



Assessing Gender/Women's Studies: A Comparative Perspective

Women's Studies Programs: The Middle East in Context*

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Introduction

The academization/institutionalization of Women's Studies has emerged as a result of the need to legitimize, develop, and further promote the feminist movement. Western feminists have considered this phenomenon the culmination of their long struggle: as enabling a credible and legitimate voice to a large sector of society that has long been silenced. Bringing women's issues and concerns to the University has accorded feminist academics a platform to undertake research, publish studies, and develop different conceptual and methodological tools to deal with traditionally ignored social phenomena.

The Western experience of Women's Studies particularly the North American, has shown remarkable progress. In Canada, for example, Women's Studies programs are found in every province, every major city, and at the majority of universities. Such programs have also spread into most community colleges. The result has undoubtedly been felt both at the national and the international levels. Nationally, in addition to a marked increase in students interested in the program, feminist scholarship has made a major entry into the policy and decision-making processes, particularly within the spheres of economy, education, law, and politics. Similarly impressive has been the international recognition such scholarship has begun to command, as Canadian women and feminist academics have taken an increasingly public profile in bringing women's concerns to international academic and political forums.

More specifically, the incorporation of women's rights and histories within institutionalized knowledge has been cul-

turally and historically distinct. The context of the liberal democratic bourgeoisie in the West has been crucial to the development of Women's Studies programs. This setting did not only create a space for such phenomena to occur, but also ensured that the developing institutions would express and even reproduce existing ideologies. This contextual relationship has ensured a dialogical process, where changes in cultural and historical circumstances induce changes to these institutions as well. It is not surprising, therefore, that currently, under the pressure of global capitalism and an increased drive towards privatization, a number of feminists are beginning to cast some doubt about the process of institutionalizing Women's studies. In fact, some feminists who pioneered in the establishment of these programs, including Dorothy Smith and Greta Hoffman-Nemiroff, are rethinking the true value of such institutions in terms of addressing and alleviating the concerns of women in general (Hoffman-Nemiroff 1994; Smith 1993). Some of the questions posed include: Have Women's Studies institutions become an academic exercise only, removed from concerns of the actual lives and issues that affect women? In addition to these "subjective" considerations, new objective realities, expressed in globalization, have also become a concern. A number of institutions are under the threat of closing down. The pioneering Simone de Beauvoir Institute in Montreal, for example, has found itself at the head of the chopping board in a period of institutional downsizing.

Within a framework of increasing correspondences in global economic and socio/political trends, this paper will address the experiences of Canadian Women's studies pro-

grams and examine their applicability and challenges to the Middle Eastern context. The paper will also examine the cultural and historical context for the development of Women's studies institutions in the Middle East.

Women's Studies: The Canadian Experience

While itself an outcome of the Canadian women's movement, the practical need for Women's Studies courses in Canadian universities emerged after the recommendations of two national investigative surveys into the status of women. The first, conducted in English Canada and known as the "Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada" (1970), linked female social and economic inequality to sex-role stereotyping, as well as to traditional vocational and educational choices for women. A second report "Pour les Québécoises: égalité et indépendance", conducted in Quebec and released in 1978, also concluded that Women's Studies programs were essential for the improvement of women's opportunities for learning (Begin 1997). The report recommended inclusion of such programs in every discipline having content related to the status of women. Without going into detail of the history of the establishment of Women's Studies programs in Canada, it is nevertheless important to emphasize the influence of two particular forces that contributed significantly to the success of the programs. On the one hand, over the past two decades the Canadian feminist movement has been able to elevate women's concerns to the highest levels of politic. Research into women's economic, educational, and health conditions, as well as the concerted work around violence against women, have found inroads into various governmental legal and political structures. This has resulted in a number of legal reforms. For example, while still a topic of judicial debate with regards to the full extent of their application, domestic violence has been criminalized, and anti-discrimination laws have been put in place within the labor market around such issues as equal pay, maternity leave, child care, sexual harassment, etc.

The second and equally important force that consolidated Women's Studies programs has been the development of a structure, or rather a number of structures, intended to foster and monitor progress in women's issues. The first such structures, intended to foster and monitor progress in women's issues. The first such structure originally appeared in the form of a Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, established in 1971. However, affected by various economic and political changes, the Ministry was reduced to the Secretary of the State for the Status of Women in 1993. While the relationship between academic feminists and the government-funded and government-run structure has not been without tensions, the Secretary of the State for the Status of Women has provided undeniable support to women's concerns (O'Neil and Sutherland 1997).

Nevertheless, this office has not been immune to major criticisms levied against it by various sectors from within the feminist movement. The most important criticism of the

Secretary of the State for status of Women has been that it is a liberal structure aiming to serve primarily white middle-class women, and ignoring other sectors of the population. In Canada, where multiculturalism/multi-ethnicity is officially recognized, such criticisms have found widespread support. A large segment of the socialist feminist movement particularly those concerned not only with the poor and working classes, but also with immigrant women of color, aboriginal women, and other marginalized groups, demanded a more grass-roots structure that would address the needs of the various women's communities. In response, another structure was put in place: the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women. With the consultation and help of various community groups, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women conducted major research and produced important documents on the conditions of immigrant women's social, economic, political, and legal status. The primary mandate of the Advisory Council on the Status of Women was to concentrate on poor, immigrant, and other marginalized groups of women.

Not unlike other forms and structures of community services with a public nature, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women's mandate was cut short. In 1995 it was closed down and its mandate was absorbed by the Secretary of State for the Status of Women. Currently, a major debate within the Canadian feminist movement has arisen again around issues of funding and research. Some of the major questions include: Where should research priorities be placed: on policy-oriented research, namely, research perceived to be in the benefit of the government and other private sectors; or should priorities be placed on community and women's empowerment research? Also being debated is the credibility of researchers: academic feminists are often perceived as being isolated from the daily lives of the community. Whereas community-based researchers, often lacking the "academic" credentials, are nonetheless seen by grass-roots women activists to be closer to the daily struggles of women. The impact of this debate and the consequences it will potentially have on Women's Studies programs have yet to be seen. Nevertheless, there are two points that need to be made at this juncture. First, there is little doubt that the party in this debate that is often critical and even militant in its position is largely represented by women's groups and organizations who have less access to research funding. In some cases this can include Women's Studies students who consider themselves activists as well as academics. For example, in a recent national workshop organized by the Office of the Status of Women and attended by feminists representing Women's and Gender studies, academics, community activists and independent feminist researchers, a heated discussion erupted around the various aspects of this debate. Questions raised, particularly by activists and community representatives, included issues of voice authenticity, representation, legitimacy, and credibility.

Second, I would like to suggest that such debates are often bridgeable at the theoretical or discursive level, within the



sanctuary of academia and the four walls of Women's Studies courses. Within my own experience as a feminist having one foot in academia and another in community activism, I find it possible to link the theoretical and the practical, and tie the academic with the community. Such a possibility is made easier by the very nature of Women's Studies curriculum, i.e., its interdisciplinarity. The interdisciplinary nature of Women's Studies, as the following section will illustrate, enables academics teaching Women's/Gender courses to articulate women's concerns at various levels of analyses. Thus, in addition to the inclusive nature of teaching which—one would hope—should address the diverse classes, races, nationalities, ethnicities, and sexualities. Women's Studies courses can be ideal places for the incorporation of praxis, namely, the articulation of intellectual/academic exercise with the practical daily-life experiences of women activists.

Women's Studies: The Interdisciplinary Nature

The question of whether Women's Studies courses should be taught within a program, an institute or in a separate and independent department is a reflection of the wider debate around the issue of feminist methodology(ies). Feminists continue to debate whether there is an independent feminist methodology that is separate and radically distinct from other social science methodologies. Shulamit Reinhartz's text *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (1992) sums up this debate, reviewing a wide range of feminist research methodologies. While such an anthology examines the various interventions, innovations, and insights brought into social science research from feminist perspectives, it tends to rule out the presence of a separate and independent feminist methodology. Although considered one of the most inclusive texts on feminist methodology, this thick volume has, at least in my experience, raised more questions than it is able to answer. The question of what distinguishes feminist research methodology(ies) from other social science methodologies became a topic of lively debate in a recent graduate course on feminist methodologies in which I used Reinhartz's book as a required text. The major question for most of these students, who were also involved in community activism, could be summed up in the following: "Why undertake feminist research if the latter is not going to have direct impact on the lives of the women/subjects researched?" Prioritizing practical research or research with a focus on social change is particularly favorable among Third World students and students working on issues of gender/women and development.

Feminists who supported the idea that Women's Studies be placed in a separate category and treated as an independent discipline, have also supported the idea of establishing Women's Studies as an independent department. The majority of feminist academics, however, both for tactical and strategic reasons, have maintained that Women's Studies are of an interdisciplinary nature and, therefore, must take the form of a program or an institute with linkages to all other academic disciplines.

The need for interdisciplinarity in Women's Studies programs is both practically and theoretically sound. Factors such as the freshness of the program, the relative paucity of feminist scholars in every university, the limited numbers of students, etc., have all contributed to the program's interrelatedness with other academic disciplines. The issue of interdisciplinarity, moreover, is theoretically and strategically necessary if women's or gender issues are to be recognized as legitimate social concerns.

The range of interdisciplinarity of Women's Studies programs vary between one university and another. While it is commonly noticeable that social sciences, arts and humanities, are the most likely linkages for Women's Studies, various universities, particularly those with strong feminist faculty in "non-traditional" departments such as Law, Engineering, and Medicine, have succeeded in extending the linkages of the programs to those disciplines as well. In Canada, most Women's Studies programs confer a major degree with a minor in other Arts or Social Science Faculties. Graduate courses and degrees in Women's Studies are also available in various Women's Studies programs in Canada. For example, the Universities of Laval, Memorial, and Simon Fraser offer Masters degrees in Women's Studies, the University of British Columbia offers an Masters in Gender Studies, while York University offers a Ph.D in Women's Studies.

The interdisciplinary nature of Women's Studies involves more than cooperation in course offerings by faculty from various disciplines. In fact, the whole structure of the program, in terms of the composition of its executive council, board of directors, management—its decision-making bodies—is made up of faculty from different departments. One of the interesting points often raised is the role of male faculty in such decision-making structures. While there is no one answer, some programs extend their definition of feminism to include male faculty who advocate women's concerns and rights in these courses; others tend to limit their governing bodies to women only. Corresponding to this issue is the question of the relationship between women and gender.

Although most feminist scholars recognize the difference between sex and gender, and realize the fact that gender is the social construction of the relationship between the sexes, such a position is not clearly articulated in the platform of most Women's Studies programs. Some programs are advertised as catering to both males and females, while others are primarily oriented towards the female population. Personal experience of teaching in Women's Studies departments has highlighted the paucity of male students attending their courses; and if they do participate, male students tend to take it out of curiosity rather than out of commitment or as a major. Such a dilemma is also evident in the way some institutes refer to their programs, be it Gender, Feminist, or Women's Studies. These issues, I believe, are not semantic or superficial. Quite to the contrary, this has

been an issue of debate among feminists at levels of high theory, particularly—although not exclusively—between Western feminists and Third World feminists or feminists working with and in developing countries. For some feminists replacing the concept Feminist or Women's Studies with Gender Studies might be seen as undermining the feminist movement. Radical feminists associated with this position argue that if we are to conduct Women's Studies from a gender perspective, instead of a feminist perspective—with a focus on structures of oppression—the uniqueness of patriarchy as the overall oppressive force will be diluted, and as a result the women's/feminist movement will be weakened.²

On the other hand, social feminists and feminists of color have tended to prefer the gender context over that of "women" because, in their perspective, such a context can guarantee the inclusion of class, race, and ethnicity; issues that have often been sidestepped by radical feminists.³ From this viewpoint, the structural must take predominance over the individual. Patriarchy, thus, is not the only or even most oppressive force: race, national, colonial, and (neo)colonial factors are seen as equally important—if not more so—to those of patriarchy. While gender proponents claim that their approach provides a wider context and a diverse representation of factors, forces, and structures over those suggested by adherents of the feminist or women's approach, they are yet to answer critics who accuse them of equally weakening the struggle by turning women's rights into a more general struggle for human rights.

Discourse and debates around issues of "gender" vs "women", as well as around the actual implications of Women's Studies programs' critical approach, boil down to one fundamental question, i.e. what is the representative nature of Women's Studies? As Dorothy Smith, a prominent feminist who was a pioneer in establishing the first such program in Canada, has suggested, this issue is one that might make or break Women's Studies programs.

In addition to the linkages that Women's Studies forges with other disciplines, and the debate around gender, the programs must pay attention to the difficult economic situation they find themselves in: they must be able to express what they have to offer to students. This issue is all the more important in the face of globalization, the decline of the welfare-state, the shrinking public market and the expansion of the private labor market. Promoters of the programs emphasize the unique skills Women's Studies offer, namely, introducing students to the differences and intersections between gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity and, culture. This unique feature of the program intends to promote analytical and critical thinking, and is often highlighted in the advertising, packaging, and selling of the program. Marketing Women's Studies has recently become a pressing issue. At this juncture of world economy and politics, with shrinking funding and resources to education, health and other public sectors, a number of programs try to emphasize

market values by "selling" the skills provided by Women's Studies. The American University in New York, for example, developed the following "sales pitch": "Managers often prefer liberal arts majors because they think they are better at abstracting, thinking, analyzing situations, organizing material, writing well, and making oral presentations" (AUNY 1996). In a similar vein, Women's Studies at Bishop's University in Canada advertises the program as one that "helps those who want to work with women in such numerous and diverse occupations such as, business and management, social sciences, health, education, government, and public policy" (Bishop's 1997).

The extent to which analytical and critical skills are integral to Women's Studies remains a most hotly debated issue in current feminisms. It is this particular debate that I believe is most relevant and important to Women's/Gender Studies programs in the Middle East. However, before addressing this debate, I would like to further examine questions of academic and community research in Women's Studies.

Women's Studies: Between Community and Academy

The debate referred to earlier regarding research priorities, the nature of research, and in whose interest research should be done, is replicated within Women's Studies programs, albeit in different shapes and forms. Women's Studies programs, which throughout the 1980s were seen as a most positive development in propagating women's issues, are currently being challenged around the issue of representation. Women of color, aboriginal women, and other marginalized women have formed an articulate voice for challenging the white, middle-class, Eurocentric, and heterosexual character of Western Women's Studies programs. In Canada, for example, these challenges are obvious at the level of curriculum. Since the early nineties, immigrant women and women of color have charged that their marginalization is not only the product of the male patriarchal and Eurocentric character of Western culture in general. Western feminists, they allege, have also colluded with existing structures and reproduced their marginalization, even within feminist institutions. Among the issues they point to are the nature and structure of a curriculum that pays only lip-service to cultural and racial differences. Feminist theory(ies) and methodology(ies), which are the major components of almost every program, remain largely Eurocentric, focusing on the experiences of white middle-class Western women, and marginalizing, if not totally ignoring in the process, the experiences and contributions of other women.

Such a debate, I may add, was not strange to my own experience at Carleton University. The almost exclusively white middle-class character of women involved in the University's Women's Studies Program resulted, in 1992, in a series of protests staged by a group of women of color who demanded the inclusion of a course on race-ethnicity and the Other to be preferably taught by a woman of color.



With support they gathered from other students and faculty members, they were able to pressure the program's Board of Directors to alter the program's curriculum and introduce a course that would deal with diversity (particularly race and ethnicity). The result was the introduction of "Gender, Race, Class, Ethnicity and Nationalism" as a core course in the program.

Another point of contestation consists of what native women and women of color refer to as the inability of most white feminists to recognize the importance and relevance of colonialism's relationship to the status of underdevelopment faced by these "other" women. Feminist authors such as Marnia Lazreg, Pratibha Parmar and others have gone so far as to suggest a collusion between Western feminists and cultural imperialism.⁴ This point is not specific to Women's Studies. In *Sociological Thought: Beyond Eurocentric Theory* (1996), following other feminists, I make a similar point, suggesting that Western social sciences in general is middle-class, male, Eurocentric and based on the exclusion of the Other. To remedy this I argued that sociologists must reject the mainstream discipline of the "Four White Fathers of the West" (often represented in the names of Compt, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber), and ensure that the courses include non-Western and female theorists. A mission which was modestly achieved in the above text.

Such debates, while at first glance perhaps seeming to appear irrelevant to a context such as that of the Middle East, nevertheless, I propose, hold important ramifications outside of the Western hemisphere.

Women/Gender Studies in the Middle East: A Cultural and Historical Context

Keeping in mind the Western experience discussed above, the following section will examine the cultural and historical specificity of Gender/Women's Studies in the Middle East. The focus in the following discussion will not be on the general features of the program, such as the various tactical and strategic moves and decisions adopted in developing the program around issues of program viz. department, the emphasis on linkages and interdisciplinarity, the need to "sell" the program and ways of "packaging" it, all of which I believe are generalizable and can be used as experiences to learn from. Instead, this section will concentrate on issues more specific and perhaps unique to the cultural and historical trajectories of the Middle East.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that over the past two decades the Middle East has been undergoing economic, political, and cultural turmoil. Factors such as the advent of international capitalism, expressed in a further penetration into Middle Eastern economy, combined with the Iran-Iraq war, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the destruction of Iraq, and the relentless Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, have all undoubtedly changed the socio-economic and political map of the region. Alongside economic dependency and political

instability created under these new conditions, the Middle East has partially responded with some of its own destabilizing forces, the most pertinent of which being the Islamicist movements. Expressed in the form of new political ideologies, these movements are trying to present themselves as the authentic voice of the region's masses. Islamicisms or Muslim fundamentalisms have gained a special momentum as they vie to be the region's alternative voice in the face of what they perceive is a hegemonic Western cultural penetration. Whatever their external or international platform—be it a response to the penetration of Western culture or Western economic hegemony, or a response to the political vacuum created by regimes perceived to be allied with the West—the internal or national platform of most, if not all, of the fundamentalist movements, whether in Egypt, Palestine, or Algeria, is largely the same: namely involving the silencing and domestication of women.

Under these circumstances, women in many Middle Eastern countries are finding themselves effectively squeezed in the grip of an increasingly tightening vice. Economic pressures such as high unemployment rates, reinforced by a political ideology that emphasizes women's "natural role as being at home", are combining to push more women out of the labor force, out of the public domain and into the domestic or private sphere, widening, in the process, the gap between "public" and "private". Such a gap, while varying from one country to the next, has not been left to economic or ideological forces alone, as it is often influenced by state policies. States in the Middle East have always maintained an ambivalence towards women's issues. At various historical junctures, and when it sees fit to do so, a state would use the "woman" question in a positive manner, promoting certain rights by legislating some pro-women laws (Abdo 1997b). At other times, for instance under the threat of fundamentalism, the state will tend to stifle, push back or even retract from previous positions on women's issues. This is particularly so when the state is also faced with hard economic circumstances. Or, alternatively, as witnessed in the recent history of Tunisia, the state can flagship women's issues as another tool or weapon to fight Muslim fundamentalism. Between the state on the one hand, and patriarchal fundamentalist movements and economic underdevelopment on the other, Middle Eastern women have often found themselves the objects of push and pull politics.

Having said this, however, Arab and Middle Eastern women are not the silent recipients of this imposed victimization. The womanist/feminist movement(s) in the Middle East has(ve) always been alive, capable of articulating women's needs and fighting for women's rights and demands, albeit with varying degrees of successes and failures. In fact, it is this determination to continue the struggle, as Hisham Sharabi, Valentine Moghadam, and Rita Giaccaman, among others have argued, that has kept the struggles for gender identity and women's rights, as well as that against gender oppression, on the political agenda of most Middle Eastern

states.⁵ Such an agenda, one might argue, will continue to be fluid and in flux as long as the Middle Eastern state itself, along with its economic, political and ideological structures, remains in a transitory and ever-changing position.

It is within the context outlined above that one must examine the potential of Women's Studies or of the institutionalization of women/gender issues in the Middle East, a certainly challenging experience with built-in contradictory tendencies.

Women's/Gender Studies in the Middle East

The academization/institutionalization of Women's Studies in the Middle East in general, and the Arab world in particular, is a relatively new phenomenon, and assessing the full potential of such an experience is not possible at this stage. However, it is important to note that developing such an institution or program will undoubtedly enhance the women's struggle and to a certain degree women's rights as well. The real challenge, however, is to articulate a program that in both its form and substance is, on the one hand, flexible enough to respond to the demands of the different women's constituencies at the national level, while being aware of existing debates and discourses at the international level. On the other hand, a Women's Studies program in the Middle East, in this case in Egypt, would also have to be strong enough or bold enough so as to not be hampered by the existing reactionary forces, nor by the many external pressures within which it is attempting to forge its own path.

Before attempting to articulate some mechanisms that I think might be useful in the actual setup of such a program, I would like to elaborate briefly on the challenge posed by internal reactionary forces. At both the national and international levels, Middle Eastern feminists have been, at least for the past decade and a half, busied with the debate over the "authentic vs the outsider" or "the orientalist vs the ethnocentrist". A great deal of ink, time, and energy have been invested in the questions of the symbolic meaning of veiling; whether the latter is imposed or of choice, or whether it is part of the authentic Islam or one patriarchal version or interpretation of Islam. A major outcome of such debates, which are by no means over, has been a limiting of the horizons of Middle Eastern feminist scholars in terms of issues of debate and discussion. The impact of Islamicism and the emergence of new movements of Muslim or more correctly, Islamicist feminists, as well as other women/feminists who for whatever reason have taken a traditional culturalist side of the debate, continue to linger on. The culturalist argument focuses attention on cultural imperialism and attempts to brand every feminist issue, including democracy, human rights, liberal and individual rights, and definitely sexuality, as imports of Western cultural imperialism. This brand of criticism has undoubtedly stifled the academic debate within Arab/Middle Eastern feminists circles. A careful examination of these debates reveals that much of the discussion continues to revolve around Orientalism and "Orientalism in Reverse", to use Sadeq Jalal el-Aziz's terms (El-Aziz

1981). Arab/Middle Eastern feminist responses to these questions have often been imbued with a sense of internalized Orientalism. Taking up issues of women's materiality, sexuality, violence against women and women's public rights in general has not only been discouraged and labeled Western or imported, but in some cases also made irrelevant as a research topic altogether. Women/feminists taking up these issues have been labeled Orientalists or Westerners, in an attempt to stifle their voices.

Nevertheless, certain secular feminists, such as Heidah Moghissi and Deniz Kandiyoti, among others, have chosen to release themselves from the shackles of this debate and have shifted their focus from the religious to the historical, national, cultural and material, allowing in the process, an open discussion of wider issues.⁶ Other significant social phenomena, such as the relationship between women and the state, or women and citizenship, have also begun to be addressed and debated.

Such a discrepancy in scholarship within the Middle Eastern context, I believe, is another important challenge for Women's Studies programs to address as they try to build their research priorities and articulate their curriculum. The following section will provide some detail on issues or research and curricular development within the cultural and historical specificity articulated above.

As the developing Women's Studies programs attempt to articulate their research priorities, it will be important to reach a balance between different research projects. For example, policy-oriented research, currently high on the agenda of various Women's Studies programs in Canada, is an important project as it generates funding resources to the program and enables it to develop in various aspects. The Women's Studies Program at Birzeit University, I believe, realized this when they included policy-oriented research as a component of their program. Nonetheless, as most policy research is funded by the state or by private corporations with particular agendas in mind, it is important to assess the relevance of such research to local women and weigh the pros and cons. This equally applies to projects funded by international agencies, particularly the U.N. and other donor agencies operating in the Middle East. A brief examination of certain relevant policy-oriented research projects undertaken by Birzeit University might be useful here. For example, the Women's Studies program at Birzeit undertook a critical reexamination of the World Bank Report, as well as analyzing the PLO economic plan from a gender perspective, both of which provide positive examples of a combination of policy-oriented research incorporating gender concerns (Kuttab 1997).

Academic theoretical research is of paramount importance as it keeps feminists at the local or national level in touch with and aware of debates and discourses at the international level. However, overemphasizing the theoretical and prioritizing it over the practical has the potential of removing



academic feminists from the local empirical issues. As pointed out earlier in this paper, this has become a thorny issue in feminist politics within the Canadian context. The balance between the theoretical/academic and practical/empirical has ramifications that go beyond the issues of the content and substance of research. Faculty in the Women's Studies programs, particularly those on full-time bases, will be under-pressure not only to satisfy the feminist/women's demands that the program is set to achieve, but they also find themselves under the pressure of having to produce and publish in internationally recognized academic journals; this for sheer survival in the academic world. As mentioned earlier, within the Canadian context, the debate between community or feminist activists academic feminists remains a most heated debate, one that is undoubtedly widening the gap between "academic" women's Studies and "real" women's issues.

While there is not blueprint or straightforward answer to any of these research concerns, it might be useful for new Women's Studies programs to consider questions such as: In whose interest is research being done? Is it for women's empowerment? For policy? For academic purposes? Who should do the research? Academics? Women's organizations who are close to the needs and reality of women's communities? Or, a combination of both? The Palestinian experience of Women's Studies programs that have maintained a strong component of community outreach as one of their primary objectives provide an instructive example for other programs to follow.

The issues of research presented above are also tied to questions of curriculum. What courses to teach, which subjects to emphasize, and what areas to prioritize, can also be highly contentious questions. As the Western experience demonstrates, the primary course in Women's Studies, namely Feminist Theory and Methodology, were and still are contested by women of color and others who charge that these courses represent white, middle-class experience and not the experience of other sectors of the population.

In the Middle eastern context, while the issue of race per se might not be as evident a concern, the issues of class, ethnicity, and religion are no doubt contentious issues. Moreover, the unequal economic and consequently social under-development that characterizes most Middle Eastern states creates a serious void between rural and urban sectors, and in other contexts among urban, rural, bedouin, and refugee sectors. This gap suggests the presence of different needs and demands, based on class and perhaps ethnic lines, which must be addressed. It is important to remember that although we tend to use culture, for instance Arab culture, as a unitary category, the fact is that each Arab country exhibits different cultural traditions, varying between class, ethnic, religious, and geographic boundaries. As I have elaborated upon elsewhere, multiculturalism is, to some degree, present within every "formal" culture (Abdo 1997a). In addition to the question of what local/national issues to con-

sider in developing, say theory courses for Women's Studies, there is always the controversial issue of the relevance of already existing feminist theory to the Middle East. While the debate on this topic is beyond the scope of this paper, one point is worth making presently. Western feminist research has contributed tremendously to epistemology, particularly within the context of humanities and social sciences. One such contribution has been the debate around "public" and "private" spaces, or "production" and "reproduction". Yet, as Deniz Kandiyoti has pointed out, it is in the Middle East where such a debate can find its most elaborate and detailed expression. Thus, while on the one hand these debates can be introduced and made use of, on the other, Middle Eastern scholars can take such debates and elevate them to a higher level by recontextualizing them within the cultural and historical specificity of the region.

What I believe needs to be most seriously considered in curriculum development is what was referred to earlier as questions of women's materiality within the Middle East; namely, issues of women and labor force participation; the relationship among women, the state, and citizenship; the critical examination of women and the law, not only Shari'a law, but also civil law; women's sexuality, reproduction, reproductive technologies, violence, abuse, clitoridectomy, and other such concerns that are long overdue for critical examination. The crucial importance of Women's Studies role in undertaking this sort of research is highlighted by events such as the recent decision made in Egypt to overturn laws prohibiting female circumcision (HRW 1997).

Finally, while I do not doubt the fact that every new Women's Studies program will pay more than sufficient attention to issues of national concern, such as the historical and current role of women in defending and building the nation, issues of women and national development and so on, it is important to always remind ourselves that defending and building ourselves as persons and women is of paramount importance.

Conclusion

Without any claim to inclusiveness or conclusiveness, this paper has attempted to contribute to the feminist debate that tries to challenge the long overdue Orientalist thesis that "West is West and East is East and the twain shall never

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meet", whether the proponents were Western, Eastern, or Middle Eastern.

Women's Studies Programs, this paper has argued, are the culmination of Women's struggle and the feminist movement(s) and as such they mark an important achievement for the women's movement internationally. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, in the West these programs or institutes have become a part of the wider social structure that gave rise to them in the first place. The implication of this being that the very same forces that might have encouraged the establishment and development of these institutes, can also potentially lead to their demise. Unlike other established disciplines in the social sciences that remain largely main-stream and male-stream, Women's Studies is critical and is fundamentally anti male-control. This seed of anti-establishment inherent in most, if not all, of these programs, carries with it the potential for marginalizing, if not totally destroying them.

The status of Women's Studies programs in both the West and East, or Middle East, is very much contingent on the socio-economic and political trajectories of our times. As elucidated in this paper, globalization, privatization and downsizing, catch words that embody the "name of the age" in the West, have a negative influence on Women's Studies programs and can threaten their very existence. Similarly, the further economic dependency and political subordination of Middle Eastern countries to international economic powers can have the same result. In fact, one might argue that the transitory and unstable character of most Middle Eastern regimes has further exacerbated the status of these programs. In other words, both the objective forces that have led to the development of these institutes, as well as the forces that might lead to their demise, are quite borderless. These forces know no geographical limits or national identity: they are common to all countries, nationalities, and cultures.

Having highlighted the similarities or commonalities between the West and the Middle East, this paper has also attempted to demonstrate the historical and cultural specificity of the Middle East. Without any elaborate discussion, this paper has taken for granted that Women's Studies programs are also a part of the Arab/Middle Eastern woman's long struggle for her right to lead a better life and play a more pro-active role in shaping and reshaping her society. In doing so two major arguments were advanced. On the one hand, the paper has tried to go beyond the seemingly stymied debate around Orientalism and internalized Orientalism, which continues to frame women's issues within a religious framework. The socially tabooed issues of sexuality, reproduction, and other concerns pertaining to women's well-being are long overdue for academic inquiry, and ought to come to the surface as scientifically researched areas so that proper policies can be formulated and actions taken to address them. On the other hand, this paper has argued that the historical specificity of the Middle East, where most countries are still underdeveloped, makes the link between academia and community, and theory and

practice, imperative goals for the success of any development project, including Women's Studies programs.

Finally, as I open this paper for comments, suggestions, and criticism, I also hope it has contributed to the general feminist debate among Middle Eastern and Arab women in particular. I hope its discussions and issues it has raised can be useful and practical to Women's Studies programs in the process of developing, such as that at the American University of Cairo, for which this paper was written.

Endnotes

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1. For more on the history lobbying the Secretary of State for the Status of Women and the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women see Amy Gotlieb (1993), "What About Us? Organizing Inclusively in the National Action Committee on the Status of Women" in Linda Carty ed. *And Still We Rise: Feminist Political Mobilizing in Contemporary Canada*. Toronto: Women's Press.

2. For an interesting discussion of some radical feminist perspectives on Women's Studies programs, see Warren Shibles (1989), "Radical Feminism, Humanism and Women's Studies", *Innovative Higher Education* (14)1 Fall-Winter.

3. See for instance, Nitya Iyer (1997), "Disappearing Women: Racial-Minority Women in Human Rights Cases" in C. Andrew and S. Rodgers, eds. *Women and the Canadian State*. Montreal: McGill-Queens's University Press: (241-261); Shelley Wright (1993) "Patriarchal Feminism and the Law of the Father", *Feminist Legal Studies* (1) 2 August: pp: 115-140. For a more general discussion of the feminist/womanist divide see Bell Hooks (1984), *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Toronto: Between the Lines.

4. See, Marnia Lazreg (1988), "Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria", *Feminist Studies* (14) 1, Spring: 81-107; Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parma (1984), "Challenging Imperial Feminism", *Feminist Orientalism or Orientalist Marxism*", *The New Left Review*, No.120; Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991), "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonialist Discourses" in C. Mohanty et al, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, eds. (1992), *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

5. See Valentine Moghadam (1993), *Modernizing Women*. London: Lynne Rienne Publishers; Margot Badran (1993), "Independent Women: More than a Century of Feminism in Egypt" in Judith Tucker, ed., *Arab Women*. Bloomington: Indiana Feminism in Egypt" in Judith Tucker, ed., *Arab Women*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Hisham Sharabi (1988), *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*. New York, Oxford University Press.

6. See for instance, Haideh, Moghissi (1994), *Populism and Feminism In Iran: Women's Struggle In A Male-defined Revolutionary Movement*. Basingstoke: MacMillan; Deniz Kandiyoti (1991), *Women, Islam, and the State*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.