

A N ENCOUNTER OF ARAB WOMEN RESEARCHERS

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Between July 25th and 27th, 1996, *Al-Baahithaat*, the Association of Lebanese Women Researchers, held a meeting which was attended by a number of Arab women researchers from Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Palestine, Bahrain, Sudan and Lebanon. The first inter-Arab meeting of its kind, it enabled women researchers to get acquainted and to share their research experiences.

During the first session, the women introduced themselves. Coming, as they did, from different countries, age groups, and social backgrounds, and bringing with them a variety of experiences and expectations, their candid self-introductions and open-hearted comments were enriching and inspiring. This introductory session revealed some of the women's self-perceptions and the problems they face in speaking publicly about themselves. As one researcher noted, "The hardest thing for a woman to talk about is herself."

Each of the participants discussed the stages they went through in becoming women researchers, stressing the decision, the isolation, the multiplicity of interests, and the resistance of parents and others to their choice. One woman, who wanted to study politics, was forced by her parents to study English Literature instead. This was a real punishment for a woman whose chief goal was to become a politician! It is significant that most of the women confessed to having developed an interest in women-related research topics only after a passage of time. None began their research careers with the clear intention of studying women's issues. The women also discussed the complicated task of balancing research projects with their roles as mothers and wives. Many spoke of the all-pervasive sense of guilt they feel towards their children.

An interesting discussion arose later in the meeting concerning research on national issues from a feminist perspective, with the most memorable comments coming from the Palestinian participants. Palestinian women have had to face the dichotomy of being at one and the same time women with specific concerns, and political beings struggling for a national cause. Algerian and Moroccan participants raised the important issue of language. An Algerian researcher related that as the product of colonization, she studied Arabic as a foreign language. The language question is further complicated by the fact that women researchers in Algeria cannot publish articles under their own names, the ultimate symbol of silencing a woman's voice.

During the following two days, workshops addressed theoret-

ical and methodological issues of particular interest to women researchers. A number of participants expressed feelings of isolation, which increased whenever their research topic dealt with women's issues since such research tends to be marginalized in the Arab world. Some of the women also complained about the absence of coordination between women's research groups in the Arab world.

A key remark concerned the noticeable change of direction in women's selection of research topics. The trend has moved away from research on "women and work," "women and education," and "women and family" to a focus on more specialized topics and a re-writing of women's history from a feminist perspective. It was also noted that increased funding from various international agencies has presented more opportunities for research, although simultaneously limiting the focus to particular topics. A number of researchers asserted that an enhanced feminist awareness was needed if women were to avoid gender stereotyping on the level of research.

The result of this land-mark meeting was increased ties of friendship and collegiality between Arab women researchers. The meeting also resulted in some important decisions, foremostly:

- the creation of a communication network between women researchers.
- the creation of a directory of Arab women researchers.
- the establishment of a journal for young women researchers.
- calls for similar meetings on an annual basis.

At the close of the meeting, several participants exclaimed that it had been "a historical event;" "We have been dreaming of convening such a meeting for so many years!"; one woman stated. The meeting was indeed vital and enriching. It is to be hoped that the many connections and contacts that were made will generate further fruitful encounters in the near future.

For more information about *Al-Baahithaat*, contact:

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Al-Baahithaat is currently forming a network of Arab women researchers. If you are an Arab woman researcher, living in the Arab world or the West, please send you c.v. and four or five publication references, along with your complete address, including e-mail, to the above address.