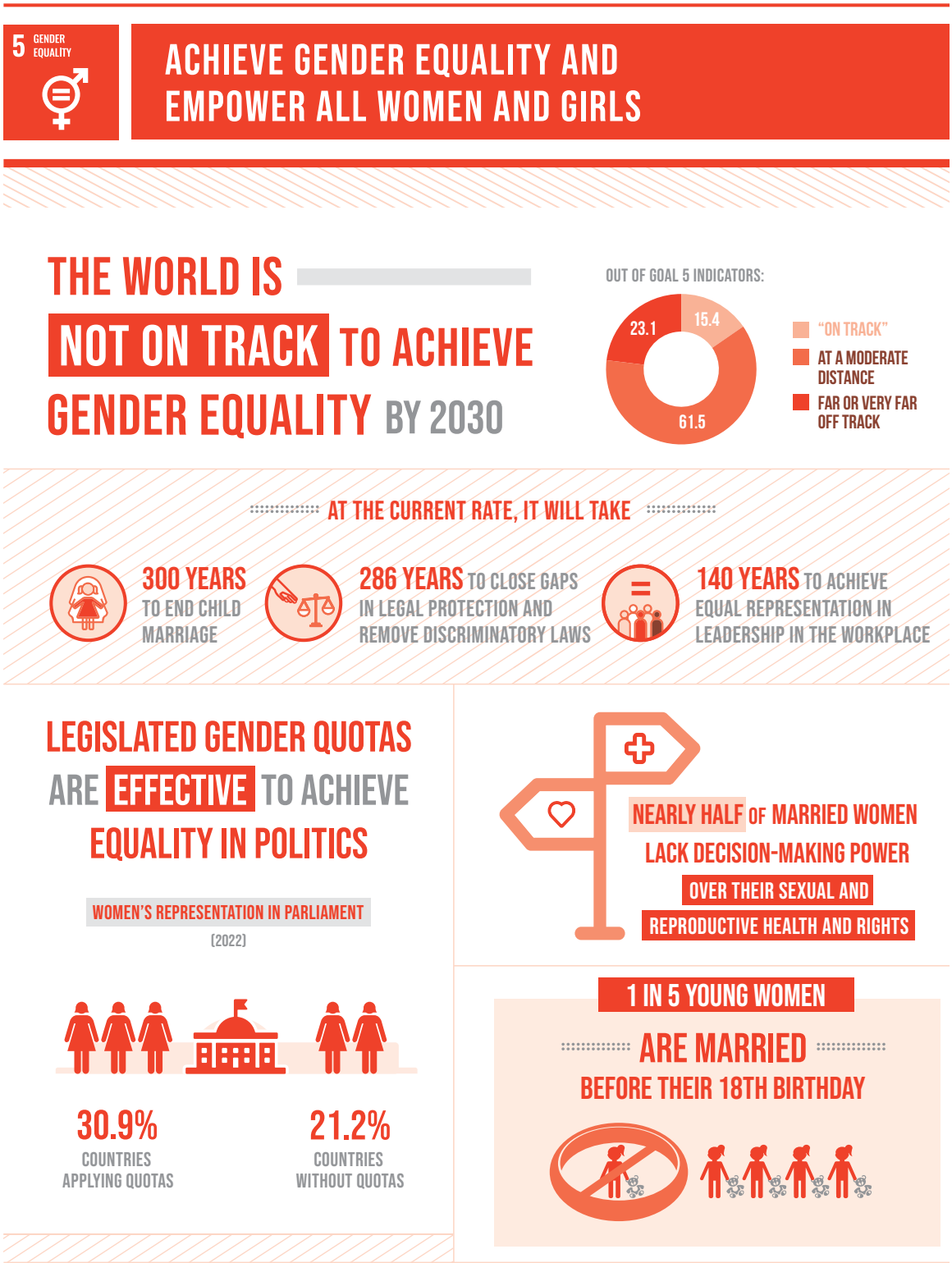

Figure 4. SDG 5 Infographic. Source: https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/

policies to protect women and girls from discrimination.

Several regional frameworks address issues relevant to gender equality and human rights more generally. In the Arab States region, the Arab Charter on Human Rights addresses violence against women (VAW) in article 33(2), which "focuses on violence in the family while isolating women as a group vulnerable to such violence" (Chaban & Trabelsi, 2017). However, the Charter's narrow definition of VAW as primarily taking place within the confines of "the family" ultimately "privileges the preservation of the family unit, which could be at the expense of women's safety and/or autonomy" (Chaban & Trabelsi, p.70). On the African continent, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (known as the Maputo Protocol) both address gender-based violence. Building on article 2 of the Charter, which enshrines the principle of non-discrimination on the grounds of sex, among others, and article 18, which specifically calls for the elimination of discrimination against women, the Maputo Protocol, adopted on July 11, 2003, holds States accountable to "combat all forms of discrimination against women through appropriate legislative, institutional, and other measures" (Article 2). Additionally, Article 5 mandates that "State Parties shall prohibit and condemn all forms of harmful practices which negatively affect the human rights of women and which are contrary to recognized international standards" (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights/OHCHR, 2003).

The Protocol is considered "one of the world's most comprehensive [...] women's human rights instruments" and includes provisions on: (1) harmful traditional practices, including child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) as well as female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C); (2) reproductive health and rights; (3) women's roles in politics; (4) women's economic empowerment; and (4) ending violence against women and girls (Equality Now). Today, 42 African Union Member States have ratified the Protocol. The Maputo Protocol also protects the health and reproductive rights of women and girls (Article 14). The Protocol protects women's rights to control their fertility, the right to use contraception, the right to protection from sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, and the right to family planning education. The Protocol also holds States Parties accountable to "provide adequate, affordable, and accessible health services," to "establish and strengthen existing pre-natal, delivery and post-natal health and nutritional services," and finally, to "protect the reproductive rights of women by authorizing medical abortion in cases of sexual assault, rape, incest, and where the continued pregnancy endangers the mental and physical health of the mother or the life of the mother or the fetus" (OHCHR, 2003). Alongside the Maputo Protocol, the African Charter on the Rights and the Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) similarly protects the rights of children to live a life free from violence, with only Sudan and Egypt submitting reservations to any of the ACRWC's articles (African Union, 2023).

In 2014, a regional meeting convened by the League of Arab States (LAS) in Cairo to assess the region's progress towards the MDGs focused specifically on the advancement of women and girls, as well as gender equality. This initiative ultimately resulted in the creation of the Cairo Declaration for Arab Women: The Post-2015 Agenda. The Cairo Declaration for Arab Women's stated objective is: "By the start of 2030 the Arab states will be empowered to achieve and guarantee all women's rights at all levels and during all stages of life. Equality will be established between men and women within the context of achieving the goals of the post-2015 development agenda." The document is structured around several key outcomes, notably, Outcome 6: Women and girls enjoy the right to live in a society free from all forms of gender-based violence (Table 1) (League of Arab States, 2014). In 2016, a draft Arab Convention to Combat Violence against Women and Girls was proposed by the Coalition of Women MPs from Arab Countries (est. in 2014), with support from the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD, 2020). In 2022, the LAS launched the Arab Declaration on Combating all Forms of Violence against Women and Girls during a high-level meeting held in the United Arab Emirates (WFD, 2022). Broadly, the declaration advances and reiterates "a commitment to protect women and girls from all forms of violence and to enhance efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination" among LAS Member States.

Outcome 6: Women and girls enjoy the right to live in a society free from all forms of gender-based violence
6.1 The existence of legislation, legal frameworks, and national measures to combat all forms of violence
6.2 The existence of national strategies and action plans to resist violence against women and gender-based violence at all stages of women's lives
6.3 The availability of comprehensive preventative mechanisms to avoid and prevent violence against women and girls
6.4 The availability of mechanisms to ensure that victims and survivors of gender-based violence can access all elements of the justice system
6.5 The existence/effectiveness of a multi-sectoral national system to provide services and rehabilitation for victims of gender-based violence
6.6 The provision of monitoring, follow-up, and assessment systems for cases of violence against women and the protection, prevention, and rehabilitation services

Table 1. Cairo Declaration for Arab Women Outcome 6

Women's Rights and the Feminist Struggle in the Arab Region: A Historical Overview

While it would be impossible to document the regional struggle led by women's rights organizations and feminists against gender inequality over the past 50 years, it is important to highlight a few critical milestones that have been achieved and the ways that such actors have accomplished these achievements. This is not to suggest that a singular or homogenous " Arab women's movement"

exists or ever existed; but however, international and regional trends and discourse about women's rights and the ways that local actors engaged with these patterns have highlighted several key "complementary phases" within the broader movement for women's rights in the Arab region (UNDP, 2007, p. 123). Each period sheds light on the work of a "movement that seeks to enable women to claim their full and uncompromised right to integration within society" (p. 123). These phases, according to the *Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World*, are:

1. Women's rights in relation to "the trauma of imperialism and its impact on women [and] families";
2. The struggle for women's rights in relation to and as part of the struggle for independence from colonial control; and finally,
3. The rise of a global feminist consciousness tied to a growing "international discourse on women's liberation, empowerment, and integration."

The first phase largely reflects the charitable works of primarily elite women. Pushed out of the political realm, among others deemed exclusive to men, women engaged in charitable work as it was considered to be a socially acceptable realm for women's work during that period. Despite these restrictions, women's organizations emerged and fully embraced this role and, in some cases, used their charitable works as a platform to demand political and social rights not only for their beneficiaries but for themselves and their organizations (*Al-Raida*, 1982). In Lebanon and Syria during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, elite women's charity work eventually evolved into a patriotic contribution to the nascent nation-state termed "patriotic motherhood." Patriotic motherhood "exalted women's domestic duties and charity work as national service *and* advanced demands for women's civil and social rights in order to accomplish that service" (Thompson, 2000, p. 142). Through this framework, women could challenge traditional gender roles that excluded them from the political realm without facing direct repercussions from the patriarchal order for stepping beyond their traditional roles.

It is important to note that during this time, the majority of this type of charitable work was carried out by elite women operating within a benevolent model that largely depended on problematic social hierarchies and refrained from overt political engagement that challenged the systematic marginalization of certain groups of women. Furthermore, this type of charity work was often embedded in paternalistic desires to "make better" those women who were illiterate or living in poverty. This, however, would change later in the 20th century: Charity work would remain a key component of Arab women's activism around the region but would come to be seen as "a kind of 'direct action activism' which implies hands-on work with women." As Leslie Lewis wrote for *Al-Raida*, this type of charitable work was "a means of addressing the practical, socioeconomic, legal and political problems" facing women, in a way that was more expressly political (Lewis,

2005, p.15). Direct action activism was meant to empower marginalized women to make their own claims on the state for their rights.

The Women's Union in Lebanon and Syria was founded in the early 1920s and brought together activists from both Lebanon and Syria. It is frequently referred to as the Lebanese Women's Union and was later changed to the Arab (Lebanese) Women's Union between 1928 and 1929. In 1946, the Union split into two organizations (Women's Union and the Lebanese Women Solidarity Association) but would later be reunified in 1952 under the name Lebanese Council for Women (Civil Society Knowledge Center). Hence, from the 1920s onward, the Arab women's movement had firmly established itself as a key political actor, primarily through its anti-colonial demands and its participation in struggles for independent nation-states around the region. In many countries, women's political parties, caucuses, and unions, had formed and were actively advocating for freedom from colonial rule (Table 2).

Figure 5. Illustration by Bahij Jaroudi

Country	Association
Egypt	Egyptian Women's Party (1942)
	Daughters of the Nile (1948)
Tunisia	Union of Tunisian Women (1944)
Morocco	Union of Moroccan Women (1944)
	Association of the Sisters of Purity (1946)
	Association of Moroccan Women (1947)
Lebanon	Lebanese Women's Council (1943)
	Association of Lebanese Women (1947)
	Committee of Lebanese Women's Rights (1947)
Iraq	Iraqi Women's Union (1945)
Sudan	Cultural Girl's Syndicate (1945)
	Association of Women's Enhancement (1945)
Jordan	Society of the Jordanian Women's Union (1945)
Syria & Lebanon	Women's Union in Syria and Lebanon (1920-1921)

Table 2. Arab Women's Associations, 1920-1950. Source: Arab Human Development Report (2005)

The rhetoric of these organizations centered around women's empowerment and emancipation as a critical component for any nascent state. They understood women's liberation as part and parcel of the broader struggle against colonialism that their nationalist counterparts advocated for. Notably, nationalist political parties primarily led by men initially seemed to reinforce this discourse by calling for an end to colonialism, partly due to the way that the colonizer was treating Arab women under their rule. However, it soon became evident that nationalists had co-opted the ideological construction of "woman" and "womanhood" to articulate

their own versions of the ideal woman. As Mounira Charrad (2011) writes:

Alternatively framed as symbols of the nation, as markers of cultural authenticity, or as new citizens, women—or rather, the symbolic 'woman'—have occupied center stage in the crafting of national identities and in state efforts to further political and economic agendas. Like the colonial powers against which they struggled, nationalists regularly invoked women as markers of difference between the colonizer and the colonized. (p. 422)

The imagery of the "ideal Arab woman" would carry over into the post-independence era of the region as States themselves began to "cultivate the metaphor of the nation as family and women as mothers of the nation" (Charrad, p. 422). Drawing on traditional and conservative gender norms, this new imagery evoked the use of "family honor" to create and manipulate a national identity. This national identity was not static; instead, as Beth Baron analyzes in the context of post-colonial Egypt, it generated a "multiplicity of images [of] the symbolically 'female Egypt'" that "reflect the struggle for power on behalf of different parties and their debates over Egyptian culture." She states: "In short, if Egyptians agreed that the nation was to be represented as a woman, they disagreed as to which 'woman' should be chosen and what being a 'woman' meant" (Baron, 2007, p. 81).

The struggle for ideological control over definitions of the "ideal" Arab woman intersected with post-colonial state policies regulating the rights of women during what would become the third phase of the Arab women's movement. As Hatem (2005) writes, the "top-down" development model employed by post-colonial Arab States often meant that governments had almost thorough control over women's issues. In almost all Arab countries, this resulted in women's access to only a select set of rights and even these remained highly controlled. For example, while many States largely recognized the importance of women's education, limited effort was exerted to ensure that women had access to high-quality education or that education took priority over other traditional gender responsibilities, like marriage, childbearing and/or domestic work. Many States actively sought to silence women's demands for more substantial rights, instead deferring control over women to male guardians, including family and religious or community leaders, according to patriarchal customs (Hatem, 2005). This was especially evident in countries where Personal Status Laws (PSL), often called family law, existed; in these cases, States completely abandoned any responsibility for protecting the civil liberties of women and girls. Instead, under the PSL, women were placed under the authority of their male guardians, who made decisions about their personal rights, including those related to childbirth, child custody, inheritance, marriage, and divorce, among others.

At the same time, however, a global movement for women's rights was emerging and galvanizing actors in all corners of the world. For many, including women's rights organizations in the Arab region, this international rhetoric served as an important justification for their work encouraging

them to build on and contribute to this global conversation on women's rights. As one article in a 1981 issue of *Al-Raida* noted, the women's movement had "gone global." Women could now speak across global divides to each other, "in their own voices" and from "their own cultural experience" (Boulding, 1981). The Institute was documenting these advancements and the growth of the women's movement internationally, particularly across the Arab region. Bringing together international rhetoric on women's rights and feminism with feminist activities and advances in the region, the Institute was able to effectively bridge these two discourses for its readership.

This documentation included summaries of various international reports, such as a United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) report on "activities for integrating women in development" (*Al-Raida*, 1977), to overviews of regional and international conferences on topics related to women's rights, such as the "Family Planning and Women's Development" conference held in Tunisia in 1977 (*Al-Raida*, 1978a) and the "Middle East Regional Seminar for the Training and Education of the Rural Woman," held in Cairo in May 1978 (*Al-Raida*, 1978b). In 1982, *Al-Raida* featured a summary of the famous Arab feminist Nawal El Saadawi's speech presented at the Center for Arab Unity Studies in Beirut, during which she encouraged the Arab women's movement to adopt a democratic model that moved beyond claiming "political, social, and economic" freedoms, to demanding a "freeing [of] the soul, thus breaking inner chains" for a more radical liberation. She praised local women's groups from around the region, and acknowledged the transnational efforts taking place, such as the Women's Regional Conference held in the Gulf States in 1981 (El Saadawi, 1982).

Alongside these reports on regional and local activities of the women's movement, the Institute also used *Al-Raida* to document the growing discourse around human rights and women's rights at the international level, particularly focusing on the work of the United Nations. In Issue 5 of *Al-Raida*, a summary of the UN's Decade for Women was published alongside the UN's proposed Plan of Action for advancing women's rights around the world (El Saadawi, 1982). Additionally, as mentioned previously, the Institute would begin to publish on the UN Observance Years by dedicating substantial portions of various *Al-Raida* issues to these topics. For example, Issue 8 of *Al-Raida* acknowledged the Year of the Child, hence featuring a review of key international conventions protecting the rights of the child and research reports on the status of the Arab child across the region. *Al-Raida* also began publishing thematic issues on topics that had emerged within the UN-led global discourse on women's rights, such as the issue of health and family planning (Issue 11), reproductive rights and issues related to traditional PSL or family laws (Issue 14), and women in the workforce (Issue 16).

Importantly, in 1985, the Institute published an entire thematic issue of *Al-Raida* on the subject of "Arab Women & The Women's Decade" to mark the UN's world conference "to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nation Decade for Women" held in Nairobi, Kenya (*Al-Raida*, 1985). In the issue's editorial, Wafa' Stephan writes that "Arab women, like their sisters, will participate"

in various events to "debate the decade's main themes of 'Development, Equality and Peace' and the subthemes of 'Education, Employment, and Health'" (1985, p.3). Stephan also writes that "concerned women who cannot go to Nairobi can still share in these exciting events by adopting certain strategies, as suggested by the International Women's Tribune Center." The rest of the issue examines "the progress of Arab women" in relation to these themes and offers readers an overview of the outstanding critiques against Arab feminism, namely, that "while some Arab feminists believe they have to learn from the experience of women in other societies, others criticize those who copy models of Western feminism" (Stephan, 1985, p. 3). The issue also focuses primarily on the theme of "women and legal equality" because, as Stephan notes in her editorial, "of the fact that the battles of many Arab feminists have been waged in this field" (p.3). The issue presents an overview of the UN Decade for Women, highlights the passage of several key conventions, including the CEDAW and offers a timeline of key events, including the various UN Conferences on Women beginning with the conference held in Mexico City in 1975.

This would not be the last time that an issue of *Al-Raida* highlighted the UN-led discourse on women's rights. As detailed throughout this 50th anniversary issue, much of the Institute and *Al-Raida*'s work has emphasized key thematic areas of the UN's work, especially, but not limited to, the fight to end violence against women and girls and women's rights in conflict (for more information, see this issue's sections on Women, Peace and Security and on Gender Equality).

The Next Phase: The Rise of Nongovernmental Organizations and the Fight for Women's Rights

The 2005 UNDP report *Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World* acknowledges toward the end of its discussion the third phase of the Arab women's movement, the rise of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other CSOs dedicated to the rights of women (UNDP, 2005). This shift was in many ways a response to the increasingly strict sociopolitical environments affecting women's rights movements across the region, as well as their need for sustained funding to continue their activities, which, up until that point, had not been consistently provided by their respective governments.

Simultaneously, an influx of foreign funding from the international community in an effort to support local women's rights initiatives quickened the process of NGO-ization in several respects. First, foreign donors required a level of "professionalization" from recipient organizations; this often meant that only well-established, licensed organizations like an NGO could receive this funding without issue. Second, foreign funding focused on women's rights pushed the women's rights movement—which broadly focused on women's *collective* concerns across a variety of sectors and issues—to adopt a "single issue focus" in their work that they could then claim as an area of expertise. This is because foreign donors often required proof of work from local organizations that

demonstrated their experience; logically, organizations could not be experts in all areas related to women's rights. However, this effectively segmented women's rights actors into small single-issue silos of work. This shift, termed "NGO-ization" by Islah Jad, created a dynamic where organizations competed within narrow issue-focused silos, diverting attention from broader systemic challenges (Jad, 2007). As Lara Khattab (2010) notes in relation to the Lebanese context, "this NGO-based advocacy system de-politicized what is essentially political" about the fight for women's rights. Consequently, women's rights NGOs found themselves trapped within a system that holds them accountable to foreign donors and their respective Arab governments—as a licensed and internationally funded organization—rather than to their beneficiaries, the women and girls, and other marginalized groups that feminism and the women's rights movement should be supporting.

The trend of NGO-ization persisted into the 21st century becoming a defining characteristic of the first decade of women's rights activism. Moreover, NGO-ization was exacerbated in many ways by Arab regimes' own strategic use of women's rights to secure political legitimacy on the global stage (Tripp, 2019). Essentially, these regimes would adopt certain women's rights legislation or policies under the guise of advancing women's rights but in practice, would only do so to attain legitimacy in the eyes of foreign governments. These "advancements" became little more than rhetorical promises to advance women's rights, frustrating women's rights organizations and feminists who continued to fiercely advocate for these legislative improvements. As Rola El-Husseini (2023) has written, this trend has only worsened as the human rights discourse has grown in the 21st century:

> *These Arab regimes also have an external audience in mind when they use gender as an instrument of state legitimacy. That audience is the international community, which has often included women's rights in its call for democracy in the Global South; indeed, the two have increasingly become "bundled." This bundling of women's rights with calls for democracy is manifest in policies such as the Hillary Clinton Doctrine, which linked women's rights to US national security. Packaging women's rights with democracy was apparent not only in the European Union's Gender Action Plans, especially as Europe positions itself as a "norm entrepreneur," but also more recently in the Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) that was first proposed by Sweden in 2014 and that became defunct in 2022 with the election of that country's right-wing government.*

In some cases, El-Husseini notes, this outward appearance of "support" for women's equality has allowed women's movements across the region to achieve piecemeal gains for women's rights. For example, in 2017, under pressure from both external actors and women's rights organizations, several countries finally repealed their notorious "marry-your-rapist" laws (Begum, 2017). These laws had previously absolved rapists of persecution if they married their victims following the assault. Similar progress has been observed regarding PSLs around the region, albeit once again in piecemeal fashion. However, many of these "progressive" reforms to PSLs across the region have been watered down or left un-implemented. In worst-case scenarios, some reforms have even

been reversed entirely. This inconsistency has left feminist and women's rights organizations, once again, frustrated by the lack of concrete progress (El-Husseini, 2023).

Ultimately, this most recent "phase" of the Arab women's movement has been marked by political conflict and revolution starting with the Arab Spring in 2011, the now more than 10 years of civil war in Syria, the ongoing wars in Yemen and most recently in Sudan, the violence in Libya, the economic crises plaguing various countries in the region, and the ongoing occupation of Palestine. Not only have women and girls suffered disproportionately in relation to these crises, but the lack of stable governance across the region has meant that the push for gender equality "is slow and does not reflect the commitments made to the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development goals" (UNICEF, 2021). Women's rights organizations and feminists across the region have been forced to prioritize addressing the immediate needs of women and girls, many of whom are deprived of essential reproductive healthcare, grappling with poverty or the imminent loss of livelihoods, and experiencing heightened levels of domestic violence and ongoing conflicts (United Nations Population Fund/UNFPA, 2021).

In addition, the rising turn toward social conservatism across the region, coupled with the crackdown on civil society in the aftermath of the Arab Spring has made it even more difficult for some women's rights organizations and feminists to function openly, forcing their operations covertly (Amnesty International, 2021). Despite these challenges, civil society and activists continue to fight, as evident by the 2019 protests in Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon, among others. People across the region continue to take to the streets to demand their rights and to hold their governments accountable, with women's rights organizations and feminists at the forefront of these movements (Alsoswa & Livani, 2019). Relatedly, women's rights organizations and feminists have emerged as key players in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. Drawing from international efforts, such as the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, they advocate for the inclusion of women in these efforts, emphasizing their important role in promoting lasting peace and stability (this issue, see section on Women, Peace, and Security for more information).

Conclusion: A Global Movement for Women's Rights in the Arab Region

Today, the Arab women's movement remains heterogeneous. Just as it always has, the movement continues to grapple with its identity and who, or what, is at the center of its focus and worthy of its support. From generational discrepancies between what might be called the "founding" generation of the movement and today's youth across the region, to the discourses challenging the gender binary to be more inclusive of non-cis-gendered women and others, the movement is engaged in the ongoing dialogues and questions reflecting global trends in women's rights activism. As such, the role of

AiW in documenting and translating these dialogues to the international level and vice versa becomes increasingly vital. With the rise in the use of social media platforms as a primary vehicle for women's rights and feminist activism, this work of translation becomes even more crucial as activists from different geographical corners of the world now have unprecedented opportunities to engage directly with one another. In the Arab region, this has meant growing engagement with the Arab diaspora and the emergence of transnational movements and networks. From crowdfunding platforms like Go Fund Me, enabling people in the diaspora to support activists in the region, to international speaker series and webinars facilitating collaboration between activists working on various feminist issues, the Arab women's movement continues to move forward in line with women's movements and feminism around the world.

This special issue of *Al-Raida*, commemorating the Institute's 50th anniversary, aims to capture a glimpse of this remarkable growth observed within the women's rights movement. Using the global discourse and frameworks of human rights and the SDG 2030 Agenda, the issue attempts to highlight the profiles of various organizations, activists, networks, and individuals who are pioneering feminism and women's rights advocacy in their own innovative way. In addition to spotlighting these pioneers, the issue pays tribute to the Institute, a pioneer in its own right, and the work it has done over the past fifty years in service of the broader women's rights movement. Together, the issue attempts to highlight some of the newer work of women's rights and feminist advocates in the region, honoring both the trailblazers who laid the foundation for the movement and the newer voices shaping its future.

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