



# The 25 Year Life Story of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World

**H**ow did it all begin? How did it develop? What are its future prospects? These three questions, along with many others, come to one's mind when talking about the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World. Answering them, we felt, could help trace the 25 year life story of the Institute, a life story marked by a seventeen year civil strife which has, undoubtedly, slowed the momentum of its activities, but has not succeeded in hindering its determination to move ahead in promoting the advancement of Arab women.

## Recollections and Testimonies

### Riyad Nassar, President of the Lebanese American University

In the early seventies, the Lebanese American University (LAU) was still a women's college. Serious thought, however, was given to the possibility of changing it into a co-educational institution. With this perspective in mind, several consultations were held with the Board of Trustees, members of the alumnae, friends, faculty and students. The pros and cons were debated, and eventually the decision was made to implement the change. We felt that if we wanted to develop the institution further, we could not invest in half of the country's population. We had to expose the total population to our liberal educational system. Another factor that affected our decision was the results of a questionnaire that was sent, at that time, to the students asking them whether they preferred the college to remain as it is (a women's college), or become co-educational. As I recall, approximately 80% of the students preferred the latter. So we felt that change was pertinent. Yet, we strongly believed that in order to honor its heritage, this institution had to continue offering women a special and unique service. The idea of doing something for women, therefore, became clear and it was approved by the constituencies of the University. Out of all the discussions that took place, the whole group voted for creating an institute for women studies in the Arab world. But the final approval had to come from the Board of Trustees, so the administration proposed the idea and the Board endorsed it.

Once approval was granted the details of the Institute started being worked out internally. The implementation of this new idea needed funding, so the President of the University at that time, Dr. Schechter, approached the Ford Foundation which agreed to give us seed money to start the project and kept on financing it for the first two or three years. The initial amount we received, in 1974, was \$ 30,000. We received all in all

\$ 80,000 from the Ford Foundation during the first three years of the Institute's inception. By the end of three years, the Institute had a successful record that enabled it to attract money on its own from other foundations, women organizations, governments and individuals. And here I give the previous Director of the Institute, a very dynamic and professionally qualified woman, a lot of credit because she was able to impress people and convince them that the Institute could deliver.

After funding was secured, we needed a director to run the Institute. Dr. Schechter and myself - I was Dean at that time - thought of Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr. She was a faculty member at LAU, and had a good record in teaching, research and running the nursery school. It took some convincing to get Julinda to move away from teaching, which was her primary interest. We had to do a lot of arm twisting to convince her to take the position. We were proven right, she did an excellent job throughout the 24 years she served as director. She managed to nurture the institution from an embryo to a very reputable one.

When we set up the Institute the first task Julinda had to undertake was to develop a mission for the Women's Institute. Since she was reporting directly to the Dean, Julinda and I, along with the President, worked for days on developing a philosophy for the Institute. Certainly Julinda was more informed on these issues because she was working with a team of professionals and was consulting with people outside the University. But I as a Dean had a say and so did the President and finally we came up with a mission statement for the Institute, namely "to serve as a data bank and resource center to advance a better understanding of issues pertaining to Arab women and children; to promote communication among individuals, groups and institutions throughout the world concerned with Arab women; to improve the quality of life of Arab women and children through educational and development projects; and to enhance the educational and outreach efforts of the Lebanese American University."

Throughout the years we tried to move away from the political sphere. The Institute was more of an intellectual, academic, research, documentation institute than a lobbying place for women's rights. Universities usually try to shy away from the political arena. For instance, we did not want to be lobbying for the amendment of discriminatory laws against women; not because we did not believe in it, but because we thought independent organizations would be more effective in exacting change than an academic institution. However, this did not stop the Institute from working towards increasing people's awareness on women's and children's issues.

## Irene Lorfing, Former Research Associate at the Institute for Women Studies in the Arab World

Before joining the Institute for Women Studies in the Arab World, I was working on a collaborative research project on family formation patterns and health in Lebanon. In the course of my work, I witnessed for the first time some of the problems that Lebanese women faced because they were women. When I joined the Institute in 1977, the war was raging but the office was vibrant with enthusiasm. After a few months of research and documentation on the status of Lebanese and Arab women, I realized the immensity of the task ahead. My collaboration with the Institute lasted ten years during which we concentrated our efforts on research, documentation, networking with Arab and international organizations as well as planning and participating in regional and international workshops and conferences. We have also introduced at the Lebanese American University, the first course on women's studies in the region. These were very productive years that laid the path to the growth of women's centers in the Arab countries and increased the interest of Arab researchers in women's social, economic and political roles and their status in their respective societies. Our research efforts concentrated on: the identification and elimination of sex stereotypes in school textbooks; sex role attitudes and cultural change; women in employment and development in the Arab world; tasks of women in the Lebanese industry; Lebanese women heads of households; the economic contribution of Lebanese women and its effect on family dynamics, socialization patterns of Lebanese children; and comparative studies to assess Arab women's situation in the family and society. We have also prepared, at the request of UN organizations, plans of action for young girl's and women's programs in the Arab World and a research design to study women's profiles and assess their situation in the family and community (UNICEF, MENA region).



Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr, former Director, with the staff of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World

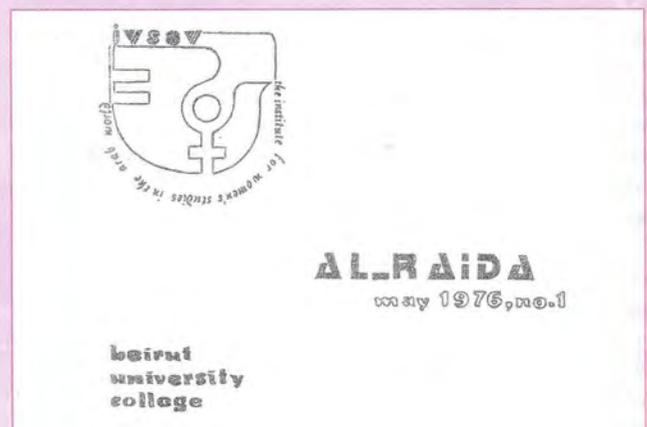
Another important component of our work was the planning of regional conferences on the issues facing the integration of Arab women in development. These conferences were attended by policy makers, UN and Arab organizations, prominent Arab researchers and women's NGOs. In addition we have participated and attended conferences all over the world. We have, for instance, cooperated with the Mediterranean Women's Study Center (KEGME) in Greece for the preparation of the 1985 women's decade in Nairobi.

The war was raging, but we always managed to find a boat, a plane or a car that would take us to our destination. It was important to communicate our findings and experiences, make our voice heard and reinforce our networking. Nothing seemed to stop us. I believe that the legitimacy and urgency of the task we had decided to initiate and undertake kept us going. As a pioneer Lebanese institution in the Arab world, we had to succeed and I think we did.

## Rose Ghurayyib, Former Editor of Al-Raida Al-Raida: How it All Started

Founded in 1973 at the Lebanese American University through a grant from the Ford Foundation, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World started publishing, in 1976, a newsletter of eight pages, reporting about the noteworthy activities of the Institute. The newsletter eventually evolved into a quarterly publication of sixteen large-sized pages, called Al-Raida (the pioneer). Its aims were briefly defined as follows: pursuing closely and steadily the modern feminist movement in the Arab world; reporting on its activities as represented by unions, conferences, congress, seminars, declarations and claims; publishing articles which drew their material from documentation and research. For this purpose, the Institute started establishing a documentation center, with Arabic and English reference books and magazines to be used by members of the Institute and other people interested in reading and/or writing about the women's movement as well as Arab women. The first ten numbers of Al-Raida were published both in English and Arabic, using a separate

pamphlet for each language. This required a double amount of work and expense. Since 1980, the publication has been limited to the English issue and, in 1992, the number of the pages was raised to thirty two, then to forty eight in 1996.



Cover of the first issue of Al-Raida

## Future Prospects

### **Nabeel Haidar, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Lebanese American University**

**Question:** The Institute is located on the Beirut campus which hosts most of its activities. In your capacity as Vice President for Academic Affairs, how do you envisage the future networking between the Institute and the other two campuses of the University?

**Nabeel Haidar:** The Women's Institute is a University Institute. Its scope of action is the whole university in its three campuses - Beirut, Byblos and Sidon. The reason why the Institute did not do much in Byblos and Sidon before is due to the Lebanese war which started shortly after the Institute was established. During 1997 and 1998 however, the activities of the Institute reached out to the Byblos campus and some were conducted either in cooperation with local NGOs in the Byblos area or solely by the Institute.

**Question:** Are there any plans to offer a degree in women's studies, BA or a minor?

**Nabeel Haidar:** Although I personally would like to see a degree in Women's Studies at LAU, unfortunately I do not believe that it is financially feasible at the present time, the reason being that there will be very few takers (majors) of this degree. At this time what we should be concerned with is

raising awareness among our student population to issues related to women. Here I must emphasize that we should not only address female students but more importantly male students. I believe that awareness may be brought about through lectures, workshops, seminars, outreach programs and well thought of courses. We should always keep in mind that women do not live in a void but together with their male counterparts; therefore, education on women's issues should address both men and women.

In the future, the near future, we look forward to start offering courses in which the plight of women is approached from the angle of justice and peace - a course like "gender equality" - where the injustice practiced against women could be shown to be a factor of instability at the national level. A few courses (perhaps four to six) could form a minor area of specialization, but a whole program of thirty six credit hours is unlikely at this stage.

**Question:** Do you think that increasing women's and men's awareness will lead to a greater involvement of Lebanese women in the public sphere?

**Nabeel Haidar:** I was very disappointed recently during the municipal elections when only a few women decided to run for elections. This shows that our women lack confidence in themselves. They should get engaged - in force - in all types of elections not as a women's block but as full-fledged citizens. Why should we ask for women to be appointed in key positions if they themselves decide not to be involved?



## Mona Khalaf, Director of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World

**Question:** Do you envisage, as the new Director of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World any major changes in the mission of the Institute?

**Mona Khalaf:** The mission of the Institute, as set by the university revolves essentially around three major areas: academic research, documentation and networking. It is, therefore, an academic unit within the University set-up. I do not anticipate any basic changes in this broad mandate, at least not in the near future. Here I would like to open a small parenthesis. The Institute was the first of its kind in the Arab world. Its inception, however, almost coincided with the outbreak of the civil strife in Lebanon which went on relentlessly for seventeen years and resulted in a huge displacement of the Lebanese population, its systematic impoverishment and a drastic increase in the number of women headed households. Within this context, the Institute felt that it could not limit its activities to academic ones. It undertook outreach programs to help women in the lowest social strata who desperately needed this help to survive. Thus, along with pursuing its academic endeavors, the Institute developed action programs for the community.

**Question:** Within this broad mission, do you think that new perspectives would emerge, particularly at the research level?

**Mona Khalaf:** Definitely. Despite all the progress achieved and the reduction in the gender gap during the second half of this century, the basic issues related to women are still the same. A significant change has, however, been witnessed in the

way these issues have been conceptualized in the context of development. We have, in fact, gradually moved from a "women in development" (WID) approach which stressed what women need from development into a "gender and development" (GAD) approach which prioritizes what development needs from women. And here, when we talk about development, we are not limiting it to economic development. We are talking about sustainable human development, a development achieved by people and not for them, a process in which all people irrespective of gender are essential agents. This new gendered outlook to development which emphasizes its human and sustainable components cannot but affect the course of research and training undertaken at the Institute.

**Question:** The name of the Institute is linked with that of the Arab world. How would you assess the achievements of the Institute in that respect?

**Mona Khalaf:** As mentioned earlier, the achievements of the Institute have been jeopardized by the Lebanese civil strife. But efforts have already started to network with other centers in the Arab world. In fact, through a grant from the Italian Association for Women in Development (AIDOS), the Institute is presently engaged with three other documentation/information centers in Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine in collecting and exchanging information about women's rights in their respective countries.

In addition, the Institute is expanding the scope of its documentation center through the collection of books, journals and studies with the purpose of making it *the* reference on Arab women's issues.

### AREAS OF RESEARCH

=====

Preference will be given to research in the following areas :

1. Role of women in national integrated development.
2. Women and rural development .
3. Women and industrial development .
4. Working women - employment .
5. Social and legal status .
6. Conditions under which women live .
7. Contributions of women in different fields.
8. Self-concept .
9. Organizations.
10. Education - vocational training .
11. Abolishing illiteracy .
12. Social taboos that hinder women's development .
13. Population growth and family planning .
14. Health and nutrition .

### I W S A W's GRANTS

=====

1. Grants will normally not exceed L.L.7500 .
2. Preference will be given to individuals or groups with long standing commitments to the Arab world and with adequate qualifications to undertake research .
3. Preference will normally be given to projects that can be completed within 12-18 months.
4. Grantees will be expected to make their research results available to the Institute . They might be requested to participate in seminars and conferences .

#### Closing Date

There are no standardized application forms for submission. Proposals must be received by August, 31st 1976 .