

Report on a Research Trip

Between September and December of 1983 sponsored by a Fulbright award, I visited seven African and North African countries conducting interviews with women from various social classes, occupations and experiences. I also contacted the various women's associations in the countries. The aim of this trip was to reassess the position of women and the women's associations in the different countries as well as to collect material, published and unpublished data, and literature. I now have about 60 (1h½ hour) tape recording of interviews in Arabic, English, French and W'olof with women, and sometimes men, speaking about the pressing issues facing women today, or discussing their lives. I also took many photographs and travelled with two assistants provided by the University of Illinois, one for the Anglophone

countries, the other for the Francophone ones. Both women had been co-conveners of the **Common Differences: Third World Women and Feminist Perspectives** conference held at the University of Illinois last Spring.

In Egypt the feminist writer and physician **Nawal el Saadawy** provided me with contacts with women from a variety of backgrounds. Through her and other contacts I was able to interview novelists and journalists such as **Ekbal Baraka**, **Mona Hilmi** and **Fathiya Al-Assal** as well as business women, doctors, nurses and maids.

In Sudan we were the guests of **Ahfad University College for Women in Omdurman**. **Amina Badri**, a professor at the college, wife of the dean and an active member of the **Bubaker Association for Women's Studies**, arranged for us

to meet a variety of women. Thanks to this very efficient woman we were able to study an excellent cross-section of women's roles in Sudanese society. It was one of the most productive stops of the trip. We met with many of the students and classes and gave several lectures at the College. The Bubaker Association has been very active in bringing to the rural areas of Sudan much needed medical, literacy, and hygiene programs. The Association is also conducting an energetic campaign there and in the cities for the eradication of sexual mutilations.

In the Ivory Coast and Senegal, we had several meetings with university officials. We contacted **Amina Traoré**, professor at the **Institut d'Ethno-Sociologie of the University of Abidjan**, and a well-known feminist. I met with **Awa Thiam**, professor and researcher at the **University of Dakar**, editor of the journal **Femmes et Sociétés**, author of **La Parole est aux Nègresses**, and activist against sexual mutilations. We went to a village in the bush with one of my former students, **Molly Melching**, now working for AID. We conducted interviews in the village in Wolof with the help of Molly. In Dakar and in Abidjan we also had several interviews with women from different classes of the population.

In Morocco we were met by the "**Groupe Etude-Féminine**" in Casablanca. Two work-groups were created in January 1983 through cultural associations in Casa. The aim of these groups is to analyze the condition of Moslem-Arab women in general and of Moroccan women in particular and to try to bring to light the reasons for their millennial slavery. Some of their activities were centered around the cultural week of March 8, 1983 and included many discussions on women and the personnel code, employment, teaching, militant Palestinian women, women and cinema etc. Their projects for 1984 are a book and cinema etc. **and the Election**, (a book which will be in Arabic and for which they are looking for a publisher), and studies on prostitution, publicity, and popular songs. We had many important meetings and discussions with these women, separately and as a group.

We also met with **Souad Filal** and the other members of the "**Groupe de Recherche sur la Femme et L'Enfant**". We visited and interviewed women in Rabat and Fez. I was able to go with two nurses to the "bidonville" of Casa and talk to some of the women from the poor districts. **Fatima Mernissi**, the well-known feminist writer and author of **Beyond the Veil**, was out of the country.

In Algiers we met with a group composed of

literature and linguistic professors. They publish a journal called "**Kalim**" of scholarly articles, a good number of which are devoted to women and feminist issues. We had lengthy talks and interviews with two of the women novelists: **Yamina Mechakra**, author of **La Grotte Eclatée** and **Myriam Ben**, author of **Ainsi Naquit un Homme**, two books which I teach in my classes. We went to Oran and had meetings and discussions with the "**Groupe de Recherches sur la Femme Algérienne**". This group has been one of the most active groups in North Africa and the Arab world in terms of their research, publications and activities. For many years they have published **Isis**, a scholarly journal devoted to research on women which was printed through the University until last year. Recently they added a new publication, **Voix-là** which includes less academic material and gives "**Voices**" ("**Voix**" in French) to women from various strata of society and with different interests.

In Oran we conducted interviews with the maids and cleaning women of the hotel where we were staying. Most of them were in a polygamous family setting and wore the veil to go outside. They all expressed the desire for their daughters to live differently.

In Tunisia we met the journalist **Amal Ben Aba** and other members of the "**Groupe d'Etudes de la Condition des Femmes**". We had an interview with **Jalila Hafsia**, director of the Club Taher Haddad and author of several books. The women we met there seemed the most free of all the women we met on the trip in terms of possibilities for expression, development, choices, and life-styles.



Group in Tunisia

The wealth of material collected throughout the trip should provide the information necessary to write articles and possibly books, which should come into existence in the coming years. Already "Les Cahiers du Griff", a feminist journal in Paris, has asked me to direct a special issue on Arab and African women for which I welcome any article. The issue is due to come out in 1985.

General observations resulting from the trip are that most of the women's associations are facing serious difficulties such as being directly forced to stop, or having to go underground, or having to assume all the responsibilities for their publications and distributions with practically no means, or existing in the fear of prosecution or persecution, or all of these combined.

As in most countries around the world, the women's movements are often accused of not being objective and of not being scientific enough, even when they are among the few in a University



Group in Morocco.

producing scientific research (the women in Oran are a good example). The temptation has often been to become assimilated into the dominant voice in order to avoid eradication. Fortunately, most of the women's movements have avoided this pitfall and have asserted themselves autonomously in the midst of tremendous trials.

In Egypt, a women's association started and headed by Nawal el Saadawy was stopped by the government.* In Senegal, the movement against sexual mutilations, with Awa Thiam as one of its

leaders, often comes under heavy attack by various African groups and individuals. In Morocco, the Groupe Etude Feminine and all of its activities were sharply criticized by the press which connected them with prostitutes and drug addicts! And finally in Oran (Algeria) the GRFA (Research Group for Algerian Women) was dismissed from the CRIDSSH (Center for Research and Information in Human Social Sciences) of the University of Oran (see the announcement in this issue).

Reasons for such difficulties will have to be analyzed within the whole economic, political, and social framework of the area under study. It is not, however, the aim of this report.

Other observations are that I found women eager to speak and to voice their problems. The various associations made it clear to me that they felt the need to create stronger ties with the various women's organizations throughout Africa and the Arab World; that it would strengthen them and make them feel less isolated in what they sometimes tend to see as their unique problem. Many expressed the need to find a platform to voice their difficulties, the means to publish their research, and to publicize their activities, especially when this seems impossible in their own country.

I wonder if Al-Raida and the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) in Beirut could serve as this platform and link?

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Author of books, studies and poems she travels extensively throughout the Arab World and Africa doing research on women. Her book, "L'Exisee" (see Al-Raida May, 1, 1983, p. 15), tells the story of a woman symbolically mutilated by religion and patriarchy. It has been very well received by critics and feminists alike.

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* See Al-Raida, Aug. 1, 1983, p. 15.