

International Women's Day

At the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World
Beirut University College

Wednesday, March 11, 1992

On the occasion of the International Women's Day, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World organized a panel discussion entitled **Woman in a Man's World**. Scholars, women's groups, university professors and students, in addition to members of the press and the radio media attended the panel discussion which took place on Wednesday March 11, in Irwin Hall, Beirut University College.

The four panelists discussed the issue from the perspective corresponding to his/her field of specializations. (1) Dr. Ilham Kallab is a professor of Arab Literature at the Lebanese University, the Arab University of Beirut and previously at Beirut University College. She is a writer and researcher in women's studies and an active feminist. Dr. Kallab spoke about *The Social Image of Women in a Man's World*; (2) Dr. Maan Ziadeh, a professor of philosophy and sociology at the Lebanese University, and a prominent scholar in the region discussed *Male Pioneers and Women Liberation*; (3) Mrs. Mona Khalaf, an economist who conducted research on 'women and work' and was an instructor of economics at Beirut University College spoke about *Women's Economic Participation in Society*; (4) Dr. Kamal Yazigi, Chairman of the Social Science Division at Beirut University College spoke about *Women and Politics*. Mrs. Sonia Beirut, a leading female figure in the Lebanese television and press media, who has also written articles and short stories on issues related to women, served as moderator.



From left to right: Dr. Ilham Kallab, Dr. Kamal Yazigi, Mrs. Sonia Beirut, Dr. Maan Ziadeh, Mrs. Mona Khalaf.

Mrs. Sonia Beirut opened the panel discussion with questions regarding the title of the lecture. When one hears the title of this lecture he/she wonders if the so-called man's world is separate of the woman's world? What does "the man's world" stand for? Is it the world of economics, of politics, of production, of decision making, of the making of wars and peace?! Do women, especially Arab women, live in another planet called the house? And does this planet contribute, even remotely, to the shaping of the man's world? Beirut also wondered about the few women who have entered and proved themselves in the male dominated world: What are the benefits and losses they have endured? Were the men supportive or hostile? At that, Beirut left it to the four panelists to answer and shed some light on the issues she raised.

(1). **Dr. Ilham Kallab on the Social Image of Women in a Man's World:** Kallab noted that International Women's Day does not exclude men, and the problems of a society are based on the nature of relationships between its members, notably men and women. These relationships cannot develop and grow if one sex is oppressed.

Women are seen as marginal in our society, which (the society) is governed by patriarchal rules protecting legal, economic and social interests of men. Hence, from birth, males are favored in influential sectors, such as economics, politics, and intellectual development. Furthermore, women are responsible for men's honor, and laws which restrict and inflict harsher punishments on women for the same crime emphasize this image. Consequently, a woman's effective participation in society usually entails belonging and being accepted by men and their world

This image and the consequent status of women are but a reflection of an economic system where men are the central point and women remain dependent and marginal.

Kallab also indicated that economic independence for women is a key element for effective participation in society, in the man's world, and for producing the needed reform and change. Kallab's note seemed like a call for women to enter the labor force and to earn the independence they need to achieve a more influential and independent role and image in society.

(2) Dr. Maan Ziadeh on Male Pioneers and Women Liberation:

Ziadeh stressed that Women's Liberation must be a joint effort between men and women. He insisted that the cause essentially entails the liberation of society from backward ideas and attitudes. He encouraged women to have associations, organizations and movements demanding and pressuring for equal rights, but warned against hostility for men implying that men are not the enemy. Ziadeh said that success of women's entry into the so-called man's world remains limited if done in a hostile and excessively aggressive way. Thus, the mission should be based on cooperation between men and women. Hence, development and improvement of women's conditions involve the development and progress of society.

Ziadeh made reference to history and to male pioneers as Riffa Al-Qahtawi, and the Imam Mohamad Abdo who instructed Qasim Amin in Qoranic verses to call for women's liberation. Hence, the changes brought forth by these and other men complimented with action and struggles by women themselves, succeeded in improving the conditions of women in the Arab world.

(3) Mrs. Mona Khalaf on Women's Economic Participation: Khalaf noted that women's entry into the economic mainstream and into employment, a male dominated sector, is a recent phenomenon in the Arab World. This entry, she said, did not come easily but seemed mobilized by a financial need in the family. Hence, women's participation in a male dominated market came as necessity not an option or a choice.

Khalaf gave features and characteristics of working Arab woman: 1) The relationship between women's education and women's employment is not one of cause and effect; 2) increase in employment of women with higher education is proportional to the decrease in employment of illiterate women; 3) change in social perceptions and attitudes towards working women motivated women to seek employment in the public sector and government offices; 4) employed Arab Women are often over-qualified for their jobs; 5) there has been an increase in the demand for women in the labor market due to a change in attitude of employers towards women's work.

In summary, the problems Arab women face in entering the labor market are directly related to three variables: educational level; norms and values; domestic obligations and duties.

To illustrate, Khalaf reported a case she encountered in her research. Thus, during an interview with an elderly woman in a rural, agricultural village, the most explicit reply to the question: What do you do? was: Oh! my child, I get up at 3.00 A.M everyday, and go with my husband into the field to take care of the crops, then I return home to feed and clean the herds. When that is done, I rush home to cook, clean, sow and check on the children and their needs. By that time the day is over. When do you expect me to find time to work?

4) Dr. Kamal Yazigi on Women and Politics: Yazigi complimented Ziadeh's recall of Arab men who pioneered for women's rights with their counterparts in the West, such as Auguste Comte, Saint Simon, John Stuart, and others in addition to pioneering women in feminist literature. Yazigi's indicated that the struggle began exactly two hundred years ago, and the greatest progress was achieved during the World wars when women played a leading role in the war and post war society.

Why did women start demanding for their rights only 200 years ago, when they have been oppressed for 2000 years? was the main controversy raised by Yazigi. He felt this trend (was)/is part of the democratic movement sweeping the West during the last two centuries. He explained that all the ideologies, whether economic or political fall into this trend for democracy and equality in rights. What is socialism but a call for economic equality, which (socialism) came in response to democracy, the movement for political equality?! he noted. Western women have demanded for their share of the equality, hence, they are influential in universities, in politics and in the labor market although there might still be a discrepancy in wages between men and women. Women in the Arab world still have a much longer way to go. They are subjected to the worse kind of discrimination imaginable? Women of the East are the "Fitna", and needs more than women's associations and the women's movement to solve their problems. The situation requires a liberal and dynamic leader who supports women, calls and implements radical reforms.

Yazigi also criticized women's call for equality in the midst of other forms of inequality and problems which plague the world; men themselves are not equal, he stated.

What the audience had to Say

The first lady to speak from the audience, Mrs. Fares, pointed out that she works in a man's world: She is a mayor. Yet, Mrs. Fares criticized the strategies of the women's movement as being faulty and failing to create the awareness needed among women themselves. *All the energy is channeled into making demands! Women achieve progress at some point and then seem to fall back. Therefore, there must be something wrong with the strategies. What is the degree of awareness all women have? Are all women really aware of the existing problems? How many women really want to see change and reform?*

Mrs. Khalaf agreed that liberation is a matter of awareness on one hand, and choice on the other hand: Hence, women should become aware of their rights and the alternative lifestyles they can have, and consequently, exercise the right to choose. On another hand, women should have the rights and the facilities to participate in any sector of society without encountering sexist discrimination from the system, men or women themselves. I feel we should not lecture women to live their lives according to

defined feminist standards, so to speak, if they do not want to! What is suitable for one woman, keeping in mind her educational and social background, may not be the same for another woman.

Ziadeh intercepted the discussion to add that creating awareness among women may be important, but creating the same awareness among men is necessary and inclusive. As far as faulty strategies of the movement are concerned, these occur because there is a tendency to separate women's causes and demands from other sectors of society.

Dr. Lamia Shehadeh, professor at the American University of Beirut addressed two questions to the male panelists: To Dr. Ziadeh she said: *You said that the women's movement should not be aggressive, and should cooperate with men for it is the liberation of men too. Are we to understand that women must wait for men to get liberated, and then ask their permission before they (women) can achieve equality? How is it that women should not be aggressive and that the movement cannot achieve positive results on its*

own, without the support of men?

Ziadeh replied I did not say that women must wait for men and ask for their permission for liberation. My point of emphasis is that the women's cause is a societal matter and should involve and include all the sectors and actors in society. However, I would like to clarify that some women's groups especially in the Western world, have excessively aggressive approaches which project them as extremists. The struggle and the development should be based on cooperation. Hence the development of society lies in the development of women.

To Yazigi, she said: *You said that women began their struggle and achieved some of their rights only during the last two hundred years, and afterwards you criticized the call for equality in the absence of equality among men! I feel that the equality being raised here is related to the question of choice that was mentioned earlier. Women ought to have the same choices in life and in society that men have.*

Yazigi replied: Since men are not equal, women should not be equal either. This is one form of equality.

He then addressed Mrs Fares, the mayor, on her comment about faulty strategies I disagree with your statement about failure due to faulty strategies in the movement. In fact, in the Western world, the movement has achieved the majority of its demands. The cornerstones have already been set.

The commotion created by these arguments between the audience and the panelists became louder than what was actually being said.

But what usually happens on such occasions is that the discussions continue in the lobby of the building •

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