

Beijing & After

Much has been written about the Beijing Conference since its conclusion just four months ago. Yet very little of what has been written was reflective of the reality. In an effort to communicate the importance of the Beijing Conference from the perspective of women who were actually there, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World organized an informal gathering entitled "Beijing and After."

Ms. Linda Matar, President of Women's Rights Committee and a member of the official governmental delegation to the Beijing Conference, gave a historical account of the four world conferences for women which took place in Mexico (1975), Copenhagen ('80), Nairobi '85, and Beijing '95 respectively. Ms. Matar pointed out that all the conferences raised the same motto: "Equality, Peace and Development." At the Beijing Conference new issues related to poverty and violence were actively discussed.

Dr. Kallab, a professor and a researcher on women's issues and a member of the official delegation to the Beijing Conference, praised the increasing participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). "The NGOs' presence is very important as it affords an opportunity to express the true concerns of the people. As you may already know, the Lebanese national delegation was composed of members who served on both the governmental and the NGO planning committees. Consequently, the Lebanese report was the result of coordinated work between both groups." Dr. Kallab enthusiastically asserted that "this cooperation between the Government and non-governmental organizations was a new and very good experience!" She then expressed her disappointment with the bad media coverage in Lebanon. "People did not understand the purpose of the conference. They were often wondering what we were doing in Beijing." She then explained that the Beijing Conference was a sort of a carnival in which all the women of the world met to exchange experiences and to finalize the agenda of the international report, *The Platform for Action*, which had been in process for three years. In other words, the main work was done before going to Beijing. However, no one seemed to understand this, thanks to the insufficient media coverage. Dr. Kallab added that the media highlighted only provocative topics, such as lesbians' demonstrations, instead of trying to reflect the real suffering of women in Third World countries. "Such demonstrations seemed to be much more attractive to the media!"

Nazha Sadek, a researcher affiliated with the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, commented on Dr. Kallab's views concerning the coordination between the NGOs

and the formal delegation. Contrary to what Dr. Kallab asserted about its being positive, Ms. Sadek thought that it was rather negative. "When the NGOs and the formal delegates are together, the pressure of the NGOs is not as effective as it can be." She then explained that the voice of the NGOs was not heard even before they reached Huairo, the NGO conference venue. All the effort that the NGOs exerted, including letters, telexes and demonstrations, in order to have their residence relocated closer to that of the formal delegation, was to no avail. Even those members of the NGOs who were official consultants, and hence obliged to be directly connected with the formal delegation, were not able to perform their job as well as they should because of the difficulties in transportation. Moreover, the NGOs did not have the opportunity to take part in the lobbying at the political conference. Ms. Sadek commented that ever since the cause of women's rights was raised and laws were established by the United Nations to protect these rights, these laws have not been properly applied in many countries. "Our governments often plead that we should respect our cultural particularity. Of course, these pleas very often distort the content of the rights issues." Hence, she hoped that the United Nations will form international groups to monitor the application of these decisions so that women can truly benefit from them.

After the speeches were delivered, the audience members were very eager to voice their questions and concerns regarding the difficult situation of the Lebanese women and to ask whether the Beijing Conference had led to a plan to improve this situation. The issue that seemed to disturb the audience most was the issue of violence against women.

Dr. Nazik Yared, Humanities Professor in the Lebanese American University, started the informal discussion by stressing that violence in Lebanon was not only political and economic, as it is often presented, but is also physical and social, occurring within the family itself. "Just read *An-Nahar*, and you'll know about the father who rapes his daughter and the brother who rapes his sister. Such problems exist not only in the West, but also in our country. However, we dare not mention them!" Ms. Tina Nakkash, an activist concerned with the issue of domestic violence in Lebanon, angrily inquired why the National Committee which went to Beijing did not address this topic at all during its preparatory meetings.

Ms. Linda Matar's reply was that a discussion of this topic would be viewed as a direct attack against the Personal Status Laws (see explanation below), which are considered a "red line" in Lebanon right now, as everybody knows.

After expressing their deep discontent with the situation of the Lebanese woman, exemplified by the infliction of violence against her, killing women for crimes of honor, and depriving her of the right to grant her own nationality to her children, the audience raised the following question: "Has the National Committee or the NGO Forum reached a certain plan or strategy to continue the work done so far?" or, in other words, "What is the Lebanese woman supposed to do after the Beijing Conference?"

Dr. Kallab replied that the National Committee has now been dissolved. She added that they were waiting to see if there would be a formal governmental intention to call upon them and the other groups so that they could design a post-Beijing plan. "Regarding our committee," she stated, "each of us is forming her own plan. However, no formal plan has been designed up until now, although in Beijing there had been a request for formal mechanisms to follow-up on women's issues."

Having been enlightened on the situation, the audience started to make suggestions to help in continuing the work begun in Beijing. One of the suggestions was to call for a parliamentary committee of women that would follow-up on the Beijing report and all the work done so far, in order to design the strategy and define the objectives for any future work. Such a comprehensive strategy would involve all legal, social and economic matters related to the Lebanese women. Then, follow-up responsibilities would be distributed in an organized manner so that by the time the next international conference is held in 2005, we will be able to measure our improvement objectively.



Linda Matar responds to a question from the audience during the "Beijing & After" Panel discussion.

A third suggestion related to increasing public awareness regarding women's issues. In order to have the proper impact on people, a concerted campaign should be mounted on a national level so that the media will talk about women's issues on a daily basis.

The Personal Status Code was held responsible for much of the Lebanese woman's suffering. Although the speakers agreed with the audience on this fact, they frankly stated that this code was a taboo that could not be easily discussed right now. Here, one cannot but wonder how we can ever find solutions to our problems if we are not allowed to examine their root causes!

Ghena Ismail

Personal Status Code

- A man who kills his wife or sister because he witnessed her in an act of adultery benefits from an exempting excuse, whereas if he kills her because he witnessed her in a state that arouses suspicion of adultery he benefits from an extenuating excuse which reverts the punishment from a death sentence to a one-year imprisonment. It is worth noting that in other cases an extenuating excuse reduces a death sentence to life-time labor or temporary labor, *i.e.*, 7-20 years.
- An adulteress is punished whether adultery was committed in the marital home or in any other place, whereas an adulterer is only punished if adultery was committed in the marital home.
- According to Islam, a man generally inherits twice as much as a woman does. One main difference between the Sunni sect and the Shi'a sect is the following: In the Sunni sect, if a father dies leaving only daughters, most of the inheritance is transferred to his brothers and nephews. In the Shi'a sect, daughters can inherit all the money themselves.
- Lebanese nationality can only be transferred by the father. It cannot be transferred by the mother. The children of a Lebanese mother and a foreign father are not Lebanese, even if they were born and brought up in Lebanon.
- Lebanon has not yet signed the agreement on the "Abolition of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women" which was propounded by the United Nations on January 18, 1979. This agreement guarantees women full rights to voting, participating in shaping the government policy and implementing it, representing the government on the national level, and participating in the work of all national organizations.
- If a woman who works in the diplomatic external field marries a foreigner, she is automatically transferred to the administrative branch no later than three months after her marriage.

If you are interested in learning more about Lebanese women from a legal perspective, please see the 1985 IWSAW publication, *al-mar'a fi at-tashree' al-lubnaani* ("Woman in Lebanese Law"), by Maitre Laure Moghaizel.

Emily Nasrallah's Novel, *Al-Jumr Al-Ghafi*, Discussed at LAU

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World organized a panel discussion of Emily Nasrallah's latest novel, *Al-Jumr al-Ghafi* (Sleeping Embers) on 21 November 1995. In her appreciative introduction, the journalist and author Layla Horr praised the author's impartial attitude during the war years. She stated that Nasrallah never involved herself in the conflict, and commented that the reader can always sense the beauty of the Lebanese village in Nasrallah's seven novels and five sets of short stories.

Dr. Latif Zeitouni, Professor of Arabic at L.A.U., observed that the author has dealt with village life in a realistic manner far removed from the romance affecting most other authors when describing rural life. The village of Jourat-as-Sindiyan, as portrayed in *Al-Jumr al-Ghafi*, is afflicted by social and political subjugation. Layya, the main female character of the novel, marries Abdullah, an elderly man who has been living abroad, but who has returned for a short visit in order to find a young bride. The significant age difference between Abdullah and Layya has been compensated for by Abdullah's wealth and Layya's dreams of travel. Abdullah, however, is impotent, and the witness stationed near the newlyweds' bedroom to attest to the bride's virginity (and hence, her family's honor) gives up and leaves after six days. Humiliated, Abdullah beats Layya, who returns to her parents full of shame, although she is innocent of any wrong-doing.

Dr. Zeitouni explained that subjugation, as portrayed in this novel, is nothing but the harsh side of ignorance, and ignorance is but one of the results of the prison formed by the village community. The author chose the woman as the core of the novel because she wanted to show the amount of injustice inflicted upon women and the corresponding amount of awareness and courage she needs to fight this injustice. Hence, awareness is the solution offered by this novel to the continuing problem of subjugation.

Emily Nasrallah asserted that Layya has always lived inside her, ever since she started to pay attention to the problems of women and all other people who are oppressed. However, she never allowed her to emerge. But to her great surprise, Layya emerged while Nasrallah was in Cairo. Nasrallah found herself wondering: "What made Layya suddenly emerge? What made me depict the village in this realistic manner while I was away from the village and from Lebanon?" Her only explanation was that when people are far away from a place, "it becomes engraved deeper in their souls; the image becomes clearer." Nasrallah added that there is more than one Layya in our society, and that last week she read a story that is even worse than the one she wrote, because the victim in the news story was

murdered in a cruel fashion. Finally, Nasrallah said that her ultimate aim is to enlighten society and to encourage women to arise from their long sleep and liberate themselves, so that they do not become the source of their own daughters' subjugation.



Emily Nassrallah explains the sources of inspiration for her recent novel.

Workshop on Writing for Children About Environmental Issues

The Goethe Institute and the Austrian Embassy's Commercial Section, in cooperation with IWSAW and the International Board on Books for Young People-Lebanon (L-IBBY), organized a writing workshop emphasizing "Environmental Issues in Children's Literature" in late October in Beirut.

Two distinguished experts in the field of Children's Literature, Mrs. Renate Raecke of Germany and Dr. Lucia Binder of Austria, worked with 24 candidates in groups and one-on-one. The workshop included practical work and lectures. Mr. Assad Serhal lectured on environmental issues in Lebanon, and Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr, IWSAW Director, collaborated with Mrs. Aida Naaman in presenting a lecture entitled "Landmarks and Trends in Arabic Children's Literature."

As a result of the event, books and television scripts were written by the various candidates. IWSAW hopes to publish and present these scripts in the near future.