

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World: Academic Research and Community Action

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The Middle East is at the moment one of the areas where women's studies are expanding, and women's organizations are increasing at a fast rate. Over the past three decades or so, an impressive number of women's organizations have appeared on the public arena. With the emergence of civil rights movements in the Arab world in the 1980's and the rise of the Islamic revivalist movements since the mid-1980's, a new phase in feminist thought and practice began to take shape. Since then a new theoretical framework began to emerge that challenged conventional Western views that regarded Arab women as faceless, voiceless and nameless. At the same time, pressure emerging from other parts of the third world to break Western stereotypes of the non-Western world further induced women to interrogate the Western paradigm that views Arab women as an undifferentiated group and overlooks the wide disparity that exists among women in the Arab region, within each society, and across national borders.

Accordingly, women began to articulate their differences from Western feminism. It became clear to them that it may be counterproductive to echo uncritically the themes of Western scholarship such as the critique of sexuality, marriage, the family etc, and overlook the realities around them. It became clear that gender studies in the area cannot and must not be isolated from their social, political and historical context, and must be dealt with in relation to class, race, ethnicity, cultural patterns, religion, war, immigration, displacement, etc.

Accordingly, Arab women began to write in their own voices and challenge simplistic images of Middle Eastern women. Refusing to be excluded from public discourse, they became intent on making their own active contribution to society, history and culture. They began to articulate the view that far from being a uniform and cohesive group, women differ from one culture to another and within the same culture. For instance, the introduction of illiterate Arab women into the scene, whose voices are beginning to be heard for the first time, is bound to challenge the simplistic view that sees Middle Eastern women as one homogeneous group.

If Arab feminists have challenged western perceptions of Arab women as submissive, passive and marginal, they have made it a point not to overshadow the ongoing critique of patriarchy and its manifestations within the family, communities, organizations and workplaces. In this context, one could say that the desire of many Arab feminists to communicate with honesty the miseries and oppression that their culture confers on them- in an attempt to empower women and give them their rights - is coupled with the general fear and apprehension that such an ideology is imported and not intrinsic or relevant to our culture and that can lead to the corruption and disintegration of society. Therefore, there was a feeling that what is needed in order to fend off such charges- that Arab feminism is an offshoot of Western phenomena- is not only to contest the prevalent theoretical works used in Western scholarship, but to put them within the cultural and historical context, specificity, and particularity of the region.

Thus women have had a double role to play: to articulate their difference not only from Western feminism, but also from their own native, traditional contexts. Within this framework, they needed to clarify the point that criticizing their society's drawbacks is not an attempt to erase one's culture, but to improve it. As Uma Narayan puts it: "We all need to recognize that critical postures do not necessarily render one an 'outsider' to what one criticizes, and that it is often precisely one's status as one 'inside' the culture one criticizes, and deeply affected by it, that gives one's criticisms the motivation and urgency" Women have been excluded from areas of public activity that have generally been associated with men. Even in areas where they are not excluded, their contribution has been represented as second rate and inferior to that of men. Therefore integrating women's contribution into the mainstream will be an enriching experience since it will not merely extend the arena of knowledge, but will result in a shift of perspective enabling us

to see a separate, but multifarious and diversified picture at the same time. In other words, one could say that women's experiences are bound to fill the gaps in our knowledge about women's lives, and history as well as about Arab history and culture, and present a richer and more complex image of Arab societies than the ones that have already been projected.

In addition to promoting women's active contributions to society, history and culture, feminist discourse needs to enhance the general understanding of women's role by attempting to emphasize the need for a strong, theoretically informed analysis of gender relations by building on the small, but growing body of critical feminist work developed in the region. Lila Abou Loughod notes the "dangerous tendency these days to denigrate the academy or theory in favor of an unexamined activism. The reason this makes me afraid is that we slide too easily into assuming that we already know what we need to do for women's situation here or anywhere... Women's studies is a critical enterprise ... and it must be intellectual."²

Within this general frame, one could say that the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World has responded to the demands of women by taking into consideration the particularity of women's experiences in the area without neglecting or overlooking the debates taking place in the West. Far from turning a blind eye to oppressive measures practiced against women, the Institute always took active and resolute stands by denouncing defects and shortcomings even at the risk of reinforcing Western prejudice about the superiority of Western culture. Since its inception in 1973, the role of the Institute has been that of enlightenment and consciousness raising. As a pioneer Institute in the Arab world, it has played a major role in promoting academic research and enhancing community action to promote the cause of women in the region. It started off as an academic unit to design curricula, conduct research, sponsor conferences on women's issues and facilitate networking and communication among individuals, groups and institutions concerned with the status of women in the Arab world. If it is an institution that embraces women's issues at all levels, it is not an activist organization. As the President of the Lebanese American University, Dr. Riyad Nassar, refers to it in an interview with *Al-Raida*, "The Institute was more of an intellectual, academic, research, documentation institute than a lobbying place for women's rights. Universities usually try to shy away from the political arena. For instance, we did not want to be lobbying for the amendment of discriminatory laws against women; not because we did not believe in it, but because we thought independent organizations would be more effective in exacting change than an academic institution. However, this did not stop the Institute from working towards increasing people's awareness on women's and children's issues."³ If the university is a space for thinking critically and analytically, the aim of the institute was to stimulate research, and development without extricating itself from the concerns of the actual lives and issues that affect women. Accordingly, it has succeeded in making the link between academia and community, and theory and practice, imperative goals for the success of its development projects. The outbreak of the war in 1975, forced the Institute to respond to new challenges generated by a violent and unstable situation. In order to help the vast number of women who were displaced from their homes and villages, it undertook community work and programs to assist them. Furthermore, it has engaged in various income-generating activities since 1985 to provide poor women with skills that will help them earn an income. In addition to the massive work done on women, the Institute extended its activities to include men, children and families. Furthermore, the Institute set up rural Development programs that include workshops to develop social and political awareness, income generating activities and social and legal literacy programs. Based on numerous surveys normally carried prior to workshops to investigate market needs, the Institute has so far managed to train around 3000 women in various skills. In addition to woman-centered projects (including Basic Living Skills, an education program to deal with social literacy), the Institute has embarked on numerous academic and research programs. Now, it is in the process of establishing a minor in Women's Studies program that consists of a package of six courses: "Women in the Arab World: Social Perspectives", "Issues and Debates in Feminist Theories", "Women and Economic Power", "Psychology of Women: A Feminist Perspective", and "Representation of Women in the Arts and Media." These courses address different issues related to women and gender, and are useful to students in the different disciplines. At the same time, they can serve as electives for students in the various fields of specialization.

If the war interrupted the initial drive and impetus of the Institute's activities, it has not succeeded in impeding its determination to respond to the challenges and press on towards advancing the cause of women in Lebanon and the Arab world.



Endnotes

1. See *Contesting Cultures: Westernization, Respect for Cultures, and Third World Feminists* (New York; Routledge, 1997).
2. Cynthia Nelson and Soraya Altorki, eds. *Arab Regional Women's Studies Workshop. Cairo Papers in Social Science*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998), 65-66.
3. *Al-Raida*, Vol. XVI, nos. 83-84, (Fall/Winter, 1998-1999), 57.