

Locating Arab Refugee Women: Identity and Allegiance in Global Feminist Conflicts

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Introduction

There are academics who argue that the most significant failing of the Arab feminist movement is that it has yet to become a political actor with significant power and influence in the social and political arena.¹ Overtly radical Arab feminists are accused of being pawns of the West, of being too polarizing to represent the interests of Arab women and are ostracized by the Islamic establishment. Their “personal is political” stance is seen as a deliberate subversion of the primary issues concerning Arab women generally, including Arab refugee women. Notably, though Arab refugee women are a highly politicized group, for the most part they remain silent in the Arab feminist discourse: they are neither addressed by Arab feminism nor are they given a voice in Arab feminism.

Arab refugee women are the focus of this article, particularly with regards to the construction of their identity. To understand the role of the identity construction of the “Arab refugee woman” in intra-feminist debates, this article will address the following questions: what categories of women qualify as “Arab refugee women” and what epistemological grounding most objectively situates them to be in a unique position to address the debate described in the previous paragraph?

As noted by Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), feminist approaches to the social sphere are concerned “not just with truth, but also with how knowledge is produced and authorized” (p. 14). Feminists have a “moral responsibility” for their knowledge claims, which “entails a general ethic of accountability to a community of women” (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 14). In the case of refugees, Sayigh (1996) classifies the researched as “disadvantaged” (p. 145). However, as Harding argues, “the oppressed have the capacity to see more clearly. They may be socially disadvantaged but they are epistemologically privileged; they are better placed to produce ‘maximally objective knowledge’” (Harding, 1991, p. 27).

Unpacking identities in this way is crucial for analysis. Leila Ahmed (1992) problematizes the Islamist position regarding women; she defines it as essentially reactive, trapping the issue of women in the larger cultural struggles. In other words, the Islamist position diffuses the heterogeneity among Arab women and obscures the distinct groups within the whole, along with their issues. Unless unique groups of Arab women are able to maintain distinct identities and a separation is made between their diverse issues, there is a real possibility of “losing” Arab refugee women in such a cultural vault.

1. Author Saliha Boudeffa observes that women’s gains in the Arab world are the result of a silent revolution. Through education and work, they have managed to achieve social visibility and a place in the media. In fact, the feminist movement comes as a result of these social and economic changes.

In addition, cultural biases, colonialist in nature, are often present, even in some of the most radical political circles. The racist notions that Arabs are indeterminately linked to Islam and that Muslims are backwards and uncivilized often lead to the conclusion that Arab politics can never be progressive because it is “Muslim” and therefore supports patriarchy, violence, savagery, barbarism, etc. A racist logic homogenizes all Arabs and Muslims, constructs them as inferior to Whites/Europeans, and assumes that the Arab identity and Islam are inherently backwards and patriarchal.²

These attitudes, underlying the contemporary struggle between Western feminism and Arab feminism, raise many complex issues about race, resources, class, and power that exceed the scope of this article. In attempting to locate Arab refugee women in the larger debates, the truism that their religious identity may be constructed by Islam, though important in aligning them with a particular form of feminism, does not, on its own, inform their politicization as refugees or as actors in the women’s movement. In the following sections it will be shown that a more influential factor in this process is their identity as refugees. It is argued that using Islam as a starting point homogenizes Arab women and has the net effect of rendering Arab refugee women, as a sub-category, invisible.

2. See interview with INCITE! Women of Colour Against Violence! co-founders Nadine Naber and Andrea Smith at http://www.incite-national.org/media/docs/6851_criticalmoment-2007.pdf.

3. Many of the 50,000 refugees who fled to Pakistan in the months following the Taliban takeover of Kabul did so because they were suddenly deprived of female earnings. Female employment has proved to be a necessity for many families in the camps and the prospect of having to survive in Afghanistan without this option, given the harsh economic conditions, has been a clear disincentive to return.

4. Refer to Nahla Abdo’s “Engendering Compensation: Making Women Count!”, a report prepared for the Expert and Advisory Services Fund International Development Research Centre, March 2000.

Identifying an Agenda among Arab Refugee Women

The role of refugee women in post-conflict reconstruction frequently emerges in both academic and policy debates on refugee reintegration and citizenship. As a social group, refugee women have and continue to be marginalized. This is primarily so because the ruling classes that articulate laws and influence development policy persistently essentialize them as a homogenous group, viewing them as a mere offshoot of war, and considering them as social and economic burdens rather than assets. However, recent research has demonstrated that in fact refugees represent a crucial, yet under-utilized, social, political, and economic capital. This is further supported by Hanafi (2007) who, in a pioneering study showing familial modes of entrepreneurship driven by non-economic factors as motivating refugee return, makes the case that “Palestinian returnees should not be seen as a burden to society but rather as an asset, bringing skills and capital and having great potential to contribute to the social and economic life of the receiving country” (p. 75).

Though the role of refugee women in sustaining livelihoods, building and maintaining cohesion, and facilitating reproduction and production of family and community in refugee settlements is widely acknowledged,³ not much is known about the structural possibility of transforming their agency in order to influence the course of livelihoods outside of the refugee setting or to actively participate in the Arab women’s movement. Few studies have been conducted among Arab refugee women to these ends.

Refugee women in many Arab countries have been found to disproportionately suffer discrimination on the basis of their gender and also on the basis of their ontology, as refugees.⁴ The difficulties that Arab refugee women experience in their host countries are well documented. Of all Arab countries, only Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen are parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its Protocol. For instance, due to the failure of the Arab states to recognize Palestinians as refugees under the Refugee Convention and their subsequent failure to guarantee Palestinian

refugees' legal protection, these states do not routinely grant Palestinian refugees many of their basic human rights. Thus, Palestinians are sometimes denied the right to work, to travel freely either inside or outside Palestine, to unite with family members, to own private property, or to benefit from a wide spectrum of international human rights guarantees. In addition, research on domestic violence, particularly against women in the Gaza refugee camps, has shown an increase in physical, mental, psychological, and sexual violence against women.⁵ These issues, as crucial as they are, remain peripheral to core Arab feminist concerns.

While Western feminists criticize Arab women for their acceptance of religion, claiming that it undermines their cause, Arab activists maintain that their struggles can be located in some or all of the wider social, political and economic situations in their countries at any given time. Arab women, generally, contend that it is less pressing for them to tackle specific phenomena (such as rape, wife battery, sexuality, etc.), than to attempt to change the wider context in which they live. Arab women argue that women who live under political, economic, or racial oppression believe that their oppression as women is part of their oppression as people. Their argument continues that these oppressions are believed to be major impediments to women's progress. Thus, they argue that many of the specifically Western feminist concerns can be realized only once a certain level of self-determination and development has been reached. Arab women have, nonetheless, maintained a steady demand for change, particularly regarding their civil and political rights. Despite a reluctance to openly radicalize their demands, these women continue to demand greater self-expression and autonomy for women in the Arab world. Arab refugee women, however, remain largely excluded from this discourse.

To the extent that the revival of religious fundamentalism threatens the global feminist establishment, Western feminists underscore the necessity of engaging Arab women as symbols of the sustained struggle between religion and feminism. This has not always been true: conservative Arab feminists have long been targets of Western feminist criticism for their perceived tolerance of systematic oppression and abuse of women under patriarchal Islamist regimes. The position in which they find themselves now is one concomitantly worsened by each new wave of Islamic terrorism. Arab refugee women, however, continue to evade this "fundamentalist" stereotype. Although perception of them has not substantially changed, they are not as 'vilified' as they have been in the past because they have come to symbolize the failure of extremist regimes (a vindication for the champions of "freedom" and "emancipation"); in a sense, their position in global feminist politics has improved with the escalation of the political upheavals that rendered them refugees.

These antagonisms are significant thematic considerations in analyzing the distance between Arab feminists and Arab refugee women.

Politicization in Exile

Women actively create room for movement in conflict situations and utilize the windows of opportunity offered by conflict to improve their position. For instance, various forms of conflicts offer women new opportunities for political participation, exposure to the

5. The Women's Empowerment Project of the Gaza Community Mental Health Program has documented a sharp rise in cases of violence against women, including incest rape. For more information visit <http://www.gcmhp.net/women.htm>

concept of women's rights, the chance to establish women's groups, skills training, and organizational capacity building. Refugee women with links to the Diaspora and/or with strong links to NGOs, particularly NGOs which actively promote human rights and social justice concerns, will be more sophisticated in their political discourse, more aware of global rights regimes, more adept at accessing information via technology (such as the Internet), and more actively involved in seeking political change in their homelands (Jacobsen, Levitt, & Wagner, 2002). Various studies have shown how women actively utilized these numerous windows of opportunity to improve their position. For this reason, in this article reference is made to an "empowerment"⁶ perspective vis-à-vis women's position in exile in contrast to a "victim" discourse.

Similarly, Mahnaz Afkhami (1994) in *Women in Exile* notes that:

Along with the loss of their culture and home comes the loss of the traditional patriarchal structures that limited their lives in their own land. Exile in its disruptiveness resembles a rebirth for the woman. The pain of breaking out of a cultural cocoon brings with it the possibility of an expanded universe and a freer, more independent self. (p. 45)

Empowerment of refugee women is also a class issue which manifests itself differently from one group to the next, depending on location, education, exposure, as well as social/economic or political connections. Among elite political exiles, the result of this politicization is felt in the form of sustained debate and engagement with the ruling classes and consciousness-raising, both at home and in the diaspora. Among less privileged groups of refugee women, this politicization is symbolized by collective responses to oppression and abuse, and organizing around daily issues that particularly affect women and children.⁷

Strategic Engagement by the West

The Arab women's movements are part of international women's organizations that strive to improve women's position in all societies, as well as to struggle for peace and sustainable development, and against war and globalization. There are many common factors between Arab women's movements and international women's organisations, taking into consideration the specificities of each society in its culture and economy. Many international women's organisations are currently active in opposing the war in Iraq and supporting the right of the Iraqi people to control their fate. Many Arab and international women's delegations are sent to Palestine, in a popular campaign to protect the Palestinian people, where they face violence from the occupation forces. Despite these common grounds, questions remain as to who determines the agenda with regard to affected groups in these regions: if Western feminists engage with Arab refugee women's issues (as researchers, development experts, or activists), how accurately do they portray these issues to the rest of the world?

Arturo Escobar (1995) identifies labelling as a fundamental feature of organizations, alluding to the pervasive use of labels within the development discourse in the form of client categories and "target groups", such as "small farmers", "pregnant women", "landless labourers", "slum dwellers" and the like (p. 108). These labels are essential to the functioning of institutions dealing with problems in the Third World ("Third World"

6. Describing an integrative empowerment model, feminist activist and sociology professor, Balghis Badri argues for the necessity of empowerment of the self and civic engagement, as well as incorporating educational, legal, leadership, political, economic, cultural, religious, and institutional factors to empower women.

7. In Eastern Sudan, for example, the experiences of conflict and exile have changed the nature of active women's groups. A study among women's groups in exile and groups that address the needs of women in marginalized and war-affected areas found that women still attending literacy classes are organized and often leaders of women's groups and they are adopting an increasingly transformative agenda.

is itself a label). Labels are by no means neutral; they embody concrete relationships of power and influence the categories according to which we think and act. Geof Wood has insightfully summarized the rationale for labelling:

...the validity of labels becomes not a matter of substantive objectivity but of the ability to use labels effectively in action as designations which define parameters for thought and behaviour, which render environments stable, and which establish spheres of competence and areas of responsibility. In this way labelling through these sorts of designations is part of the process of creating social structure... Labels reveal more about the process of authoritative designation, agenda setting and so on than about the characteristics of the labelled... In that sense, labels do in effect reveal the relationship of power between the giver and the bearer of the label. (as cited in Escobar, 1995, p. 349)

Labels determine access to resources, so that people must adjust to such categorization to be successful in their dealings with the institution(s).⁸ Thus, it can be argued that the material and practical needs of “Arab refugee women”, to a large extent, overpower their strategic needs, rendering their cultural identity as Muslims and Arab women much less valuable over a period of time. Their identity as refugees, on the one hand, obliterates their individual and collective struggles as Arab women. On the other hand, it empowers them materially, while transferring responsibility (and power) for their well being to external agents of development, namely the international community.

International response to refugees is an embodiment of mediation between communities, states and, in some cases, social movements, each with separate and oftentimes conflicting interests. At the level of communities, this interest might be the preservation of cultural sovereignty in the face of social upheavals. At the institutional level, labels are invented and maintained on an ongoing basis as part of an apparently rational process that is essentially political (Escobar, 1995). Women’s movements, for their part, articulate an interest in refugee women as part of a wider struggle for the emancipation of all women, although their interest may at times inadvertently resemble those of the ruling classes.

Western lobbying on behalf of marginalized groups of women is, in some instances, perceived as misplaced and has been criticized as such. Western feminist assertions of women’s rights as human rights must, for example, take into consideration the particular situations of different women. While the political importance of the discourse of human rights and equality remains compelling, any adequate discourse of human rights must remain vigilant about its own partiality and limitations. While Western feminism(s) tend to focus on the rights of individual women, many Arab feminists, recognizing the importance of individual rights, also highlight the problems faced because of social, structural, cultural, and global influences. Malaysian author, Azza Basarudin (2002), argues that “approaching Arab women’s rights, struggles and liberations through Western feminist agendas cannot be effective because these agendas were cultivated in a different environment based on Western history, needs, experiences and values” (pp. 62-65).

8. Used here in reference to social, political, and economic entities that influence access to, and may exercise control over resources necessary for survival and livelihoods.

The jostling of Western media, international non-governmental organisations, aid agencies, and various philanthropic individuals to assist refugees caught in these

“wars of terrorism” has not been lost on Islamic feminists in the Arab world. There is the perception that Arab refugee women have been prioritized for assistance and overly flashed on the world stage, at the expense of equally needy Arab women living in difficult conditions and fighting for basic civil and political spaces without so much as a nod from the West. As this situation develops, the convictions of Islamic feminists in the Arab world become stronger: increasingly they believe that indeed Arab refugee women are the domain of the West, the West’s pawns, and therefore the West’s mess to sort out. The reluctance of the Arab women’s movement to delve into the politics of Arab refugee women can also be construed as their reluctance to be obscured and swallowed up by the secular, populist politics of the capitalist mammoth that is the West. It is, in the final analysis, a subverted rejection of the global feminist movement.

Towards Rapprochement

Is reconciliation of Western feminist and Arab feminist ideology possible or indeed desirable? Perhaps it is the ambivalent attitude of Arab feminists towards their refugee counterparts that allows for the tiny hope that Arab and/or Islamic feminisms and Western feminism will be able to find a common space to address and accommodate Arab refugee women, a break from the polarizing issues that currently pit Arab and Western feminists against one another.

Law provides an effective platform for rapprochement. There is a global consensus among feminists on the need to write civil laws that are outside the boundaries and unreasonable demands of religious texts and to enforce them to protect women. There is also a consensus on the fact that civil law should be concerned with what is fair and just, not a passionate plea to keep men superior to women. Law is a powerful site for dialogue among women themselves and between women and the patriarchal state. The polarizing controversies surrounding perceptions of Arab women’s subjugation under religion cannot be simply resolved, but, in the short term, it is imperative to establish a common cause around legislative amendments that can be achieved for Arab women in their countries and Arab refugee women in Arab host-countries. This can be achieved by collectively challenging resistant legal establishments in Arab countries with regard to women’s political and social participation and civil liberties.

Barring legal compromise, two factors threaten the precarious position of Arab refugee women and, at the same time, provide opportunity for the Arab women’s movement to reconcile itself with the plight of Arab refugee women and re-establish rapport with the global movement of women: it is hypothesized here that the favour that Arab refugee women currently enjoy with the international community cannot last indefinitely. Beyond a wholesome appreciation of their situation, there has neither been a concrete movement to mitigate the root causes of refugee crises in the Arab world by the West nor significant progress towards protecting refugee women in exile. In the absence of concrete asylum guarantees, Arab refugee women are likely, in the long run, to turn back and seek favour at home. Thus, the Arab women’s movement has a unique opportunity to broaden its agenda to rally around them refugee women and embrace issues specific to refugee women as part of its core agenda.

UNHCR facilitates three possible responses to the refugee crisis: resettlement of refugees from the country of asylum to a third country, voluntary repatriation of refugees, and local integration/naturalization of refugees in the country of asylum. The former is riddled with problems and controversy, particularly where women are concerned, and only a tiny percentage benefit from resettlement each year. The majority are slated for repatriation, which presupposes an end to the conflict in their country of origin. The third alternative, integration into the host country, can create special problems for Arab refugee women. Research has found that the tug-of-war between host-communities and refugees strain much more than resources. It can create cultural and social tensions between groups. The Arab women's movement can again capitalize on these debates, providing more space for its interaction with the global feminist movement.

Finally, towards finding common ground, Basarudin (2002) suggests that "for feminism(s) to be accepted in the Middle East, Arab women need new liberation movements that are based on their experiences and values with some acceptable feminist ideas and practices" (p. 62). She continues: "There is a wide gap between Western feminist discourse and the actual lives and practical needs of women from various ethnic groups, cultures and backgrounds" (p. 63). Thus, she suggests that in envisioning solidarity with Arab women, Western feminists should utilize the vast resources and knowledge available in dismantling global oppressions, which not only include gender apartheid but which also have social, economic, and political components, to understand how Arab women have continued to be victims of racism, colonialism, and imperialism.

Conclusion

Arab feminists and Western feminists frequently disagree on issue prioritization and approach. Arab feminists think it necessary to coach women's advancement in the wide struggle of their society. Western feminists have argued that this approach leaves critical issues unattended. Despite the fact that the issues of Arab refugee women have been largely ignored by Arab feminism, this article has argued that the strategic engagement of Arab refugee women by the West, which has led to deeper interest in the lives of women throughout the Arab world, could provide a neutral ground for dialogue and debate. Arab refugee women's concerns can provide significant points of entry and engagement between Arab feminists and their counterparts in the West.

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