

A New Arab Woman?^(☆)

Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban discusses the image of Arab women in comparison to western feminism. Born and raised in Syria, she completed her BA at the university of Damascus. Then she was offered a grant to do post-graduate studies

Feminists in the Arab World were predicting great achievements in the region by the end of the decade. Yet, little in the way of real progress has actually been recorded.

The «new» Arab woman we would like to hear about refers to isolated examples, such as the Jordanian woman who was the first to fly a commercial Tristar jet; or the Kuwaiti woman who was appointed Dean of the country's Faculty of Law; or the Kuwaiti doctor who only recently became the first woman Dean of the School of Medicine; or a former Syrian minister; or Egyptian feminists. The fate of Arab women is still commonly portrayed in the role of eternal submission, driven from home by exile and war; commanded to cover her face with the veil and always obey her husband and father.

According to Syrian-born Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban, this is not what she found as she talked to Arab women when she set out to write her book - **Both Right and Left Handed**, in which Palestinian, Syrian, Algerian and Lebanese women speak of their own life experiences in the male dominated society of the Middle East. She found scholars and freedom fighters; poets and mothers of martyrs; intelligent, spirited and often angry women.

In an interview with Pat Lancaster, Dr. Shaaban made a cross-analysis between the status of Western women and the status of Arab women. She said that Arab women are far better off than the West perceives them to be. «Sadly the western impression is still very much that of somebody wearing the veil and buying up Harrods. They do not see Arab women as they really are: wives, mothers and homemakers, but also informed and enlightened people who frequently hold down responsible jobs in farming, education, politics and law.» Dr. Shaaban added that Arab women are extremely supportive of one another on a personal level, praising each other's achievements and helping one another when they can. «In the Arab World there is a lot of solidarity between women, but it is not organized. Whereas in the West, women have official workshops where issues are debated, there is a structure.» Shaaban also pointed out that Arab women need to work on this

*in Britain at Warwick University. She is author of the book **Right and Left Handed**, in which she reports some of the experiences of Arab women in the male dominated society of the Middle East.*

structural organization. Although there are women's unions and organizations in the various Arab countries, much is still needed in overall regional terms; «What we need most of all is a change of attitude. There aren't laws against women as such but general attitudes prevent them from attaining their potential.»

With respect to attitudes towards women, Dr. Shaaban believes that the archtypal image of the western feminist has had a counter-productive effect in the countries of the Middle East. For instance, she noticed that there is a general misconception, which is promoted by men, that western feminists are sexually promiscuous and irresponsible women who do not really care about the family or children. Therefore, any attempt to immitate them constitutes loss of morality; thus, reinforcing the prevailing role of Arab women as wives and mothers, sisters and daughters, rather than as productive and career-oriented persons.

Hence, Dr. Shaaban discovered, in the course of her research, that although women have become professionals and politicians and have excelled in many fields, they are still considered the weaker sex at home. «In fact, the more successful the woman is in her profession, the greater is the pressure to prove that she is still a 'woman' with connotations of docile and feminine.» says Shaaban. Sadder still is the way many women react to this kind of pressure. «I found that these women, who, for the most part had rich experiences and valuable thoughts, were fettered by their own fears of seeming odd and ridiculous, or of jeopardizing their chances of a happy family life if they did not behave according to inherited social traditions. There is a widespread feeling in the region; just because women go out to work, to school or university, they are now fully liberated and independent. The aim is to make women feel grateful for the slight progress they have made and to stop them from going beyond this. Yet the real battle has only just begun» warns Dr. Shaaban •

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