

# Their Own Definition of Feminism

*I want to conduct research for publication which is important for promotion, and I want something easy and fast because I do not have the time to embark on a full scale study. I am investigating the possibility of writing something in the area of Women's Issues. I thought this would be an easy topic to tackle.*

This is what a university professor said when she came to the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, one day, to inquire about references and data on women in the Arab World. I insisted that women's issues should not be and are not of peripheral importance. I went on to explain how elaborate academic research on women is, that the field is interdisciplinary and has multicultural dimensions, and that women's issues are real and cannot be treated lightly.

Yet the incident was rather discouraging; for although I had encountered this attitude before, I did not expect it from an upward-mobile woman. It reinforced my observation that it is largely representative of Arab women's self-perception and conception of their issues. They seem to go on adjusting to the new realities without giving them too much thought. For instance, the premise that Arab women are essentially identified with a male guardian continues to override a reality in which women have become bread-winners and assist their families and notably their guardians in the provision. Furthermore, despite educated and achieving women's integration in the mainstream, there seems to be a general consensus that the family reserves highest priority in their lives and in their ranking of rights, duties and responsibilities in society.

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The core of this perception lies in a widespread aversion to feminist thought. The term feminism in itself bears the stigma of sexual liberation, whose roots seem to lie in the sexual revolution of the Western world. Western feminists, on the other hand, are offended by such anti-feminist connotations.

The concept of feminism in the Arab world remains ambiguous. Its multi-cultural dimensions are not clear. Hence, a clear definition of the goals and soul of feminism for Arab women is in order. Thus, what are the feminists of this region really addressing: oppression or advancement? traditions or social realities? policies or norms? household politics or social politics? etc . . . Whatever the case may be, a very serious and profound review of traditional images, role definitions, work, education, reproductive and productive rights, laws, religious dogma and legislations, The Personal Status Code, and politics is required.

The greatest difficulty in addressing feminist perspectives is in adopting Western models. Now that feminism is defined and established, the movement, in the West, can afford questioning its politics, organization and structure. In other words, these structural debates do not threaten the credibility of the cause. However, it would seem that in our part of the world, a concise, culturally-relevant definition is needed for Arab women to internalize their cause and organize themselves. For as it stands, they seem to haphazardly imitate and adopt foreign concepts and images, and fail to understand their essence and examine their relevance to Arab society.

This is not to say that important issues like violence against women, for instance, will be addressed in one part of the world and not in another. It is to say that the heart of the issue lies in conceiving of equality and normality of women-men relations through a cultural approach.

Hence, if the starting point, i.e. the ideology is clarified and if the perceived threat of women's advancement is corrected, then Arab women will be able to confront injustice effectively. They will advance their rights as an integral part of societal development as opposed to it being a contradiction to status-quo values. This does not mean that a confrontation will not occur. Defining Arab feminism is the first confrontation. Only then will Arab Women's Issues be addressed more seriously and professionally.

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