

TALK IN

IWSAW, BUC, March 1994

On the occasion of International Women's Day, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, Beirut University College organized a women's TALK IN, instead of the usual lectures and/or panels. On March 9, 1994, BUC community which included students, faculty, staff and friends of the IWSAW gathered to express themselves on various women and gender issues. Approximately 600 persons, men and women, urgently raised their hands for their turn with the microphones. The atmosphere was filled with mixed and firm feelings on various issues. There was anger against oppression, enthusiasm for human rights, and some backlash against women and their movement. Here is a selection of some of the statements made.

There would be no need for an internationally declared women's day if there were no problems for the women of the world. There is a revolution going on and women, are demanding that they take charge of their own lives, to become subjects not objects. Here in the Arab world, women are speaking up, everywhere. Let me draw your attention to the events on the front pages of today's newspapers, the women's march that took place yesterday in Algeria (i.e. March 8, 1994). Yet some of us have come to feel that we have a special problem here in the Arab world: a great deal has been written about Arab women, and yet very little of it has been written by Arab women themselves. Here, in Lebanon, everyday we read articles about women. There have been books, articles and debates, sometimes theological debates. There have been conferences and meetings. Many words have been bandied about, including patch phrases like women's liberation and equality between men and women. Yet some of us feel that we have lost touch with what some real women have to say about these questions, about their real lives. We have lost touch with what real women really want. We do know some things for sure: in Lebanon we have at least one problem and that is the law. One basic right, for instance, the right for citizenship is not endowed on women as it is on men. A Lebanese man who marries a foreign woman automatically endows her and his children with Lebanese citizenship. A Lebanese woman, however, who marries a

foreign man, does not achieve the same rights.

There are many other problems lurking perhaps. Some of them no doubt are universal, others are specific to our culture. There are other things than problems, there is happiness and joy for women that we would like to share today. Today, here at BUC, we are giving democracy a chance to catch up with itself by providing a forum in which women are going to speak up, to express themselves, to say what they have to say. This is our chance to say what we want to say in this open, thoroughly unstructured, and democratic forum. We ask that every woman here, whether she be a student, a member or the faculty of staff, an employee or visitor to speak up. Say what you have to say on the condition of being a woman. Say it in Arabic, in English, in words, in music, say it in pictures, if you want, BUT SAY IT!

Allow me to address a word to the men in the audience. There seems to be a common view among you, at least among the students, that the women's movement is somehow directed against you. It is not. Today, we expect you to listen, to listen to our form of expression, which might be different from your form of expression. We sometimes express ourselves differently from the way you do. If we cannot expect justice and a fair hearing from men in a university setting, then from whom can we expect it. (Excerpts from the opening word of Jean Makdisi, moderator).

I wish to comment on the question of language and especially words relevant to this university audience. There is Bachelor of Art, but have we heard of Spinster of Arts? There is Master of Arts, we have never heard of Mistress of Art or Science. Again these are some of the words that subsume women.

Why should women always ask a man to come to them and ask them for marriage, why shouldn't a woman express her interest in marrying a certain man?

I am very concerned with the issue of violence against women. If we see two men fighting in the street, it is considered a public offense. If a man beats his wife, it is considered a family affair. Is there a law that can protect a woman inside her home from being battered by her husband?

There is no law that protects women from being battered by their husbands. I find it amusing that our deputies talk, on television, about giving women the civil right to open a shop without needing the husband's permission. I don't know how many of us here are capitalists and have the money to open the shop, not me in any case. I wish they would bring up the question of the woman, who if she leaves her husband or whose husband leaves her, has no right to her kids.

Who are we addressing all of these issues to? men?