

Sisters of Men

by Dr. Shereen Khairallah,
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Let me begin by asserting that this text is a most informative and enjoyable book, thoroughly researched and clearly presented. It constitutes a welcome reference in English on Arab Lebanese women. I personally feel greatly indebted and enlightened after reading this work. One of my key criteria for a good text is the questions it raises and the curiosity it ignites, rather than the ready-made answers it may provide. Khairallah's book certainly raises penetrating questions that challenge our assumptions about Lebanese women and Lebanese history.

The first thing that attracts one's attention is the title of this work: *The Sisters of Men*. The author explicates the title by indicating that it is a variation on an oft-heard "expression signifying an unusual woman, a woman as capable as any man, as brave, intelligent and courageous, in brief, a great compliment indeed." (p. 5). But, is it truly a compliment? To my mind, it is biased and disturbing, not because I am a vehement feminist, but rather, because of the implied status such an expression assigns to women in our society. The expression, "a sister of men" suggests that only an unusual, extraordinary woman could attain such a title. This implies that noble and commendable qualities are naturally the attributes of men, whereas poor, deficient women have to work twice as hard to join the vaunted "sisterhood" of men, if we may coin such a phrase.

A second observation is that Khairallah's decision to analyze the roles of women only after they have passed away lends a panegyric mood to the work. Eulogizing women may lead to a biased appraisal of their impact during life. The following three examples of eulogized women illustrate the problem of biased panegyric. The first of these "sisters of men" is `Alya' Fransis, who was renowned for her bravery, generosity, wisdom and good counsel. In addition to being an excellent traditional healer and an outspoken woman who took a stand on every issue of importance, Fransis was also an accomplished horse-woman who defeated a number of male equestrian heroes in competitions. For "the sake of her eyes," her native city, Marj'ayoun, was spared during a period of conflict, and because of this event, we enjoy to this day the beautiful proverb "*kurmal `ain, tikram Marj'ayoun.*" Yet, despite all of `Alya's extraordinary accomplishments, some men who witnessed her amazing performance of swordswomanship could not praise her directly, but instead exclaimed to her father "O Abu Mulhim! If such are your women, what must your men be like!?" (p. 133). This compliment takes away from `Alya's achievements and places the focus on men as the ultimate measure of all that is noble and valuable.

A second example is the following laudatory remark saluting Hind Nawfal, the first woman publisher in Syria: "she combined the grace of a woman with the strength of a man" (p. 177), and this remark was made by none other than the great intellectual of the Arab *nahda* (Renaissance), Jurji Zeidan! But the foregoing examples are drawn from the 19th century. How did women fare during the 20th century?

Salwa Nassar was praised in a 1963 newspaper article as follows: "She is an atomic physicist and equal to ten men," although her father was quite furious when she was born a girl" (p. 259). All these examples, regardless of the century which gave rise to them, illustrate that man is the norm or criterion against which women are measured. This is objectionable on the grounds that it ignores the intrinsic human value of each person, regardless of

gender.

Yet Khairallah's choice of title is justifiable because of her sub-title: "Lebanese Women in History". Is there a more appropriate title for women's condition at that point in Lebanese history?

Another concept I must question is that of feminism, as it is described on p. 22. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, I do not think that either the term or the concept of "feminism" had yet been introduced into the Arabic language or local cultural practice. Feminism has been a rather recent import. Consequently, I hesitate to agree with the author's reference to "liberated" women as "feminist leaders," or to label the call for women's emancipation or liberation as a "feminist movement."

The final observation I wish to make is that we see these women pioneers as products of experiences of exile and immigration. This factor might provide a plausible explanation for the secularism and tolerance which the author sensitively traces in the lives of each of the remarkable woman profiled in the book. When I speak of exile, I mean exile in both the literal and metaphorical senses of that term. Nearly all of these "sisters of men" traveled or immigrated during their lifetimes, most of them to Egypt, but a few to Europe and the Americas, too. Could we hypothesize that their travels, or the foreign, modern educations received by the few who remained at home in Lebanon, gave these women a wider, double, perspective which provided fertile intellectual ground for their secular attitudes and tolerance?

My second group of comments pertains to factual matters. In her introduction, Khairallah salutes the women who have given of themselves so selflessly — and still do — in social voluntary work. But, understandably enough, she did not include these women in her text. I found it puzzling, however, that no mention is made of pioneering artists, such as the dancers Badi'a Masabni and Nadia Jamal, or sculptors like Moazzaz Rawda, or actresses such as Feryal Karim. I also would have preferred to see the inclusion of some intellectual and cultural trend-setters, like Salwa As-Sa'id (the first Lebanese woman to serve on AUB's Board of Trustees and a dynamic member of the Ba'albeck Festival Committee). And where are all of the women lawyers? Sulayma Abi-Rashid is mentioned

as the first woman lawyer to stand before the Ba'abda courts (p. 176); but she is grouped with the journalists. Is it because she "failed" as a lawyer, and why? Was it due to poor legal skills on her part (doubtful) or, more likely, did she leave the law for journalism because of discrimination?

In a country famous for its inhabitants' entrepreneurial skills, it is surprising to see no mention of successful businesswomen. Khairallah states that any omissions are due to "the sin of ignorance" (p. 9), yet her exploratory research and deep digging in diverse and rich sources makes such a sin very unlikely. After all of her diligent searching, Khairallah must have come up with much more information than she used in the final version of the book, so the question is, what would explain the omission of some of the above-mentioned categories of women pioneers?

Khairallah concludes the book's Introduction with this query: "What price being a woman?" (p. 25), and in the Epilogue she provides some penetrating answers to this question of the costs we pay for being normal, not remarkable, "sisters of men." Is there any reason to hope that the 21st century will usher in an age in which Lebanese men take pride in their sisters, daughters, wives, friends and colleagues for their own sakes, because of what we are, as did the men of the al-Hawaytat Bedouin tribe, who referred to themselves as the brother of such-and-such a woman with pride and dignity (1)?

Until such an era dawns, women and men must strive to transcend all the barriers — not only gender limitations — to go beyond the "misery of being a woman" to the joy, blessings and challenge of being a human being. When that day comes, our author, Shereen Khairallah, will certainly feel that her efforts in producing this unique and revealing book have been amply rewarded. Both the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World and the author herself have given us a true gift which illuminates our understanding of the accomplishments and adventures of these first "sisters." The rest is up to us!

Footnotes

(1) From an unpublished research article by Aseel Sawalha, a Ph.D. Candidate in Cultural Anthropology.