

# Feminizing Politics

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Contributions to this special issue of *Al-Raida* deal with the role of Arab women in political decision-making. However, testimonies, opinions, research papers and survey analyses reflect different levels of concern and achievement. Implicitly or explicitly a number of pertinent issues have been raised concerning Arab women and politics- or better Arab women in politics.

The first issue is conceptual. The intellectual construction of Arab feminism is, at best, a partially, not fully, achieved project. Can feminism in our part of the world (and indeed in the 'third world' at large) safely assume that the concepts generated by the experience of Western feminism are global concepts that can simply be applied locally? My immediate answer would tend to be negative. Not only a critical distance is required vis-à-vis these products, but also the need to develop autonomous feminist goals and strategies and ground them in the Arab present. What is at stake here is not so much geographic or cultural but mainly historical, i.e. one of temporality. In the absence of such a critical distance vis-à-vis these concepts and the intellectual production of an Arab feminism, consumerism would prevail. In other words, the symbolic appropriation of what the West has achieved, or, at best, its assimilation by a marginal elite divorced from the rest of society. What is lost in the process is the starting point, the process of accumulation and the required periodization to reach the required goals.

The central concept of 'gender', for example, calls for differentiating between the biological function of women and their socio-economic, political and cultural roles. To begin with, this thesis seems to be a mere replica, in the field of feminine studies, of the neo-liberal 'state/civil society' dichotomy now prevalent in the social sciences. In both cases, a simplistic dualism emerges where should be established complex correlations. More importantly, all social systems incorporate different forms of exchange of the 'agents' of that biological function and of control over domestic work associated with it. Women's socio-economic, political and cultural roles are thus determined in function of those prevalent forms of exchange and control. Hence, neutralizing women's biological function, and achieving its relative autonomy vis-à-vis the aforementioned roles, are in themselves social, historical and political achievements and not a mere theoretical assumption.

The second issue is of a strategic order. The quota system, for example, was initially adopted in countries where women have made great advances in participation in public life (economic, social and cultural) but were

still politically underrepresented. Does it mean the same in countries where such advances have yet to be made? On the other hand, to what extent would such a voluntarist political achievement encourage wider (economic, social and cultural) forms of participation? Whatever the answers to these questions, it is highly likely that the implementation of the quota in the Arab World would turn out to be symbolic if not attached to, and backed by, real positions and forces in society as a whole.

Another issue raised concerns the relationship between the feminist movement and the overall movement for change in the Arab World. Many contributions considered the social foundations of prevailing Arab politics (tribalism, sectarianism, etc.) as severe impediments to the participation of women in political life. They implied a necessary relationship between women's participation in political life and the overall socio-political transformations in their countries. This raises the 'tactical' question concerning the means of achievement.

Women movements have acquired a different connotation compared to the sixties and seventies. Now, the field is mainly in the hands of NGO's that tend to compartment, rather than relate, fields of thought and action (human rights, environment, women, development, etc.). A critical assessment of the experience of Arab NGO's is long overdue. Have they encouraged concerted feminist action or have they driven feminist activists to competition for donors, funds, clients, etc.? Are NGO's capable of linking local strategies and actions to national ones?

Whatever the answers to these questions in the current debates- and answers are required- one thing is sure. Feminism is eminently political. It is about changing relations of power between men and women in society. And in so doing, it is about changing the terms of politics at large. Undoubtedly, much of the characteristics of authoritarianism prevalent in our societies are the product of the domination of patriarchy. Feminizing politics thus becomes the equivalent of freeing politics of what makes it authoritarian.

A feminist perspective on politics would render it more humane and indeed more democratic. Not necessarily because of any inherent characteristics attributed to womanhood, but because those who have long suffered from oppression and inequality, and struggled for equality and justice are deemed capable of imagining new forms of social life. Thus enfranchising half of society cannot be reduced to a mere quantitative change. It would hopefully open up qualitatively new horizons for the conception and practice of politics as liberation.