

**The Triennial Conference of The Asian Women's  
Institute : Women and Environment in an age of  
Technology**

Life ).

September 30-October 2, 1991

The World Health Organization estimates that 70 percent of the globe's urban population breathes air made unhealthy through high levels of smog, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and other pollutants. (International Wildlife, the National Wildlife Federation, March/ April 1990).

1.5 Billion people drink polluted water. (UN)

Within the next ten years some 3000 million people will be facing acute fuelwood shortages, because of increasing deforestation. (Trees for

More often than before, the environmental problems involve subtle interaction of natural ecosystems and human activities, and studies on the solution thereon, call for integration of programs of environmental research in various areas (The National Institute for Environmental Studies).

This is exactly what the Asian Women's Institute and its member universities, colleges and Women's centers (see box) aimed for in their Triennial Conference, hosted by Kobe College in Nishinomiya, Japan. Entitled "Women and the Environment in an Age of Technology", the

**Growth - Equality - Justice  
for all Asian Women**

**The Asian Women's Institute(\*)  
(Established 1975)**

**AWI Participating Colleges and Universities**

Beirut University College, Beirut, Lebanon

St. Christopher's College of Education, Madras, India

Women's Christian Institute, Madras India

Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow, India

Hawabagh Women's College, Jabalpur, India

Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore, Pakistan

Tokyo Woman's Christian University, Tokyo, Japan

Kobe College, Nishinomiya, Japan

EWHA Woman's University, Seoul, S. Korea

Seoul Woman's University, Seoul, S. Korea

The Cluster of the Philippines, including: Silliman College and Northern Christian College.

(\*) International Office: c/o Association of Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore-3, Pakistan



*The participants of the AWI Conference*

conference discussed the effects of the environment and technology on the lives of women and explored future directions. AWI's newsletter, Asian Women, stressed that progress will be impeded unless women are involved with environmental as well as scientific issues.(1)

A key note address was given by Dr. Vandana Shiva, (\*) Director of Research Foundation for Science and Ecology in Dehra Dun, India. The address was entitled "The Seed and the Earth: Women, Ecology and Biotechnology". The theme was a parallel between woman's gift for giving life and the earth being a source of life. Dr. Shiva noted that ancient beliefs have propagated the notion that a woman was created for bearing offsprings, thus, she is the field and the man is the possessor of the seed. She noted that "patriarchy has constructed the male as the active principle and the female as passive, and has used the seed/earth symbolism for creating the divide between activity and passivity."(2) About technology, Dr. Shiva pointed out that women's bodies are broken into parts and "recent works on surrogacy and new reproductive technologies reveal how women's knowledge, contribution and rights are being forced to disappear."(3) In conclusion Dr. Shiva warned against slipping into viewing technological

techniques and know how as value and an end.

An audio visual presentation on the issue of the pollution in our modern environment, namely industrial, air, water, food and soil pollution or contamination was presented by Kobe College. Special attention was given to what is known as "The minemata disease" caused by Mercury poisoning in sea food due to dumping of industrial waste into the sea in the Minimata area in Japan. Furthermore, specific case studies of represented countries were given by the relevant centers.

During the three days of closed plenary sessions, AWI members consisting of professional educators and scholars deliberated and planned future strategies to stimulate awareness for protecting the environment among students and children. They discussed a three year project for the next meeting.

The mixture of cultures brought together for a common goal, each in its unique cultural approach is the most important, most enriching and most promising attribute of the conference.

One of the most innovative project of AWI is a Youth Leadership Development and Faculty

## AWI's Youth Leadership Development and Faculty Exchange Program

By Rima Zankoul

September 4 - October 12, 1991

exchange among its member institutes. Candidates from the relevant institutes were joined together to discuss their cultural backgrounds, travel together and present their observations and suggestions concerning the environment. Our own participant, Miss Rima Zankoul, tells us of that enriching cultural experience in the following article •

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(\* Dr. Vandana Shiva is the author of the much acclaimed Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development, Ecology and the Politics of Survival, and The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics. She is a physicist, a philosopher and a feminism as well as the Director of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Natural Resource Policy in India. Her paper will be reviewed in full in the coming issue of Al-Raida.

(1) M. Jivanandham, "Together We Move" Editorial of Asian Women, The Official Publication of the Asian Women's Institute, Pakistan: Association of Kinnaird College, Vol. 16, No. 51, September 1991.

(2)(3) Dr. Vandana Shiva, "The Seed and the Earth: Women, Ecology and Biotechnology" Key note address at the Triennial Conference of AWI, 1991.

*Please note that the next issue of al-Raida (#56, Winter 1992) is entitled Women and the Environment. It will feature the specific environmental issues and papers presented at the AWI Triennial, as well as other global efforts to preserve the environment and include women in the task.. The contributions of information and feed back is welcomed.*

**When** I first learned that I was chosen to participate in The Asian Women's Institute (AWI), Youth Leadership Development and Faculty exchange, I was filled with excitement and apprehension all at the same time. I was to travel with other young women from different cultures to visit countries which were new to each one of the participants. We were to interact with each other, support and share our unique experiences, in order to develop a better understanding of each other's ideas, cultures and traditions. The challenge was to prepare us young women for leadership roles each, in her own field and among her own people. The theme for our deliberation was: "Women and Environment in an Age of Technology", hence coinciding with the AWI triennial conference theme. How was I going to manage? What if we have radically different and opposite beliefs? What if we do not get along? These and other questions were recurring to me as I was taking the long trip from Beirut to Seoul, Korea. But I knew that the challenge was great, but I was determined to make this learning experience a success.

Indeed, it turned out to be an eye opening experience. The theme of promoting cross-cultural dialogue and interaction among young women proved to carry in-depth revelations. This experience allowed similarities and differences between the cultures and between the experiences and value attitudes of the young women to be actual and real. It is different from reading about them in books and the media, hence, profoundly contributing to youth leadership and women's development. I came back home with a wider scope of women's culture, attitudes, problems, responsibilities not to mention women's gigantic abilities and talents to contribute to world development. The theme of women, pollution and development made me realize how much more has

to be done and that the best way to do is by sharing views, customs, information and knowledge through cooperation.

Accompanied by two faculty members of AWI member Colleges, our group set off on a journey which began in South Korea, and included Japan and the Philippines. My fellow travelers

provided us with a profound reminder of the universality of women's problems concerns despite cultural diversity. At Tokyo Woman's Christian University in Japan, we attended lectures about Japanese culture and were shown how to prepare the famous and exotic Japanese flower arrangements, an important cultural ritual. We had the privilege of interacting with the Japanese youth at a youth retreat camp of Asagaya Church



were four students, namely: Zanobia Sylvester from Kinnard College - Pakistan; Latha Ignatius from St. Christopher's College of Education - India; Vinothini Charles from Women's Christian College - India. We were chaperoned by Dr. Nikhat Khan from Kinnard College- Pakistan, and Dr. Priscilla Daniels, from St. Christopher's College of Education - India.

The six of us met for the first time at EWAH Women's University for ten days, and then moved to Seoul Women's College, both being in South Korea. The Korean agenda included visits to private and governmental women's institutes, sexual violence relief centers, day care centers and associations for anti-pollution activities, which

at Nobeyama highland center. This was one of the most enriching activities in Japan because interaction with the youth of the camp was genuine and sincere, an honest exchange and sharing experience.

On September 26, everybody moved to Kobe College, also in Japan, where we were invited to share our experience with the students of the College. Furthermore, we participated in two group discussions: The first dealing with a comparative description of the status of women in each of the member countries and the second focusing on environmental problems, observations made on the trip, thus far. In the farewell party, each one of us cooked a national dish from her country.



Four days later, the group joined the AWI Triennial Conference, to report their experiences to the Presidents and Directors of (AWI) member Institutions. Together with the entire AWI team at Kobe, we held a cultural night in which each one of us presented a dance, a poem or a song from her culture. The last stop was Silliman University in Dumaguete City, the Philippines. Silliman University, by the way, was the only co-educational institution visited in this trip.

The Youth Leadership Development and Faculty exchange Program experience was very fruitful to everybody, to the participants of the program as well as the people with whom contact was made throughout the trip. The AWI efforts to create cross-cultural awareness, exposure, acquisition of knowledge and suggestion of solutions to women's problems and environmental concerns are highly commendable. Everybody returned home with an earnest enthusiasm to apply, communicate and contribute to women's cultural development and to environmental concerns in the respective countries. IWSAW is grateful to AWI for the continuing contributions and efforts they are making to improving the conditions of women in Asia•

## A History of the Development of Women's Education in the Arab World

The essence of education for women in the Arab world was not conceived until the nineteenth century (1). The first and most intensive development took place in the fertile crescent or what is known as Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and Iraq. Development in the Gulf countries came much later.

The inferior status of women at the turn of the century was inherited from a long period of cultural and political stagnation. Women's status was characterized by restriction to the home, segregation of the sexes, male dominance and religious interpretations. Hence, these role definitions hindered and slowed social assimilation of the importance of education for women and consequently, their level of enrollment.

However, the socio-political and geo-political changes which came with the fall of the occupying Ottoman Empire produced strong internal and external currents for change, namely an Arab awakening and the establishment of schools by Western missionaries.

The internal factor, an Arab awakening, had two driving forces, the intellectual and the political, both helping to bring about change in Arab attitudes towards the status and education of women (2). Reputed scholars and intellectuals calling for change offered ideologies and themes for women's rights to education, which varied in degree of liberation yet continued to reinforce male patriarchy. For instance, Ahmad Fares Al-Shidiaq called for women's liberation from illiteracy only. In his book, *Al-Saq Qabl Al-Saq* in 1855, he emphasized that women should become literate in order to read magazines and teach their children, warning against higher education because it would only improve women's inherent manipulative and cunning skills against

men.(3) Other views were less discriminating. Thus, Abdel Rahman Al-Kawkabi, a reputed advocate of freedom spoke of women's education as an essential element for social and cultural development. He related degradation of values and social behavior to the persistence of ignorance among women. Al-Kawkabi emphasized quality and value of education for women rather than basic literacy. Hence, to illustrate his point, he said that half of society acquired profound knowledge and wisdom from Prophet Mohamad's Wife in-depth education; whereas, the erotic and dubious poetry of females with lower educational background have only reinforced men's fears of allowing women to seek an education. Another scholar openly held men responsible for women's illiteracy and ignorance. Asaad Dagher said that men should remove the veil from their own ignorance before removing it from the head of a woman; and Arab men must admit that her education and knowledge are more important than her beauty.(4)

The influence of early Christian and Western missionaries on Arab education and society was an external factor influencing change. Modest educational contacts with the West caused the opening of a number of schools in the fertile crescent(5), which surpassed Egypt in educating its women. The first school for girls was founded in Beirut in 1826 by American missionaries, i.e. the wives of Father Thomas and Father Dodge, respectively. However, it was still uncommon for girls to go to school making the number of students very minimal. After founding a second school for girls in 1834, by Father Dodge's wife, the number of female students slowly rose from 6 to 40 in 1836. By 1946, the number of female students in the fertile crescent as a whole was still 144.(6). In 1860, the National Ottoman Islamic School was founded bringing about the enrollment of Muslims girls for the first time. The first nursing school of the Syrian College in Beirut was founded in 1908 graduating nine females in 1911.

In Egypt, the first public school for girls was founded in 1873, and in 1908, there were 30, 306 female students in Egyptian schools, representing

0.5% of the population. Furthermore, an additional 8, 545 foreign female students, whose parents (from Greece, Italy, England, France, Sweden and Germany) were residents of Egypt, enrolled in Egyptian schools.

### Higher Education

Arab universities have a long history of accomplishments going back to the ninth and tenth century and the introduction of Islam. In the beginning they were mostly part of mosques and religious studies was the core of instruction (7) The twentieth century witnessed the establishment of colleges by missionaries, and National universities in Khartoum and Undurman (Sudan), Baghdad (Iraq), Rabat (Morocco), and Cairo in Egypt.(8)

At the time, however, the severely restricting social traditions did not allow for women's admission to these institutions of higher learning. Moreover, women candidates were so few that the question did not arise of providing separate colleges for them.(9) The only alternative was to study abroad, which was perilous and unlikely.

By 1920, women were at last able to venture into higher institutions in the Arab countries. The first university which opened its doors to women was the American University of Beirut. It did so hesitantly because it was reluctant to arouse public disapproval on a matter related to long-standing social traditions. The University of St. Joseph, also in Beirut, allowed admission of females in 1920.

A major girl's college in the region was The Beirut College for Women (BCW) which was established in 1933. After World War II in 1949, it became a four year college. In 1950, BCW graduated its first fourteen seniors to receive the B.A. degree, and in 1955 permission to grant a Bachelor of Science Degree was given by the board.(10) The College became co-educational in 1969 and its name became Beirut University

College (BUC). BUC is a leading example of women in Academe in this part of the region. Heads of Departments, Professors, Directors and Scholars are largely women. Furthermore, it produced leading pioneers and successful women in society in the fields of art and others

### The Arab Countries

Unlike private universities, state universities in the neighboring Arab countries, admitted women as a matter of course at first. Eventually women were admitted on the grounds that they were not denied by law. Consequently, in 1924-25, one year after the establishment of the Syrian University, the first woman was admitted to the College of Medicine; and one woman entered the College of Law in 1929. In Egypt, women students first entered the Egyptian University in 1929-30. Similarly, in Iraq, the first woman was enrolled in 1930. It was noted that in Iraq, which had limited contact with the West, girl's education made a late start. **With respect to the other regions in the Arab world, women's access to higher education followed a similar pattern, but had a much later start related to the stages of national development and the degree of contact with the West. In general, the beginning of local higher education for women occurred in the 1940s and 1950s in the North African States, and in the 1960s and 1970s in the Arabian Peninsula or Gulf area.**(11).

Nowadays, women's access to universities is assured. In the past, higher education was seen as cultural refinement and exclusive for women of upper social classes who can afford tuition fees (12). Nowadays it is considered a necessity. In most parts of the Arab World, higher education is no longer strictly related to social status, but a necessity for the female as it is for the male. Sex segregation on campus still exists, mostly in the Gulf area, but is slowly decreasing. Women are tackling a variety of fields of study ranging from the most traditional such as teaching and

humanities to medicine, law, engineering and others. The female/male enrollment ratio in most of the universities in the Arab world ranges from twenty five percent in the late 1970s (13) to an approximate fifty percent estimate (14)

(1) Samir Abdo, *Al-Mara' wa Al-Taalim*, (Women and Education), *Al-Mara' bain Al-Takhaluf wa Al-Tahharor* (The Arab Woman between Stagnation and Liberation), Beirut, Dar Al-Afaq Al-Jadidah, 1980.

(2) Edith A.S. Hanania, *Access of Arab Women to Higher Education*, *Arab Women and Education*, Beirut, Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1980, p. 19.

(3) Abdo, *Ibid*.

(4) Abdo, *Ibid*.

(5) Hanania, *Ibid*, p. 19.

(6) Abdo, *Ibid*.

(7) Jarrar, S. and Byron Massialas, *Arab Education in Transition: A Source Book*, New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1991, p. 48.

(8) *Ibid*.

(9) Hanania, *Ibid*, p. 24.

(10) Marie Aziz Sabri, *Pioneering Profiles*, Beirut University College, Beirut: Khayat Book & Publishing Co. S.A.L., 1967.

(11) Hanania, *Ibid*, p. 28.

(12) Abdo, *Ibid*, p. 57.

(13) Jarrar and Massialas, *Ibid*

(14) "The Effects of the War on University Education of Lebanese Females", based on a research study by Dr. Aisha Harb Zureik with the same title and written in Arabic, *Al-Raida*, Winter 1991, Vol. IX, No 52. p.4.