

## Editorial

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## Editorial

**Myriam Sfeir and Gabriella Nassif**

We at the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) work closely with all entities and departments at the Lebanese American University (LAU) to mainstream gender and ensure that our students are up to date on all the developments related to gender justice taking place throughout the Arab region. As members of the university's gender committee, we are directly involved with the U.S. Department of State Middle East Partnership Initiative Tomorrow's Leaders Gender Scholars Program (MEPI TL). We work closely with the TL administrative team to provide our students with access to both high-quality feminist academic knowledge and feminist activism.

Our MEPI TL students receive an interdisciplinary education on women and gender issues. They work closely with their professors and the AiW to create research with a view toward social change and policy change. Being an independent convenor that works at the intersection of academia and activism, the AiW strives to serve as a platform for feminist youth. We support our students and interns so that they can pursue their work on gender equality and women's rights. We strive to help them make their voices heard.

To ensure that our students are well versed on current topics and gender issues, the AiW helped to organize several webinars under our Food 4 Thought informal monthly speaker series. These events gave our students the opportunity to engage directly with women's rights practitioners and feminist activists on a variety of subjects. The speakers they encountered motivated our students and inspired them to pursue gender equality in their coursework and beyond. The webinars also gave students the opportunity to deliberate important gender issues with speakers whose work and activism have broken many gender barriers in the fields of violence against women, human rights, politics and conflict transformation and peace building, gender activism and gender justice, sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the rights of marginalized groups. These

webinars, as well as the MEPI TL programs trainings and conferences, gave students the opportunity to put their course work into practice.

This double issue of *Al-Raida* showcases the best work of our MEPI TL students. These papers cover topics as diverse as women's agency, women's labor, and heteronormativity. Students focused on timely issues including gender discrimination in legislation, political and economic gender inequalities, and gender inequality in the workplace. The authors also use a variety of feminist frameworks to conduct their analyses, including interdisciplinary feminism, liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, and feminist political economy. Karim Mitri's analysis of the bodies of work of two of the most well-known feminists from the region, Suad Joseph and Lila Abu-Lughod, is a powerful example of how two different feminist frameworks can be complementary for feminists working in the region today. Relatedly, Melissa El Feghali's analysis of Scouting in the southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region demonstrates how important feminist youth activism can be for inciting change. She highlights the ways that Scouting organizations in the region can go beyond their current work to promote gender equality.

*Al-Raida* has always made room for students to publish their research on gender inequality and women's rights. This issue is a continuation of that legacy and is evidence of our commitment at *Al-Raida* and at the AiW to create space for young feminists to think about what feminism "means" in today's world. In this issue, specifically, students strike a balance between policy reform and radical, systemic changes to disrupt the sex/gender binary to achieve gender equality. As Taline Abou Jaoude notes in her piece "Breaking the Gender Binary," reforming policy must be accompanied by the "radical" and often extremely difficult work of removing the gender binary. Rouba Zouhairy applies this same logic in her piece about sex work and trans women in Lebanon. Zouhairy argues that the lofty ideological discussions and fights between pro- and anti-sex work feminists has left little room for a discussion of the immediate needs of sex workers around the world. While we should not abandon these ideological discussions, we absolutely cannot forget that sex workers face discrimination that prevents them from securing their livelihoods.

Pia Chouayfati, Gaia Bchara, and Hussein Faour approach the issue of gender inequality through international foreign policy and global political economy. All three pieces urge us to think about whether numerical representation of women can be considered “gender equitable.” For Chouayfati, women’s often limited involvement in post-conflict political transitions is evidence that enforcing a women’s quota will not create a gender equitable environment. Similarly, Bchara’s investigation of countering violent extremism (CVE) programming and discourse reveals the gender stereotypes that underpin this work and argues that women must be included at all levels of the CVE process. This means, for example, including women as staff members in high-level CVE committees at the international levels, as well as including women who have been affected by CVE on the ground. Relatedly, Faour examines international nuclear discourse through the framework of feminist foreign policy (FFP). Using Iran as a case study, Faour highlights how heteronormative gender underpins nuclear discourse in the global North and West and in the global South, albeit in culturally specific ways. Challenging this gender normative discourse, FFP provides a way of reframing nuclear power.

The role of gender in media was a favorite topic among the MEPI TL student submissions. The three gender and media pieces selected for this issue reflect some of the trends that the *Al-Raida* editorial team noticed across the 400 original submissions. Rawan Hijazi’s article compares the effects of popular feminist discourse on the Disney movie franchise and the genre of anime films and television shows. Importantly, Hijazi notes that making a few character changes to women and girls in these films—such as making a young girl the movie protagonist—while an important first step, is not enough to ensure that these films are truly feminist. Yasmin Al-Sibai’s piece focuses on a topic that has historically dominated the field of Middle East Women’s and Gender Studies: the Orientalist depictions of Arab and Muslim women and girls in Western media outlets. The issue’s final piece on gender and media is Lara Al Mir’s work on harmful beauty standards and stereotypes portrayed in online advertisements and the disproportionate effects this imaging has on women and girls. Al Mir proposes media literacy training as a way to mitigate the potentially negative effects of harmful beauty standards in advertising.

The issue of gender and work was another important topic for MEPI TL students and reflects the global anxieties about gender inequality in the workplace in light of COVID-19. Reem Saado's article discusses the results of an important survey distributed among Lebanese university students that examined students' attitudes toward gender equality and women's participation in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. Marianne El Khoury's work examines the relationship between motherhood and women's leadership, both in the workplace and beyond. El Khoury notes that while some studies have shown that women experience motherhood as a "learning experience" that helps them become better leaders, many women have experienced motherhood as a set of barriers to their advancement in the workplace. In an interesting analysis of women's participation in the labor force, Kaity Saliba analyses the role of women workers in three value chains in Lebanon: agriculture, handicrafts, and construction. Finally, in a very important contribution to this issue, George Mouawad discusses the experiences of trans people in the Lebanese workforce both before and after transitioning. Notwithstanding the lack of data, Mouawad makes several important observations based on a selection of interviews he conducted with various nongovernmental organizations that work with trans people.

Our students left no stone unturned and highlighted themes that make up our daily struggles for gender equality. They addressed gender discrimination, challenged stereotypes, exposed double-standards, and courageously rejected the injustice prevalent in the Arab region. They questioned misogyny and emphasized the importance of being vocal. They criticized censorship and robbing women of the opportunity to participate in politics. Their research highlights the work that we are doing at the AiW and LAU to ensure gender equality.

Rethinking the future in light of the global pandemic and the compounded crises facing Lebanon necessitates that we capitalize on our youth. They are an important asset and an important part of our future. Through the generosity of the MEPI TL, which provided scholarships to our students at LAU, we have been able to continue our mission. We have been able to support the next

generation of feminists here at LAU. As we turn toward the future, we look forward to working with future MEPI TL students to make gender justice a priority, both in Lebanon and globally.