

Middle Eastern and Arab Women Speak (*)

Prominent Arab women living in Western countries seem to be known more than their counterpart in the Arab World. Why is that? Is it cultural? Or is it mainly that achievement for women is more inherent in Western cultures than it is in Eastern cultures? Is it due to more opportunities for women? Is it related to the nature of the Western media which has a wider international scope than the Arab media, thus promoting the achievements of these women? Is it that women from a foreign culture have something *original* to offer to the West and are, therefore, more newsworthy and innovative? Or is it cultural stereotypes which do not represent the reality of the situation?

The questions are endless, and as each one is posed a new perspective is opened for debate. What do prominent Middle Eastern women who lived overseas and who have an advanced position in society have to say about Arab Women's achievements and attainments in their native countries? We took the liberty to extract some of the experiences and points of views of two women from an interview published in the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs.

1. Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban, member of the Faculty of English at the University of Damascus indicated that "the position of Arab women is quite similar to their Western counterparts. However, Arab women are continuously plagued with a cultural stereotype of submission and dependence. Having lived for six years in Britain and for a year in the U.S., I was dismayed by the continuous reinforcement of the image of Arab women as oppressed, docile and living in harems. Thus, even

Saudi Arabian women who are most typical of this stereotype have equal rights to education, are teachers, writers and university professors.

Dr. Shaaban pointed out that "women account for 40 percent of the professors at the University of Damascus and 25 percent of the members of the Syrian Parliament, and with the exception of two Arab countries (one of them being Kuwait), women have the same right to vote as men. In all Arab countries, the position of women is not very different from what is found in the West." She goes on to remark "which in my opinion is not very good." "Having said that, I can say that the position of Arab women, like that of women all over the world, is far from being absolutely equal."



"There are many things I would like to see changed in the situation of Arab women, so that we can give an example to the world of meaningful emancipation and equality (1) The first things I would like to see changed are marriage and divorce laws. In the Arab culture, the family is an important unit and the children are given absolute priority. Therefore, divorce laws aim to make it difficult for partners to divorce in an effort to avoid breaking the family. . .

What happens in reality is that families are kept together at the expense of the woman, because she is the one who has everything to lose from a divorce. First, she is granted guardianship of the children only up to a certain age (7 for boys and 9 for girls). Second, most homes are owned by men and, therefore, divorce means that the woman goes back to her family home or out in the street. How could a woman who has nowhere to go, throw her children away, and decide to be homeless? Granting women more rights in this regard does not necessarily mean a higher divorce rate. It might mean that men would think twice before asking for a divorce. Furthermore, if these laws aim at keeping the family together, Dr. Shaaban thinks it is more important to preserve a healthy family with a happy mother rather than an unhappy woman who has nowhere else to go."

2. Dr. Taghreed Alqudsi-Ghabra, assistant professor of Library and Information Science at Kuwait University stresses that as with everything in the Middle East, the situation is full of conflicting images. (2) To the West, Middle Eastern women are what the media have pictured them: i.e in Black veils, subordinate to men in the

family and suppressed and oppressed by society and the state. It is rare that the diversity in the Middle East is shown, let alone when it pertains to women.

Being from Kuwait, Dr. Ghabra gives the example of Kuwaiti women's achievements which tend to remain unknown. "Although Kuwait is located in the most conservative part of the Muslim world, women can drive."

Before the discovery of petroleum, many men were away for much of the year fishing, pearl diving, or trading. Women were left behind to take care of the family and business at home. After the discovery of oil, their skills were enhanced by the introduction of modern, state supported education. Presently, 41 percent of Kuwait University degree holders are female. As a result, Kuwaiti women hold positions in government, business, academia and the professions. Dr. Ghabra also notes that most Kuwaiti women have been exposed to the outside world through foreign travel.

Just as Huda Sharawi and others in Egypt pulled off their veils at the beginning of this century, signifying a new era for Egyptian women, a group of Kuwaiti women from prominent families burned their 'abayas' (the black robes worn outside the home) in the 1950s to signify a new and modern Kuwaiti woman.⁽³⁾

Furthermore, Kuwaiti women participated in the underground struggle against the Iraqi occupation just as their male counterparts.

New challenges face the small country of Kuwait and its people after the liberation. For one the new liberated Kuwait has a population that has been politicized to a point of no return. It is essential for women at this stage not to fall into the trap of indiscriminately accepting the political ideologies of the different groups, and end up being used by

all of them.⁽⁴⁾ Kuwaiti women, along with other Arab women, Middle Eastern and Muslim women, still face battles in improving a reality imposed on them (family, marriage, divorce laws and work laws and regulations) by traditional societies and an image imposed by Western media biases and stereotypes.*

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(* Reproduced in part from "As A Middle Eastern Woman, What I would Change in my Country: Three Views," The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, July 1991. Abridged by Randa Abul-Husn.

- (1) Ibid
- (2) Ibid
- (3) Ibid
- (4) Ibid



Jordan University College for Women^(*)

Under the Ministry of Higher Education, the Jordanian government administers four major universities: The University of Jordan, Yarmouk University, Jordan University of Science and Technology, and Mu'tah University. Combined, these four national universities matriculated 8,875 students in 1989 - 33.9 percent of the 26,180 students who passed the Tawjihi exam that year. The government estimates that some 40,000 Jordanians are studying abroad, due partly to insufficient university spaces at home. To enable more students to pursue university education in Jordan, the Ministry of Higher Education in 1986 authorized the establishment of private universities. The

Jordan University College for Women, established in 1991, is one of the first private universities to open.

Jordan University College for Women comprises colleges of science; architecture, art, and design; medical sciences; business administration; and humanities and social sciences. It operates on a credit-hour system, and the academic year runs September to June in two semesters. In the year of establishment, the library was expected to offer 10,000 volumes plus 500 periodicals in various disciplines •

(* from Membernews: a publication by AMIDEAST's Institutional membership Program, Number 8, Fall 1991.