

4. Brave and Bold: Stories of Arab Feminists Told

Can you name one Arab feminist? Most people cannot – and yet there are so many. The Middle East and North Africa region is incredibly diverse. Across these 22 countries, there have been extraordinary feminists whose lives and work have “defied norms, challenged adversity, and left a lasting mark on their societies” (Rodgers & Elia, 2023, p.2). Their names are little known, and their stories even less so. A little “brave and bold” book called *Brave and bold: Stories of Arab feminists who made history* set out to change that.

Firstly, a children’s book, this is an essential reading for any age. This initiative was launched by the German political foundation Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung as part of their campaign to raise awareness about feminism in the region. Through its office on Political Feminism and Gender Justice in the MENA-region, the foundation has partnered with feminist activists and movements to support their production of indigenous feminist knowledge. This effort aims to establish a more robust

basis for solidarity, freedom, and justice. In keeping with this objective, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung recognized the importance of engaging with the younger generation to showcase the resilience of feminist history and to inspire them to continue the fight for gender justice. Furthermore, the foundation was committed to reaching audiences beyond the region, where Arab women are bound by persistent stereotypes that deny their agency.

This book is therefore evidence that “feminism is a deeply rooted movement in the region, not a foreign import” (Rodgers & Elia, 2023, p.3). Tiny but mighty, it takes readers on a journey through the region with the stories of 12 of the countless women who have left their mark on a society masked by patriarchy and Western imperialism. The foundation recognized that it was a challenge to limit the book to only 12 women, when there are many more stories of extraordinary women that could have been told.

Still, it was critical to represent these feminists, and to immortalize their struggles and triumphs in a children's book, published in both Arabic and English. In a region where the native language is Arabic, the book becomes more accessible for children to learn about women's activism in their context, in their language. The English version is crucial because it offers non-Arabic speaking children the chance to get to know women activists from the MENA region. The book concludes with a glossary to enrich our vocabularies by introducing feminist terms and universal concepts such as freedom, equality, and justice.

The book's illustrations were done by Jordanian artist Aya Mobaydeen, known for her culturally authentic style intertwined



Samiha Khalil by Aya Mobaydeen



Raufa Hassan al-Sharki by Aya Mobaydeen

with natural elements (Mobaydeen, n.d.). Her illustrations not only serve as pieces of art, but also as a catalyst for thought-provoking discussions (Tipnis, 2023). To make the stories more enjoyable and increase engagement, the book concludes with coloring pages of these influential feminists.

The book's preface explains the project's purpose for the readers while defining the feminist movement, reminding readers of its global purpose in making the world more just for all. Feminism is a movement to build a better world for everyone. And reading this book "is not just important for girls or women, it's important for everyone" (Rodgers & Elia, 2023, p.11). This book isn't simply a bedtime story, but a source of inspiration for children to

build their narratives today and become the feminists of tomorrow.

The story begins with the legendary Fatema Mernissi of Morocco, one of the first women of her time to earn a doctorate degree. Her books on feminism changed the way people view Arab women. Assia Dejbar, one of Algeria's most famous novelists, also delved into the depiction of Arab women in her politically charged works, advocating for women's opportunities across all spheres of public life in Algeria. Lina Ben Mhenni is the mastermind behind the famous blog "Tunisian Girl," sharing daily injustices for women in Tunisia. And Salwa Bugaighis was the most famous woman lawyer in Libya – and the only woman minister in the government at that time!



Fatema Mernissi by Aya Mobaydeen



Assia Dejbar by Aya Mobaydeen

The stories then continue to Sudan with Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim, the first woman member of parliament in the Middle East. We then learn about the legendary Huda Shaarawi of Egypt, who believed that "women can only be free if they work together" (Rodgers & Elia, 2023, p.24). And then there is Palestinian activist Samiha Khalil, a social worker who dedicated her life to girls' education. She even ran for president! How can one not be inspired by women such as these? The beauty of this book lies in its simplicity, teaching children – and adults – about the contributions of feminism to our communities and countries.

Asma Khader of Jordan was another legend who changed laws in her country to ensure that women could be free



Lina Ben Mhenni by Aya Mobaydeen

Salwa Bugaighis by Aya Mobaydeen



Huda Shaarawi by Aya Mobaydeen

Linda Matar by Aya Mobaydeen



Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim by Aya Mobaydeen

Asma Khader by Aya Mobaydeen

and safe. Lebanon's Linda Matar fought for women in schools and factories, demanding equal opportunities, equal pay, and voting rights. And in 1910, Mary Ajami of Syria started "the first magazine in the Arab world to call for the liberation and education of women" (Rodgers & Elia, p.32). Yes – 1910! The story continues to Iraq, to teach us about the first woman minister, Naziha Al Dulaimi. As one of Iraq's first feminists, she gave women in the country more rights than anywhere else in the region at that time. And finally, Raufa Hassan al-Sharki of Yemen began her activism as a young girl, demanding that the Prime Minister provide "better books for girls" – and her request was granted (p.36). If ever there was a reminder that we're never too young to take a stand, this is it. These 12 women can ignite 12,000 feminists. Their stories demonstrate that "change begins with a single voice, a single idea" (Rodgers & Elia, p.38). Documenting these powerful stories ensures that their legacies will endure. It will ensure that young people have role models as they pursue the critical path toward justice to achieve a life that is both brave and bold.

Note

¹ An Arabic version of this book is available: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/20549-20230904.pdf>



Nazeema Al Dulaimi by Aya Mobaydeen



Mary Ajami by Aya Mobaydeen

References

Rodgers, C., & Elia, S. (Eds.). (2023). *Brave and bold: Stories of Arab feminists who made history*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in the Middle East and North Africa.
<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/20625.pdf>

Kabuiku, A. W. (2020, August 11). Nouri Flayhan is an illustrator, storyteller, and proud Levantine mountain girl. Coveteur.
<https://coveteur.com/2020/08/11/nouri-flayhan-interview/>

Mobaydeen, A. (n.d.), About us.
<https://www.ayamobaydeen.com/about>

Tipnis, S. (2023, December 5), Burospotlights: Jordanian illustrator Aya Mobaydeen.
<https://buro247.me/uncategorised/burospotlights-jordanian-illustrator-aya-mobaydeen/>