

TO CLAIM RIGHTS IS TO RECLAIM HUMAN DIGNITY:

Arab Women Stand Up and Speak Out

The audience, mostly women, leaned forward in their chairs. Some seemed to be holding their breath; others were holding back tears. All were silent, their faces showing intense concentration and a mixture of shock, outrage, surprise, and even, perhaps, a trace of relief. The moving testimonies they were hearing, delivered by a brave group of women at the Arab Women's Tribunal* in Beirut last year, could shock even the most hardened listener, ranging from the narrative of an Algerian lawyer who told of innocent women being mowed down by gunfire in the streets for the crime of not wearing appropriate attire, to the story of a Palestinian woman from a refugee camp in Lebanon who miraculously survived rape, the slaughter of her family, and injuries that should have left her dead in 1982.

Less electrifying, but no less disturbing, were the testimonies given by average women who had quietly endured years of violence and humiliation at the hands of abusive husbands, brothers, or fathers in the supposed safety of their homes. Domestic violence, although neither as dramatic nor as visible as politically and religiously motivated violence, does just as much harm—perhaps even more—since it is inflicted in secret behind closed doors, with few if any witnesses to intervene or provide emotional or moral support to the victims. Some members of the audience at the Arab Women's Tribunal expressed surprise and alarm at the extent of damage being done to some women in the private, secluded realm of homes throughout the Arab world. But other audience members, who had personally experienced varying degrees of domestic violence, were relieved to hear that they were not alone in their suffering. Other women just like them, Christian, Muslim and Druse, rich and poor, career women and housewives, had also been victimized by those on whom they were the most dependent. They, too, had felt isolated, trapped, and despondent. They, too, knew the gnawing sense of guilt that they were somehow to blame for the beatings, followed by a soul-destroying certainty that they were indeed worthless and deserving of such harsh treatment. At the Tribunal, these damaged women learned that speaking out provided the best antidote to the most poisonous and enduring legacy of abuse: shame.

The Arab Women's Tribunal, the first event of its kind in this region of the world, dramatically broke the silence that traps so many women behind isolating walls of shame, fear, confusion and despair. It provided a rare opportunity for Arab women from different countries and various backgrounds to join together and form networks to confront a topic of concern to them all: violence against women in its many permutations.

More importantly, the Tribunal encouraged everyone who attended to reconsider their unexamined, and thus unquestioned, conceptions of power and powerlessness, and to take a critical look at their assumption that a distinct and impermeable dividing line separates the public and private domains of life. The Tribunal offered insights into the political and economic roots of violence against women, whether committed by state actors, militia members, husbands, brothers or fathers. It examined legal measures to halt violence, and raised unsettling questions about prevailing socialization patterns (largely carried out by Arab women in their capacity as mothers) which impart to children the message that boys have more rights than girls, implying that males are far more valuable than females.

But by far the most important aspect of the Arab Women's Tribunal was that it empowered the women who testified to reclaim their humanity, to stand up, speak the truth, and break through the silence, lies and illusions that permit violations of women's human rights to continue unabated. The Tribunal emphasized that women are neither objects, symbols, scapegoats nor chattel; they are unique, individual human beings possessing inherent value and dignity. Women have feelings and rights, and will not remain forever silent while they are being abused. The public nature of the Tribunal served notice to all those individuals, institutions, societies, and governments who do not yet acknowledge or respect women's human rights that the day is coming when Arab women will say "No!" to victimization in all of its direct and indirect manifestations. In the hope of hastening that day's arrival, we present this special double issue of *Al-Raida* devoted to the topic "Women's Rights are Human Rights: Perspectives from the Arab World." We would like to thank United States Aid for International Development for providing us with a grant to enable wider dissemination of *Al-Raida* throughout the world.

If you are a subscriber to *Al-Raida*, we would like to remind you that this double issue will be the last that you receive in 1996. If you wish to renew your subscription, or take a new one, please complete the form on the back cover of this issue.

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Editor-in-Chief

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