

## “Let Us Communicate!”

The situation was startling: intellectual women leaders who have spent most of their adult lives fighting for women's rights, freedom and dignity coolly rejected a request for advice made by two young women. Instead, they continued chatting amongst themselves about their maids and their diets. Of course, I understand and appreciate that their maids play a crucial role in organizing their active and busy lives, thus enabling them to dedicate their time and energy to women's issues and intellectual activities. I also understand and respect these women's concerns about maintaining their health. What I cannot understand, however, is their insistence upon carrying on a trivial conversation in the midst of an intellectual event featuring their expertise, rather than giving two minutes of their time and attention to interested and committed young women who may become leaders of the women's movement of tomorrow, young women who aspire to carry women's struggle for respect and equal rights into the next millennium.

There is a world-wide consensus about youth's important role in carrying on various human rights struggles and projects. Youth represent continuity and future hopes. Because of this, we should encourage them and nurture whatever interests or capacities they demonstrate, rather than ignore or belittle them whenever they raise a question. Women's movements in general, and women intellectuals fighting for women's rights in particular, should avoid falling into the trap of “intellectual elitism”. Elitist attitudes serve only to widen the gap between different groups and generations. Considerable external pressures already prevent women from embarking on processes of transformation and change to awaken them to the inviolability of their rights and the importance of their existence as autonomous human beings capable of making their own decisions. Thus, internal divisions among women based on age, class, religion, race, experience or intellectual achievement is unnecessary and even defeating. For what is the use of intellectual women living in their ivory towers, rejecting all dialogue with their fellow women and men, dismissing others' suggestions and refusing all avenues of communication that might bring together women and men from various backgrounds to pursue common goals? Equally important, if women's movements and issues are not reflective of young people's needs and aspirations, these movements will quickly become superfluous and perish. Continued lack of communication and cooperation will also lead to a terrible breach between different generations, and might even result in divisiveness and pronounced competition between women, causing a break-up within the women's movement that will have long-lasting negative implications for women's rights in the future.

To avoid this grim possibility, intellectual women should avoid creating alien theoretical frameworks which do not reflect the needs and interests of today's young Lebanese women. If the younger generation feels alienated and ignored, they will be unwilling and unable to continue what these women pioneers began.

Here, we reach a crucial question: Is it possible that women's issues can become merely a routine for women activists? Is it possible that speculations about women's liberation and rights gradually become nothing more than a “pair of glasses” used only in preparation for and during meetings and seminars, a theoretical lens which you simply remove when you have finished your speech and stepped down from the dais? If this is the case, then there is no use for all of the information, research and intellectual activity conducted and possessed by intellectual women leaders. All too often, they seem unwilling or unable to deliver these intellectual resources to others, and equally important, to receive them from others. Moreover, if the insistence on the importance of youth remains confined to the pages of abstract agendas, then the role of youth should be removed from the agenda and replaced by more pressing items.

There is no doubt that intellectual women leaders are a valuable source of information and ideas, and that their experience constitutes a treasure that cannot be replaced by anything or anyone else. No one can deny the essential role they have played in improving women's conditions in Lebanon on all levels over a period of several decades. But it appears that they are often so absorbed in their work that they have begun to live in their own lofty spheres, exchanging their ideas and research results only with those who occupy this same intellectual level.

Because the knowledge, experience and views of these intellectual women leaders are a precious asset sought by all, they are asked to share with all. Because the lessons they have learned while paving the rocky way for women are essential for continuing the work they began, they are asked to exchange all of their knowledge with everyone, especially the young. Since their guidance and cooperation are essential, various channels of communication should be opened between the different generations in order to build the sturdy bridges across which the women's movement must march into the future.

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*(Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of IWSAW, Al-Raida or the Lebanese American University)*