

IWSAW CELEBRATES INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY WITH PALESTINIAN AUTHOR SAHAR KHALIFEH

In celebration of International Women's Day (March 8), the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), in co-operation with *Dar Al-Adab* (a publishing company) organized on March 7, 1997 an encounter with the Palestinian author Sahar Khalifeh, who was eloquently introduced by Afeefi Arsanios (UNDP - United Nations Development Program). Sahar Khalifeh gave a powerful speech entitled, "Woman and Writing or Feminist Writing", which was followed by a lively discussion. Excerpts from her speech follow.

"Very often we have been asked the following question: Is there feminist writing or is good writing universal and thus surpasses race, color, class and all cultural and geographical boundaries? Very often we have been asked this question, and very often our answers were evasive, apologetic, twisted, hidden, ambiguous, and dishonest ... The feminist issue is a serious matter ... It is our being females that has determined our position in the world from the date of birth until death, and even after death (i.e., when the inheritance is distributed.) ... If feminism was not a serious matter, then why have male writers written about it throughout the years? Why have they boldly described the situation of women as disgraceful, unfair and enslaving?... What did Aristophanes say in his masterpiece *Lysistrata*? What did Ibsen say in *A Doll's House*? What did Bernard Shaw say in his play *Major Barbara*? What did Najib Mahfouz say in *A Beginning and Ending, Between the Two Palaces and Mira Mar*? Were these great thinkers or weren't they? Were they successful? Were they creative?... Didn't they move the world? No-one described them as naive, shortsighted, or limited!"

"These men wrote about us, because we have a cause, because we are the basis, we are the mothers, we are the nation, and can a nation survive without a basis, without an environment? We are the environment ..."

"The poet said:

'The mother is a school, if you prepare her well, you prepare a nation of noble descents.' And we said 'Amen!' And we clapped. However, the reality is that ... we are restrained by three fronts, each of which is enough to overthrow the strongest systems and nations. Poverty, ignorance, archaic superstitions, and tribal myths ... It was in the name of religion they spoke, and in the name of religion crowds of women followed them. However, we and people like us, spoke differently. We said that faith is the road to light ... And we started to seek change ... We started searching in the political parties and organizations ... However, the women there proved to be far away from equality and fairness ... We looked into the feminist movement, but the feminist movement in Palestine, as in all the Arab countries, is still incapable of reaching the masses of women because of the competition, rivalry, and the division of leadership ..."

"What then? What do we have? How do we incur change?... The pen is the only tool ... Let us remember who paved the way for the French revolution. Let us remember Tolstoy's influence on socialism. Let us remember Simone de Beauvoir and what she has implanted in everyone of us across distance, time, authority, and religion ... I remember that feminist writing had existed for centuries, that it was not written by women only, and that it does not suffer from shortsightedness. Feminist writing does not imply egocentrism. Was Ibsen egocentric? Was Bernard Shaw egocentric? Did Simone de Beauvoir have a cause? Was it one without dimensions? ... Feminism means fairness, a revolution over old practices. It means a bridge that connects gaps, mends them, explains them, and rebuilds their joints step by step. Thus, does feminist writing exist? Yes, of course, it exists to those who are sensitive to women's sufferings, to those who are not afraid, to those who do not hesitate to hold the candle in the street, in darkness, and in the pathways of the cave people."

RURAL WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT - AKKAR

Within the program of rural development funded by the American Agency for International Development, Mercy Corps - MCI, in cooperation with the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University, organizes a series of activities that aim at establishing model villages in Akkar, North of Lebanon.

For example, twenty-two trainees from several villages learn carpet weaving at the Saint Francis Center for Nuns in Munjiz, a village in Akkar. The second project promotes environmental safety by replacing old water pipes. The

third is a series of agricultural projects that include chicken breeding and the reconstruction of farm roads and watering canals.

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World is also supervising a project for fighting social illiteracy among women through a basic living skills program (BLSP) and a series of informative stories for semi-literate women. While the BLSP focuses on such topics as family planning, health-care, child-care, home management, civic education, nutrition, environmental awareness, and legal rights, the stories aim at bridging the gap between rural and urban women.