

A Survey of the Stages of the Women's Liberation Movement in the Arab World ☆

The feminist movement in the Arab countries, as in other parts of the world, is still at a pioneering stage. Its leaders are still called pioneers, whether they lived in the 19th or the 20th century.

Since its appearance in England and the U.S.A. two hundred years ago, the movement went through periods of progression and regression. The first stage is represented by leaders like the British **Mary Wollstonecraft** (late 18th century), and the American **Lucy Stone** (early 19th century). Both leaders claimed women's complete equality with men. The stage of regression took place between 1920 and 1956 when, under the influence of Freudian theories and the pressure of industrial propaganda, women in America and elsewhere were induced to return home. Between 1950 and 1963, the important works of **Simone de Beauvoir** (France) and **Betty Friedan** (U.S.A.) marked a new impetus in the movement which, since that time, has continued to spread not only in the West but also in developing countries.

The feminist movement in the Arab countries started in the 19th century as part of a general awakening and went through the same stages of «upward and downward stress» that characterized the western movement.

The Middle Ages witnessed the flourishing of Byzantine and Arab civilization in the Middle East; women enjoyed a relative share of freedom which permitted the emergence of women rulers, women poets, singers, dancers and so on. Islam, as early as the 7th century, gave women the right to own property, fixed the laws of marriage, divorce and inheritance and limited the number of wives to four conditioned to the instauration of justice for each of them. In the 19th century, after four hundred years of stagnation, a movement of awakening took place, producing reformers and leaders of modernism amongst both men and women. The movement was initiated in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria, and from there it spread to the neighbouring countries.

Women's emancipation in the 19th century meant a rising interest in their education. We may mention at least five women who wrote traditional poetry, published articles in magazines, and took part in other cultural activities.

Aisha Taimur of Egypt, in the early part of the century, published poems in three languages: Arabic, the language of the country she lived in, Turkish, the language of the ruling khedives and Kurdish, the language of her ancestors. In the articles she published in papers as well as in her poems, she declared that she was following the steps of former women poets. Though she felt proud of her veil, she blamed men for preventing women from utilizing their talents in a more adequate manner. **Zainab Fawwaz**, a contemporary of Aisha Taimur, was an intellectual who succeeded in obtaining recognition as a journalist, a poet and an author of women's biographies. She was from South Lebanon, lived in Egypt, married a writer from Damascus and, though she kept the veil, took part in literary discussions and panels organized by men. Other women who participated in the revival of traditional poetry in the 19th century were **Warda Yaziji** and **Warda Turk** from Lebanon. **Marianna Marrash** who directed in Aleppo (her home town) a literary salon attended by both men and women.

The first half of the 20th century generated a new impetus in the feminist movement, which led to its propagation in other Arab countries than the three already mentioned. **Huda Shaarawi**, who publicly tore off her veil in 1923, was the founder of the union of Egyptian women. She also founded a feminist magazine in Arabic and French and the Arab Women's Federation in 1944, a few years before her death. Her collaborators were the famous writer **May Ziadeh**, **Seeza Nibrawi**, the Union's secretary who died a few months ago, **Malak Hafni Nassef** who died at the age of 32, leaving a book expounding her modernistic views about women's emancipation. This period witnessed the emergence of a large number of women authors, journalists and founders of women's magazines, public speakers and founders of literary salons, the most famous

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being that of **May Ziadeh** which she directed for 12 years and succeeded in bringing together the Egyptian intelligentsia of that time.

The period was characterized by a wave of social consciousness which led to the creation of women's feminists organizations, charity associations and orphanages, and to the emergence of voluntary social workers who advocated social justice and prison reforms.

Their social activity was intensified with political activity displayed through their writings, the public demonstrations they organized and other forms of support to militant nationalism in their countries.

Their claims, as set forth in the writings of **Malak Hafni Nassef** and the declarations of **Huda Shaarawi** and others, consisted of the following:

1. Granting women the right to education, including higher education.
2. Encouraging women to study gynaecology, and business management.
3. Abolition of the veil, partially or completely.
4. Necessity of allowing the betrothed to see each other before marriage.
5. Abolition of polygyny.
6. Restriction of the husband's unilateral right to divorce.
7. Raising the age of marriage and guardianship.
8. Granting women electoral rights, including the right to participate in political activity.

Most of the above claims have been granted since they did not contradict Islamic law. However, differences between religious leaders continue to exist regarding the interpretation of Koranic laws concerning polygyny, divorce, inheritance and other details in the personal status laws, which vary from one country to another and obey to a movement of fluctuation.

Feminist leaders of the early 19th century generally came from well-to-do families. They claimed education and justice for women in general, but had little or no contact with the laboring classes where women have to cope with the «double burden». Their claims did not include the right to work for women of the bourgeoisie or the improvement of work conditions for underprivileged women. Another drawback in their movement was the scarcity of scientific research concerning

women's status and problems. An exception was the masterly work of the Egyptian author **Qasem Amin** in 1904, «Tahreer el Mar'aat» (Women's Emancipation), which discussed the influence of ignorance and oppression on women's life and personality, referring to religious, logical, judicious, psychological and economic arguments. Another book by **Nazira ed-Din** «As-Sufour wa al-Hijab», appeared in the thirties. The work was based on an analytical research of women's right to discard the veil, supported by religious arguments. At the time, it aroused a good deal of commotion; but many think that the book had been written by Nazira's father, a judge at the Shari'a court, and attributed to the daughter.

The gaps existing in the activities of that period were filled by women leaders in the second half of the century (1950-1980). The activities of this second period proceeded along the same path of those started earlier, and there is no doubt that progressive steps have been achieved. Since then, a larger number of women have access to education, and yet the rate of illiteracy remains high. More women are entering professions previously monopolized by men, and show increased interest in science courses, while in the past they concentrated on art and literature. Their presence in positions of leadership still remains meager, while in politics it is almost non-existent. Laws dealing with personal status are a subject of controversy between liberal and conservative groups in the Islamic world as a whole.

Apart from being a period of expansion in feminine activities already started in the first part of the century, this period is marked by two distinctive characteristics: **first**, the spread of scientific research on women to America and the rest of the Western world has produced a similar interest in women's studies in the Arab East. **Second**, the integration of women in development is being launched by the United Nations, and shared by almost all countries of the world, including Arab countries.

Both movements have created for women certain problems which this conference will raise and discuss, and for which my speech will serve as an introduction.

Women's studies are certainly an outstanding achievement of our scientific age. They have the advantage of using the modern scientific method of questionnaires, systematic computation, statistical and graphic

results, reaching a high degree of accurate conclusions and banishing all forms of inaccurate generalizations. Women's studies have recently multiplied in Egypt, Lebanon, Algeria, Jordan, Kuwait and other parts of the Arab world. These studies, whether carried out by the indigenous researchers or by foreign research institutes, have dealt with such topics as women's education, eradication of illiteracy, women's integration in development, problems facing women's work, women's image in the media and in school books, family-planning, health education... etc.. The studies have aroused enthusiasm, but were criticized because of their limited topics and their methodology. The topics were criticized because they limited the evaluation of women's progress to the fields of education and work, and neglected such aspects as woman's personality and how it has been affected by education and work. Other neglected topics were the effects of women's education and work on family status and structure, the concept of freedom as visualized by women of today, the value of education, and its success or failure in creating awareness and social consciousness among both men and women, and the status and problems of rural women who form a majority in many Arab countries.

Education is of little value if it limits itself to the teaching of reading, writing and arithmetic, and neglects moral training and social awareness. Consequently, it is not enough to take the number of literate women and working women in a certain region, but we should also ask ourselves and researchers what kind of education is being offered by commercial schools which have been given a free hand in that region. We should try to detect the schools which inculcate in their students a spirit of bigotry and blind obedience, fill their heads with superstitions, and fail to awaken their creative abilities, their desire for further knowledge and their social consciousness.

Regarding the method adopted in these studies, it has been criticized by such researchers as Dr. **Huda Zurayk** and Dr. **Wadad Sulaiman Marcos**⁽¹⁾ on account of inaccuracies in the statistical information and an overwhelming use of demographic and statistical methods, neglecting the social historical method. In evaluating woman's work, for example, it is necessary to take into

consideration her part-time work outside the house, her economic activities within the family, her seasonal work in the field and her irregular outside work. The «multivariate techniques of analysis» should be used instead of the general statistical report.

Women's integration in development should not be considered as a new idea because, from the very beginning, women have been active workers at home, in the field, in domestic industry and in particular feminine occupations (like embroidery, sewing, nursing, midwifery and other varied handicrafts). The present movement aims at integrating in development the inactive middle-class women whose work has been limited to supervising their servants and housemaids. The movement seeks also to widen and increase women's opportunities for work by encouraging them to venture into fields formerly monopolized by men. No doubt their activity has created for women new problems and raised various questions such as: «To what extent has their new involvement contributed to their liberation (or to their enslavement)»? and «In what ways has it affected their personality, their family status and their social role»?.

The studies and articles which attempted to answer the above questions abound in complaints regarding the unjust treatment imposed on women in all fields of employment where «society's acceptance of male domination has pervaded development work». Sexual discrimination is still the order of the day, women are relegated to low-skilled, low-paid and easily replaceable jobs. As to the impact of work on their personality, it carries the same possibilities offered by education. Work may be to woman a means of liberation if it gives her the opportunity for intellectual, social and financial development, provided she avoids being exposed to exploitation and overwork as a result of carrying a «double burden». Otherwise, work may become a form of enslavement.

Here, we should remember that the process of development, involving both men and women in developing countries, has been little discussed and needs further study. According to Canadian President **Massé**⁽²⁾, «development is no more thought of in material terms but rather as a qualitative change in the way people

(1) Al-Raida, February 1, No. 23, p. 7; and May 1, No. 24, p. 3.

(2) Al-Raida, May 1, 1983, No. 24, p. 1.

think, act and relate to their environment». The influx of capital investment is not enough; there is a shortage of human resources in Third-World countries. The indigenous people lack the technical know-how to operate the machines that have invaded their countries. Another prerequisite for development is an understanding of people's background and cultural heritage, and this requires their own involvement in self-criticism.

If we compare women feminists of today with their predecessors, we find that the former have to face a more complicated situation resulting from the complexity and diversity of their demands. Facts revealed through increased research impose on them new responsibilities. As Third-World nations acquired their independence lately, women felt the need to assess their conditions and to carry a more independent study of themselves in an effort to reach a personal viable solution to their problems.

In an attempt to revive their local cultures, many Third-World countries have drifted into a wave of reaction, obliging women to go back home, and inducing repressive measures in the laws pertaining to personal status.

Can we conclude from the above facts that the present stage in feminist activity is characterized by confusion and destabilization which earlier pioneers did not encounter?

There is no doubt that the present stage features drastic changes and transitional difficulties. Yet, in spite of many negative aspects, we may detect at least two positive symptoms peculiar to this stage. **First**, the emergence of a **new type** of woman with a new way of life. In the past, women had only one choice for their future: Marriage. In some communities, they had two choices: marriage or convent life. Now, a third choice is open to them as a result of their involvement in education and work. It is the possibility for woman to live alone, and to lead an independent life dedicated to some worthy cause, such as social, artistic or scientific activity. A woman who has adopted this choice is one who has freed herself from the complexes that usually assail a solitary woman. Formerly, a woman who lived alone was rejected by society, but today this new woman has succeeded in asserting herself through inde-

pendent work. She has rejected the idea that a person was born for a definite purpose, that a woman, for example, was born to serve her clan or her community, or that her destiny is to catch a man, submit to him and identify with him and his family. This woman believes in her right to plan her own life and choose her own reason for existence. She may be a single woman, a widow or a divorcee. She may also be a married woman who enjoys complete equality with her husband. Her likes are not numerous; but they are multiplying and are to be found everywhere. She is the woman of the future.

The **second** positive development in the present stage of feminist activity is its international dimension. It started in the Arab world as a regional or local activity, but has recently spread widely. Every Arab country has its women's union; its members communicate with those of other unions and form a general women's federation. They meet in conferences and congresses in which they exchange ideas and publications.

Experience has taught women that men in both East and West, educated or illiterate, refuse to give up any of the privileges they acquired during 8000 years of patriarchal rule. «Men are ready to liberate themselves from all traditions except the one which confirms their superiority over women and their right to exploit them». This declaration was made by **Tatiana Mamono**, the Russian feminist. She adds that the Russian system, in spite of its emphasis on equality among people, has failed to implement sexual equality. The same is true of the opponents of this system outside Russia, who do not seem to be more concerned than the earlier group about women's liberation. The same complaint is heard from Palestinian women who took part in the revolution, and from Moroccan and Algerian militant women who fought side by side with men in the struggle waged against colonialism. All these women affirm that the fruits of the liberation movement were forbidden to women who have been ordered to go back home. As a result of the opposite alliance among men against women, the latter have been obliged to form a counter-alliance of women whose objective is to defend their rights and resist the injustice imposed on them by men everywhere.

The spreading wave of female consciousness is best expressed in a recently published work (1984), «Sisterhood Is Global»⁽³⁾, compiled by **Robin Morgan**. A number of countries, including eight Arab states, as well as the United Nations, are represented in this book. Seventy women contributed their articles; they were an eclectic group from different backgrounds and countries. All these women share the same cry, the same call for unity and united effort against male domination. They believe that women, who have suffered injustice and exploitation all through 8000 years, should be more ready than men to understand and sympathize with the needy and the underprivileged. Since they form half of the world's population, they should be able to become powerful enough to liberate their sisters as well as their brothers, the male sex, from three dominating plagues: lust for power, moneyworship, and destructive violence, three plagues threatening the world with annihilation.

June 30, 1985
Rose Ghurayyib

For The Record

Progress for disabled: Providing opportunities for disabled women was the focus of a regional workshop from 10 to 23 October in Amman Jordan. The agenda included establishing job possibilities such as self-employment and co-operatives, identifying community resources and reviewing present educational and training facilities. The ILO organised the session in collaboration with the Jordanian government and with the financial assistance of AGFUND. Representatives attended from Bahrain, Democratic Yemen, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Syrian Arab Republic, United Arab Emirates and Yemen Arab Republic.

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World Congress of Women

Moscow 23-27 June 1987

«Towards 2000 - without Nuclear Weapons: for Peace, Equality and Development»

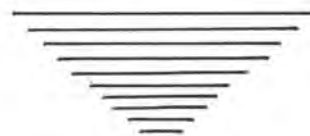
Initiated by WIDF, a world forum of women united 2823 participants from 154 countries representing 1005 national organizations, women's trade union and youth organization movements, professional groups, women artists and house-wives. 88 international and regional organizations were represented at the congress, and the United Nations participated with 25 high-ranking figures and with representatives from 13 UN specialized agencies.

The Congress is part of a process that began with the UN Declaration of the International Women's Year in 1975 and continued right through to the UN Decade for Women in Nairobi, 1985.

The Moscow Congress allowed women to pinpoint the obstacles today which is a sort of next step forward after Nairobi.

At the largest gathering of women since Nairobi the delegates gave expression to the dearest wishes and aspirations of women from all social strata, various outlooks and beliefs, for a world without nuclear weapons, a world in which everybody can realize the right to live and work in peace, a world in which every woman can build up a secure and happy future for the coming generations.

Women of the whole world
Journal of the WIDF No. 3/1987.



(3) Anchor Books, N.Y. 1984.