

3. Remembering “Herstory” in the Arab Region

and the Feminist Pioneers that are No Longer with Us

by Gabriella Nassif

In *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, the Arab feminist pioneer Nawal El Saadawi writes that:

“Women are half the society. You cannot have a revolution without women. You cannot have democracy without women. You cannot have equality without women. You cannot have anything without women.”
(El Saadawi, 1980)

Though women have long been agents of change and leaders of revolutions throughout the region and beyond, history has frequently erased their stories and actions. While most people can name a plethora of male writers, politicians, artists, activists, scientists, and many others considered to be “prominent” in their field,

few people can name women of equal stature. This becomes even more challenging when asked to name women from the Arab region.

To combat the invisibility of women in history and give women the opportunity to regain their voices and stories, the writer, activist, and journalist Robin Morgan coined the term “herstory” in 1970, which she used in her first published anthology *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (Morgan). Herstory refers to history written from the vantage point of women and through a feminist lens. In the Arab region, the work of creating herstory has been taken up by grassroots and civil society organizations and campaigns aiming to raise awareness about important women’s rights and gender equality advocates in the region. An example of this includes the AiW’s “Who is She” database, an online platform that documents the lives of women pioneers in Lebanon and, similarly, the

“Who is She” database in Egypt. To honor this legacy, this issue presents the names of several foundational feminist thinkers, writers, scholars, and activists from the Arab region who have passed away over the last five years. These women are key historical figures not only for feminists but for the wider Arab region and deserve recognition for their work. Following the Institute’s own legacy as platform for documenting “her-story” in the Arab region, this piece provides a brief look at the powerful feminists whose work defined the field of feminism and feminist theory and activism in the Arab region over the course of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

MARNIA LAZREG (1941-2024) ALGERIA

A self-described “studious girl” who adored school and books (Tarleton, 2011), Marnia Lazreg’s true education came from the positions she negotiated as a self-determined Muslim woman growing up in colonial Algeria. From these stances, Lazreg developed a body of philosophy, critique, and scholarship that challenged assumptions about women, particularly Algerian women, the colonial body, and the colonial context.

Born into a middle-class family just outside of the capital, Algiers, in 1941, Lazreg had the rare opportunity to attend a French school and obtain a baccalauréat. With this qualification, she pursued a degree in English literature from the University of Algiers. Lazreg then worked for the state oil company, which sent her to the United States. There, she managed to

complete her education, subsequently earning a PhD in sociology from New York University.

At her passing in January of 2024 at the age of 83, Lazreg held the title of Professor Emerita of Sociology at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York. While she wrote extensively on Algeria and colonialism, she is best-known for her text, *Questioning the Veil* (2009), in which she controversially contested the notion that Islam mandates the veil or that it serves as a form of expression for women. However, her work was much richer and more diverse.

While she eventually taught at Hunter College and the City University of New York Graduate Center full time, Lazreg also intermittently worked for the World Bank and the United Nations on women’s issues and development projects. However, she was most at home as an intellectual, providing post-colonial feminist critique, and writing extensively on diverse topics such as Islamic feminism, torture, and Foucault.

Lazreg’s scholarly contributions were grounded in her search for a deeper understanding of her life, Algeria, and the nexus of the two. In a 2020 essay, she reflected:

“My intellectual journey is to a large extent intertwined with the history of the country I was born in, Algeria. [...] I have an abiding

interest in Algeria, which has fascinated me not only because of its complexity, or its cultural specificity, but also because of the theoretical challenge it poses to the researcher: it rarely fits our pre-formed concepts or accepted generalizations. Writing about Algeria is an endless discovery of a history I was never taught. „

(Lazreg, 2020)

JULINDA ABU NASR (1932-2024) LEBANON

Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr made significant contributions to academia, but her greatest impact, not only on scholarly discourse but also on feminist movements, came through her establishment of the Institute of Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW, now the Arab Institute for Women or AiW) at the Lebanese American University in 1973 (Haffar, 2024). As the first institute of its kind in the Arab region, Abu Nasr served as its director for 24 years and continued to shape its growth and successes in the years to follow. In March 2024, Abu Nasr passed away at the age of 92.

Abu Nasr was born in the village of Rishmaya, Lebanon, in October 1931. She attended the Beirut College of Women (now LAU), where she worked as a part-time teacher at the Neighborhood House educational center, focusing on developing its preschool program. Later, she pursued

a BA and MA in the US, studying home economics and child development, which she applied while teaching at LAU and overseeing the university's nursery. After earning a PhD from Florida State University, Abu Nasr returned to LAU. In addition to her role as Director of IWSAW, she founded the Institute's flagship journal, *Al Raidā*, as well as the university's Early Childhood Center. During Abu Nasr's tenure in this role, she successfully transformed the Institute from an academic research center focused on women's issues into one with activist credentials and global and regional reach. Simultaneously, she focused on another passion: fighting illiteracy and advancing children's education.



Figure 1. Julinda Abu Nasr

Abu Nasr coedited the volume, *Women, Employment and Development in the Arab World*, one of the first texts to address female participation in Arab economies and its impact on social structures (Abu Nasr et al., 1985). Upon her retirement in 1997, Abu Nasr had authored several publications and had donated an impressive 8,000-volume collection of women and gender studies to the Riyad Nassar Library on the LAU Beirut campus, which was named in her honor.

LINDA MATAR (1925-2023) LEBANON

Linda Matar's political awakening began at the age of 12, in 1938, when she worked as a silk factory worker to support her family while attending classes at night. Her nearly century-long life reflected the significant changes experienced by Lebanon and the Arab region. As "a feminist who came from the factories" (Civil Society Knowledge Center), Matar joined the League for Lebanese Women's Rights in 1953, where she initially endorsed a petition that demanded the right to vote for women and to run for public office. Rising up in the ranks, she eventually served as the League's president for 30 years, starting in 1978. As president, she lobbied to amend laws that discriminated against women, including those concerning family status, inheritance, and criminal laws. Matar also represented Lebanon in numerous regional, international and UN conferences, contributing to the preparatory meetings for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Additionally, she coordinated the regional office of the Women International Democratic Federation and cofounded several other non-governmental organizations in Lebanon focused on women's rights.

By the 1990s, Matar was advocating for greater political participation among women.

“We want women to participate effectively in public life, notably in the

legislation and enactment of laws,” she often said. “If certain discriminatory laws still exist nowadays, it is because women are not engaged properly. ”
(as cited in Kadi, 2016)

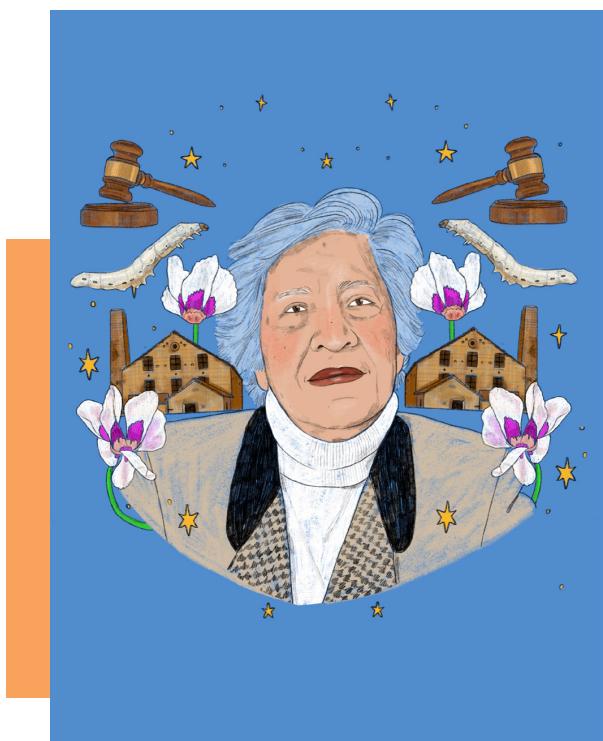


Figure 2. Linda Matar by Nouri Flayhan

She argued for a women's quota in parliament "until the culture of women's participation in public affairs becomes inherent in the society, including among women themselves" (Kadi). Despite running for parliamentary elections in 1996 and 2000, she was not elected. Although she did not enter the Lebanese halls of power, Matar's accomplishments were acknowledged by the Lebanese State in 1998 when

she was awarded the National Order of the Cedar for her exemplary service to not just the women of Lebanon but to all its people. Matar passed away in 2023, at the age of 97.

NAWAL EL SAADAWI (1931-2021) EGYPT

Born in 1931, Nawal El Saadawi was an Egyptian feminist, writer, activist, and physician. She authored numerous books on topics considered to be taboo, including women's sexuality, the position of women within Islam, gender-based violence, and the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). Having suffered from FGM herself at the age of six and having witnessed the practice through her own work as a medical doctor in Egypt, she became an outspoken advocate for ending the practice in the country. El Saadawi would also become an advocate for women's rights due to the amount of violence she saw inflicted against her female patients during her time as a physician. These inspired her to write the book *Women and Sex*, in which she confronted and contextualized various aggressions perpetrated against women's bodies (El Saadawi, 1969). The work became so controversial at the time that it led to her dismissal at the Ministry of Health.



Figure 3. Nawal El Saadawi

El Saadawi went on to become one of the most prolific and outspoken Arab feminists of her time. She founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association and co-founded the Arab Association for Human Rights. Her work eventually led her to be nominated to the position of UN Advisor for the Women's Program in Africa and the Middle East. Throughout her lifetime, El Saadawi continued to write in various languages for diverse audiences, both global and Arab. Among her many books, she published a memoir, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1986), based on her time in prison during the presidency of Anwar Sadat in Egypt, as well as *Woman at Point Zero* (2015), which was inspired by her conversations with a female prisoner she had spoken with nearly a decade prior to her own detention. El Saadawi's work continues to influence feminists around the world and in the Arab region. In 2020, she was named in *Time* magazine's list of 100 most influential women of the past century.

FATEMA MERNISSI (1940-2015) MOROCCO

Born in Fez, Morocco, in 1940, Fatema Mernissi was a feminist scholar and writer best known for her work *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (1975), which she wrote for her Ph.D. thesis at Brandeis University in the U.S. She later returned to teach at Mohammed V University in Rabat as a full-time faculty member. Mernissi's work is considered foundational to the efforts of contemporary Islamic feminists. In her many books on the subject of women within Islam, she "rigorously, patiently,

and elegantly dismantled the Qur'anic 'evidence' of women's inferiority" and examined how certain interpretations of Islam encouraged "men [to] enforce submission from women" (Devi, 2015).

“Not only have the sacred texts always been manipulated, but manipulation of them is a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies.”

(Menon, 2015).



Figure 4. Fatema Mernissi by Nouri Flayhan

Mernissi "challenged Muslim orthodoxy" in all of her work by "placing women at the center of her inquiry" (Menon). The radical contents of her books led to them being banned by many Arab governments, although this never stalled Mernissi's work and writing.

In 2003, Mernissi, along with Susan Sontag, received the Prince of Asurias

Award for Letters, presented by the government of Spain (Fox, 2015). In 2004, she was awarded the Erasmus Prize, and in 2017, the Middle East Studies Association honored Mernissi by naming a book award in her name to "recognize outstanding scholarship in studies of gender, sexuality, and women's lived experience" (Middle East Studies Association).

**ASMA KHADER
(1952-2021)
PALESTINE, JORDAN**

Asma Khader, born in 1952, was a Palestinian and Jordanian lawyer and human rights activist whose work focused on the status of women and violence against women and girls more generally. She graduated from the University of Damascus with a law degree in 1977 and established her own legal clinic in 1984 in Jordan, becoming one of the first practicing women lawyers in the country (Sweis, 2021). Khader served on numerous committees and worked at various institutions dedicated to women's and human rights, many of which she founded herself. In 1998, she founded the Sisterhood Is Global Institute/Jordan, which had consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The organization

“sought to deepen the understanding of women's rights and was “established to bridge the gap in information technology and knowledge accessibility between

women in the industrialized countries and the Muslim world „ (Hamdar, 2000)



Figure 5. Asma Khader by Nouri Flayhan

The center also worked to support women by providing them with legal and educational services (Sweis).

A lifelong advocate for women's protections from sexual and gender-based violence, Khader played an active role in the fight to abolish Jordan's "marry your rapist" law—a law that allowed rapists to avoid punishment if they married their victims. She made significant strides through her political career in government, where she was the first woman to hold the position of Minister of Culture and later served as a senator. In these roles, she successfully advocated

for the government to provide financial and legal assistance to women survivors of violence and to create government-run shelters where survivors could seek support. Khader's work also extended to the international realm, where she served on the International Commission of Inquiry and the Advisory Committee of the Women's Division of Human Rights Watch, documenting and reporting on violations of women's rights in countries in the Arab region such as Libya. She was also an author and wrote several works, including *Questions and Answers about Women's Rights in Jordanian Law* (1996) and *Law and the Future of Palestinian Women* (1998).

MONA KHALAF (1939-2018) LEBANON

Mona Chemali Khalaf, born in 1939, was a Lebanese feminist economist who advocated for women's rights as a professor and as a former director of the Arab Institute for Women. Khalaf graduated from the American University of Beirut with both her undergraduate and graduate degrees in Economics. She then moved to the Beirut University College (BUC), later renamed the Lebanese American University (LAU), where she worked as a fully tenured professor in the Adnan Kassar School of Business. Additionally, she served as the chair of the AUB President's Club from 2011 until 2018 and was the director of the Arab Institute for Women from 1997 until 2005.

Khalaf's expertise as an economist and women's right advocate positioned her to serve on various national and international

committees and groups dedicated to advancing women's rights. She was involved with the Lebanese National Commission for Women's Affairs and later served as an advisor to the report prepared by Lebanon for presentation at the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women (Al-Raidā, 2005).



Figure 6. Mona Khalaf

Her critical contributions to the women's rights movement included several key publications, such as the first ever household survey conducted on women's labor force participation in Lebanon (Al-Raidā, 1998). Khalaf also researched and wrote on a wide variety of topics, including Lebanese women in prisons, women and education in Lebanon, and women's labor contributions in Lebanon and the Arab region. Khalaf passed away in 2018 after 79 years of remarkable work in support of the empowerment of Lebanese and other women in the Arab region.

ETEL ADNAN (1925-2021) LEBANON

Etel Adnan was a feminist writer and artist born in 1925 in Beirut, Lebanon. She obtained her undergraduate degree in Philosophy from the University of Paris, France, and completed her graduate studies at the University of California, Berkeley, in the U.S. Throughout her life, Adnan worked as a lecturer, journalist, writer, and later as an artist, spanning across Lebanon, France, and the U.S. In 2003, she was recognized as "arguably the most celebrated and accomplished Arab American author writing today" by the academic literary journal *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*. Adnan's most acclaimed work remains *Sitt Marie Rose*, a novel based on the true story of a kidnapping that occurred during the Lebanese Civil War and the impact of this kidnapping on the immediate community (Adnan, 1982). This book positioned her as a member of what miriam cooke later termed the Beirut Decentralists, a group of women who chose to write about the war, directly challenging the notion that only men write about war and conflict (cooke, 1996).



Figure 7. Etel Adnan

Adnan's other written works, such as *Of Cities and Women (Letters to Fawwaz)* (1993) and *The Arab Apocalypse* (1980), also documented political strife and the realities of everyday life in the Arab region. In her 30s, Adnan began to paint and produce other types of art alongside her writing. Like her literary works, her artwork received multiple awards and was displayed in prestigious galleries, including Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha and at the MoMA. More recently, in 2023, her work was featured in an exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London.

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