

Introduction to Email Interviews on Current Challenges Facing the Arab Women's Movements

The idea for this section arose from the realization that the historical evaluation studies at the front of the issue needed some counterbalancing appraisal of the present. But this need presented us with many problems, among them the number and diversity of the women's movements, the small pool of specialists with a regional overview, the difficulty for grassroots activists of extricating themselves sufficiently from day-to-day activities to analyze their situation. There was also the problem of the polar differences of ideological viewpoints from which the present could be reviewed. Such differences extend from those of liberal inclination who perceive the proliferation of women's NGOs as a sign of progress, and others who see it as a symptom of fragmentation and loss of the original Arab women's movement of its momentum and unity; between those who welcome all UN and Western intervention in the 'woman question', and others who see international agency support for 'gender equality' as an attempt to undermine Arab/Islamic family values and identity; between those who see the Arab women's movements as having achieved popular acceptance of basic rights (eg. women's right to education), and those who see them as unable to overcome historical, cultural and structural limitations. For a few scholars, however carefully selected, fully to present this diversity of contemporary women's movements over such a large and heterogeneous region would be an almost impossible task.

The halfway 'solution' we reached was to maximize as far as we could the variety of viewpoints by inviting 20 scholars and grassroots activists to participate in an email interview. We tried to select respondents from as broad a regional and ideological spectrum as possible, so you will find interviewees from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Algeria, Morocco, and Sudan as well as countries with older, more studied women's movements, such as Egypt and Lebanon. Ideological viewpoints include liberal, radical and Muslim feminist.

We selected the questions through a process of Editorial Committee consultation, designing them to elicit focus on specific aspects of the women's movements that may be termed critical. Readers may find that many questions they deem more essential than ours have been omitted. If so, we invite you to send your comments, to be published in a forthcoming issue.

We asked all the interviewees to send us photos. Thanks to the three who did, but we felt that, with so few, we could not use them.

Rosemary Sayigh

Current Challenges Facing the Arab Women's Movements

The Interview Questions - (NB: AWM is an acronym for Arab women's movements.)

1. What in your view has been the greatest achievement of the AWM(s) so far? What has been its/their greatest failure?
2. Conservative forces in the region accuse the AWMs of being overly influenced by 'Western feminism'. Is this charge justified in your view? What is the best response?
3. What are the factors that account for the spread of religious fundamentalism among women and men in the Arab region? Does this religious revivalism threaten the AWMs? Can Islam (or any other religion) offer a long-term basis for struggle for women's rights?
4. Today we find the AWMs doing social work, adult literacy, research, legal counseling, and other kinds of activity. Is this pluralism good or bad in your view?
5. Do you think there should be more struggle for family law reform?
6. In the past, the AWMs mainly looked to the 'West' for models and affiliations: should they form relations with women's movements in the 'East' — Iran, Africa, India, Pakistan, etc?
7. Up to now leaders and members of the AWMs have been mainly educated urban women: what stops the spread of the struggle for women's rights to women of other classes?
8. Most AWMs are characterized by non-elected and non-accountable leaders who make decisions without consulting members. Should the AWMs adopt more democratic structures and practices?
9. Have AWM members done enough to change gender relations and practices in society, and in their own families?
10. Most Arab countries contain non-Arabic speaking minorities: what has been, and should be, the policy of AWMs towards them?
11. Should we avoid the term 'Arab feminism' as implying the existence of an 'Arab woman' and creating a false idea of Arab homogeneity?
12. What has been the impact of the UN Decade for Women and its offshoot agencies (eg UNIFEM) on the AWMs?
13. The number of women professionals and scholars in the Arab region has been rapidly expanding: what effects has this had on the AWMs?
14. What do you see as the greatest obstacles to the growth and development of the AWMs today?
15. What of the future? If you were able change one element in the present set-up of the AWMs, what would it be?

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1. In spite of the fact that I belong to a society which does not acknowledge the term 'women's movement', I guess that with some concessions regarding the political implications of the term I may be able to pinpoint some important aspects of achievement and failure of the Arab women's movements. However, to do so, we need to agree on the definition of the term. The importance of developing such a common understanding is not only to reach a 'theoretical' agreement, but also to allow us to recognize its various forms in different social environments in the Arab world. If our understanding of the term is confined to a single meaning, in which 'women's movements' is defined only as a political body of feminism, such a limited definition would exclude those Arab societies in which neither are political activities permitted nor is feminism recognized.

Yet, in contrast to this limitation, there are Arab societies where even though a 'women's movement' does not formally exist, or is not acknowledged as a feminist movement, its momentum is constantly at work. One might say that the term can have more than one definition. For beyond abstract or operational concepts, a 'women's movement' can be found when we are ready to see it in its various forms. In Saudi Arabia, for example, although there is no 'movement' to defend women's cause, we cannot miss the implications of the term in all steps that have been taken there to improve women's status. Though Saudi Arabia, unlike neighboring countries of the Gulf region, has never witnessed any kind of women's movement, yet it would be difficult to maintain that it has not felt the effect of the overall Arab women's movement. It is true that most reforms related to women were due to government initiatives; but most of them were a response to civilian requests or demands. From the first royal decree in 1960 acknowledging girls' right to education to the official recognition in 2001 of women's right to their own identity card as citizens, not only as daughters or wives, the 'Arab women's movement', though never present in Saudi society, was at the same time never absent.

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The value of these two official decrees becomes clearer when we know that both measures faced strong opposition from some factions of Saudi society. The controversial nature of all issues related to women in Saudi Arabia would have made both decisions impossible to reach without the long discussions that took place between opponents and supporters, in which support for women's rights appeared stronger. This I would call an achievement of the Arab women's movement. The achievement lies in the fact that the movement managed, however indirectly, to set up an agenda of feminist reforms that has permeated the very different societies of the Arab world at different periods of their modern history. Challenging women's illiteracy from within the blacked-out value system of Islam was one of the movement's main achievements, especially in view of the fact that women in some parts of the Arab world were prevented from learning because of a certain interpretation of Islam. The same is true in relation to women's right to employment.

The failure of the Arab women's movement can be identified as its inability to extend this kind of success to other areas of women's life without being trapped in the modern image of western women. Another point of criticism is its failure to resolve the historical conflict between men and women by building an equality of gender.

2. We have an Arabic saying, "It is a word of justice that is used for injustice". This saying was first used by the Prophet Muhammad's cousin (may Allah's peace be upon him) to mean that sometimes a word of truth is misused to lead to a false conclusion. It seems to me this saying is very applicable to those who criticize the Arab women's movement not for the sake of giving an objective opinion but only as a means of condemning the movement itself. The aim behind labeling the women's movement as a blind follower of 'Western feminism' is not one of objective criticism of certain ideas and practices, but rather to condemn the movement as a whole and to diminish its appeal to Muslim women. In my opinion, the women's movement should not take time to respond to such accusations, or allow them to divert it from its goal of empowering women. The practical response is to devote itself to its goal by rallying women from all parts of the Arab world - in urban and rural areas, among women of different educational orientations, and from different ethnic, cultural and eco-

conomic backgrounds. This cannot be done unless the movement tries faithfully and seriously to link itself with the urgent issues and real needs of women in specific Arab environments.

Despite the overwhelming trend towards globalization, it has to be realized that women's issues are not identical in every part of the world. It is true that there are commonalities, and that there should be a sense of solidarity among women internationally, but it is also true that problems cannot be imported or exported and solutions cannot be imposed.

In addition to this, another practical response is to take the issue of democracy seriously rather than using it as a slogan, which means that the Arab women's movements should democratize themselves from within. This needs taking into consideration the views and the criticisms of both women and men. The women's movements should have the courage to initiate self-criticism.

Finally, it is very urgent that the whole Arab women's movement should make a serious attempt to crystallize its thoughts and practices in the light of what the legal system of Islam says about women. I think that there is a whole historical passage of women's legal status in Islam that must be revised and re-read in relation to the contemporary needs of women and contemporary feminist issues. This reading must be done in the light of *Al-Qur'an al-Karim* and according to *al-Sunna al-Nabawiyah al-Sharifa*, and not only according to the opinions of past 'ulama. This is not to disparage their opinions, but to draw attention to the necessity for women to take responsibility in this male-dominated area. This is not a call for isolation from the international arena; rather, it is a call to the Arab women's movement to place its own fingerprint on the 'woman question', so it won't be labeled by the singular image of Western feminism.

3. There have been several academic and journalistic attempts to specify the factors that account for the spread of so-called religious fundamentalism. Here I shall refer to two academic attempts that represent opposite approaches to the issue. One of them adopts a completely Western stand by giving 'Islamic revivalism' a stereotypical image as an antagonistic form of movement that has no other goal except to stand against 'modernism'. Modernism in this approach is defined exclusively as Western mod-

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ernism, which allows it to label Islamic revivalism as a threat to the universal values of the West. The other approach attempts to read Islamic revivalism from within the historical context of the hegemonic relation between the West and the Islamic world (including the Arab world). It looks at this relation of hegemony as a framework that allows an exercise in power/knowledge by which the Islamic world is feared, belittled and controlled. Since this hegemony has been the framework of introducing modernism as a purely and exclusively Western product, it has consequently led to the creation of political conditions for modernism in the Islamic world. The condition was that the Islamic world could not be modernized unless it accepts to follow the Western model of modernization. This meant, in both theory and practice, erasure of identity beyond physical features, cultural heritage, and geographical boundaries.

Gita Sahgal and Yuval-Davis represent the first approach, manifested by their analysis of 'Islamic revivalism' as a form of fundamentalism identical to all forms of religious fanaticism, without giving weight to historical, socio-political, and cultural differences, based on an implicit assumption of Western universalism.¹ Such an approach labels all attempts at returning to the *Qur'an* and the *Shari'a* in issues related to women, as a retreat into tradition. This view is contested by those who see returning to the *Qur'an* and the *Shari'a* as the only way to challenge traditional interpretations by creating a contemporary and innovative re-reading of the canonical texts. The second approach does not only recognize the right of feminism in the Islamic world to have a choice of its own in the way it responds to challenges to Muslim women, it also provides a theorization for understanding the legality and not only the logic of this choice. But Leila Ahmed and Nasreen Ali among others question the validity of a single image of woman, which Elizabeth Spellman calls an 'essential woman'. They argue that this is an image whose look and mentality is Western. Bobby Sayyid takes the argument a step farther when he says, "The effect of this is that women who do not share essential woman's particularities become lesser women".² The implication is that in order to be recognized by the West as liberating movements, feminist movements have to be either Western, or at least western-oriented, a position that endorses cultural and racial hierarchies.

4. This also is a controversial question. On one hand, there are those who think that involving women's movements in such projects might lead to their 'domestication' by diverting their attention from the political arena and the public domain. On the other hand are those who believe that the only way for the women's movement to gain political credibility is by dealing with the urgent issues and the immediate needs of women of different backgrounds. I think I tend to side with the latter, for two reasons. The first is personal, related to my intuition as a poet and not only to my orientation as a sociologist, which makes me prefer the romance of working with people to being puzzled by the surrealism of political work. The second reason is the actual need of women for social work, legal counselling, etc., as a means of empowering them, which could be the only way to help them struggle for full citizenship, legal and political.

5. Oh yes, I believe very much that there is an intense struggle to be carried on in the area of family law. As I said before, there is a whole system of Islamic law that suffers silence and neglect, and which has to be re-read and re-interpreted.

6. Yes, indeed. In fact, globalization must not exclusively mean Americanization or Westernization. Globalization in the positive sense of the word means the collapse of the Berlin wall in all directions of the globe. This means an equal representation of different dimensions of the seven continents. In addition, there are rich histories of women's personal and communal struggles, of joyful and painful experiences, which ought to be globally rediscovered and shared by women and men of the world. These need to be revalued and disseminated among new generations of women, especially as the Internet today helps to demolish political boundaries as well as the very concept of censorship.

7. I am glad that you brought up this question. The causes of this limitation vary from social to political to multi-dimensional factors. Some critics of the Arab women's movements think that this situation is a result of a poor practice of democracy. Others think that this is because the movements have failed to address the heterogeneity of the Arab world, and to move outside the ivory tower of its intellectual domain. Whatever the reasons, it is a source of worry for all those who would like to see the movement

spread roots at a popular level. In my opinion, if elitism within the movements is not modified to include women of different social backgrounds and diverse cultural frame of reference, it could eventually be one of the major reasons for its future isolation and maybe elimination.

8. See my answer under 2 above.

9. We have to be modest enough to admit that individual achievements, no matter how great, can never be a full measure of the success of a public movement such as the Arab women's movement. Taking this reservation into consideration, one can say Yes, it is very likely that a number of movement members have done their best to change gender relations and practice on a personal and familial level. This is not to say that there is full achievement of gender equality in their families. Arab women's movement members live and function within a certain social environment; the only way for their personal struggle to be effective is to change the social framework that allows uneven gender relations to be an accepted pattern of social behavior.

10. This is a good question because it is related to the self-criticism that is badly needed within the overall movement. Unfortunately, women's issues in non-Arabic speaking minorities have been silenced for a long while as a result of political linkages between the Arab women's movement and the political project of nationalism in the region. I think it is time that the movement starts to realize the importance of its own independence. However this is not achievable unless it frees itself from being an echo of a dominant discourse of a ruling class, and/or political parties. This is also the only way to put an end to attempts to use the 'woman question' as a card in political maneuvering, as happened in Algeria and elsewhere in the so-called Third World during the second half of the past century. I think one of the main things to be done at this stage is to establish a mutual trust by strengthening solidarity among women of different linguistic, cultural and/or social backgrounds. This in my opinion should be done within the bound of unity of the Arab world.

11. I think that terms are not the problem in defining feminist movements in the Arab world. What really matters is the content of the

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movement, and that it does not become a duplicate of dominant modes of feminism, which may have a different agenda than that needed by women within a specific bound of time and space. Developing a form of feminism that does not deny women the right to have their own 'feminist imagination', their own choice in achieving gender equality, and the right to be proud of their cultural identity, is the real challenge of feminist movements in the Arab and Islamic world today.

12. I am sorry to say that the impact of most UN declarations in relation to women has been very limited, and so far most of them are going nowhere beyond propaganda. In my opinion, this situation will continue unless genuine and practical measures are created to protect women from national and international violations of their rights, whether these take the form of wars or domestic violence.

13. I think the growth of the number of women professionals and scholars in the Arab region is a very positive sign of a real liberation of women on a practical level. However these women should not allow themselves to be absorbed by official institutions at the expense of their feminist objectives. The increase in number of those well educated in different fields of knowledge widens their representation in social institutions, empowering them to speak and to have their voice heard.

14. The most serious obstacle that could impede the progress of the women's movement is fanaticism. In other words the Arab women's movements should not cling to their old ideas but be open to fresh ideas and new needs of younger generations of women.

15. First, I would like movement women to leave their offices and conference rooms and walk barefoot in alleys and on unpaved roads, to develop a sense of solidarity between urban and rural women of different intellectual and social backgrounds. Second, I would like it not to be ashamed of identifying itself with the Islamic feminist perspective of women's liberation (*al-tanthir al-nasawi al-mustanir*). Thirdly, I would like it to be more democratic and less exclusive and centralized. Finally, I would like it not to stop dreaming, for this is one of the best ways to renew its energy and to let fresh air replace the burned-up oxygen.

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ENDNOTES

1. Sahgal, Gita and Nira Yuval-Davis eds., (1992) Refusing Holy Orders (London: Virago).
2. Ahmed, Leila (1992) Women and Gender in Islam (New Haven: Yale University Press); Ali, Nasreen (1998) "Essentializing Inessential Women" unpublished paper, Manchester; Sayyid, Bobby (1997) A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism (London and New York: Zed Books).

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1. The Arab women's movements have been most successful in improving women's roles and situations in the 'public spheres' of education, work, and political participation. Their goals in these areas often converged with male reformers who followed modernization paradigms. They have been less successful in making the link between personal lives and politics, and in addressing gender issues within the so-called private sphere.

The greatest failure, in my view, has been not to build on previous achievements, and not to build effective alliances between groups within a specific country, like Egypt for example, as well as with feminists in other Arab, Asian and African countries.

2. It does not take a western feminist to see injustice and inequalities in any part of the world. Women all over the world are facing discrimination, and aside from general problems related to poverty and war, they are confronting gender-specific problems. This is not to fall back into un-reconstituted universalizing and a patronizing "Sisterhood is global" mode, but to recognize that we need to break out of dangerous dichotomies. For some reason (well, we know the reasons), this never really came up with respect to socialist and Marxist movements and political groupings.

For a start, western feminism is not one thing, and Arab women's movements might be influ-

enced by certain strands of it, i.e liberal women's rights activism as opposed to radical feminism. Secondly, Arab women have struggled historically to gain rights and change existing gender ideologies and relations as women have in many non-western countries. Thirdly, all sorts of ideas and movements emerged in the West, ranging from the nation state to Marxist thought. What is wrong with appropriating certain ideas and/or politics and translating them into one's specific social, cultural, economic and political realities? The history of humankind is a history of encounters and exchange.

And finally: most women who are part of feminist movements in western countries are extremely critical of their own governments and their politics. This is not restricted to women's issues in the specific national context, but often extends to international politics. Living as someone of Iraqi origin in the UK, for example, I am always moved by the number of British women who have no direct connection to either Palestine or Iraq, but who are very passionate and effective in their struggle against war, against imperialism and against injustice.

3. This question is very complex and would need a very long answer. The factors accounting for the spread of religious fundamentalism range from a series of economic crises, the failure of secular governments and parties to deliver progress and affluence for all, the 1967 war and the ongoing atrocities committed by the Israeli government, anti-Western sentiments linked to Zionism and the US support of it, imperialist policies of the US and other western countries, and the corruption and oppression of existing regimes.

Religious revival in and of itself does not have to be antithetical to women's rights. However, in my view, any form of religious extremism, whether it is based on Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism or Islam (or any other religion) is a threat to women and women's movements. Women are being used as markers of purity and authenticity and are generally subjected to severe restrictions in movement, appearance and behavior.

I do not think that any religion can offer a long-term basis for struggle for women's rights, but I understand that in certain situations it might be necessary or useful to evoke religion.

4. Pluralism in itself is neither good or bad. It very

much depends whether resources and energies are put to good use, or whether women's groups are wasting their efforts by working all over the place and not focusing. In my experience in Egypt, the problem was not pluralism in terms of activities, but 'reinventing the wheel' and lack of co-operation. In other words, different groups and organizations would start certain projects without building on the work done by other groups earlier. Furthermore, activities were sometimes the result of available funding rather than well-thought through needs.

Yet, ideally, Arab women's movements (again as women's movements in other parts of the world) should be able to work on many different levels and issues, as gender inequalities are pervasive in all aspects of life. In light of the severe lack of human resources (due to the relative small size of women's groups), and in some countries of funding (though not Egypt), priorities need to be made.

5. Yes, the existing family laws in most Arab countries affect women of all social classes. They are the source of much anguish, emotional and material suffering and a general symbol for unequal gender relations.

6. I do not think it is an 'either or question'. But I certainly agree that there should be more transnational links with women in the 'East' as well as 'South.' One of the most powerful arguments in countering the common accusation of "imitating the West" is to show that women in non-western countries, such as Pakistan, Nigeria and India, suffer from similar problems and engage in similar struggles.

7. To some extent, this holds true for many social movements worldwide: it is the educated middle classes that have the time and energy to change the world while the poor struggle for daily survival. However, several factors account for the fact that Arab women's movements today seem particularly to fail to mobilize women of other classes (as opposed to places like Turkey where the women's movement has been much more successful in this point on various occasions).

8. Definitely. Unfortunately many women's organizations in the Arab world follow the prevailing political culture in the region, i.e. authoritarianism and hierarchical political structures. Those women and groups that try to challenge prevail-

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ing forms and cultures of doing politics struggle on several fronts at the same time. They often spend more time trying to create democratic structures and processes than in fighting for women's rights. But, in the long run, these attempts are extremely important and positive.

9. One of the greatest challenges for members of Arab women's movements is to challenge existing gender ideologies and relations in our own families and amongst friends. Many of us, whether in the Arab world or the West, fail to practise what we 'preach'. It starts with our relationships at home as well as towards our sisters. We are often still complicit with the patriarchal system of divide and rule, and we treat other women as rivals rather than partners in a struggle.

10. All inequalities and injustices - whether on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, etc. - are linked. Women's movements anywhere in the world need to have a holistic approach to the problem of gender discrimination. At the same time you can't fight the discrimination of religious or ethnic minorities, or the oppression of poor people, without addressing gender inequalities.

11. I think we should move beyond the endless debates about terminologies. The term 'Arab feminism' is as valid and as misleading as the term 'Western feminism.'

12. Initially, the UN decade for women seems to have boosted the Arab women's movement but some of the activities were not sustainable.

13. The effects have been multifold: It has led to the professionalization of women's societies which in previous decades were either based on charity and welfare work, or political militancy. On one level, this professionalization resulted in a situation where highly qualified women – doctors, lawyers, academics, etc. – became part of women's movements. They managed to combine their professional qualifications and insights with the political struggle for women's rights. I think that this has been a positive development. At the same time, the women's movements may have lost the voluntarism and militancy of earlier decades, and now sometimes run the danger of 'careerism'. I noticed in Egypt that some women made a career out of being women activists. This is not a problem if it is merely a side effect

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of their activism, but it becomes problematic if the job becomes the goal in and of itself.

14. Repressive governments within the Arab world severely limit all forms of dissent and political expressions. They feel particularly threatened by women's movements that challenge the status quo. Radical Islamist movements and increased social conservatism also pose a great obstacle to the growth of the women's movement. Western imperialism, and particularly US foreign policy with respect to Palestine, Iraq and the so-called war on terrorism all increase anti-western sentiments in the region. Until Arab women manage to be less defensive towards the accusation of being too pro-Western, and show their critics that 1) the West is not one thing; 2) Western feminism is heterogeneous; and 3) most western feminists are critical of their own governments, their work will be very difficult.

15. It would be fantastic if there could be less rivalry and competition, and more solidarity and co-operation.

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1. It is very difficult to talk of a single, unified Arab women's movement. Women's groups in many parts of the Arab world have played quite an important role in anti-colonial, nationalist struggles and have been able to achieve certain advances, such as reforms in Personal Status Laws, employment laws (equal pay), etc. However, as has been argued in various feminist texts, and indeed by local activists, many of these groups have focused on reform rather than the complete transformation of 'the situation of women' in the various countries of the Arab world.

For example, the nascent women's movement in Sudan played a part in the anti-colonial struggle. Women's groups also played an important role in resisting the various dictatorial regimes that

dominated Sudan in 1958-64, 1969-85 and the current regime. However, the mainstream women's movement in Sudan has not adopted a transformative stand regarding gender issues, and although it has been more successful in addressing issues of socio-economic difference, it has failed to recognize differences between Sudanese women, particularly racial difference. However, there are new women's groups that are addressing these issues.

2. Charges of 'Westoxication' have been levied against active women's groups by both conservative and to some extent progressive forces in the region - including sections of active women's movements - but more so by conservative forces. I think the question to be asked is: why is this the case? Most of the time this happens for political reasons, mainly with the aim of undermining progressive feminist discourse. As I argue elsewhere, I have listened time and again to the first woman parliamentarian in Sudan arguing:

We are not feminists! For us, liberation does not mean '*alistirgal*' (behaving like men), nor promiscuity or moral laxity. Look at what feminism did in the West! Look at the photos of naked women you see on the walls of subway stations (in London)! Look at the spread of drugs, homelessness, and broken families.! Do you know why this is the case? It is because bourgeois movements have made it a point to lead women's movements astray, and their conspiracy was successful.¹

Some of these issues are actually being challenged by feminist groups in the West. In the case of Egypt, this issue has been discussed by Nadge Al-Ali in her excellent article "We are Not Feminists".²

It is important to mention here that one of the reasons of such a stand has been the tendency of some of the western feminist strands to homogenize women, 'Othering' Third World women in the process. In the case of conservative forces and politicized Islamic groups in the region, however, what is often criticized is usually a construct of what conservative forces see as 'Western feminism'.

3. I believe that there are both local and external factors that account for the spread of politicized Islam.³ Generally speaking, this is part of a resurgence of movements organized around religious,

ethnic or national identities. These movements find fertile ground in an increasingly globalized world, where they are able to mobilize religious collectivities by - amongst other things - emphasizing their difference from the 'West'. Given the fact that women are often considered as markers of national identity and cultural difference, they are often expected to commit themselves to specific notions of 'womanhood' and to reproducing ethnic and national boundaries, in a way that often undermines women's human rights. As such, I believe that it is difficult for any religion to offer a long-term basis for struggle for women's rights. However, I acknowledge the existence of Islamic feminist discourses and the fact that there are elements of religion and culture that can form a basis for promoting women's human rights; but they need to be approached critically. Groups like the 'Women's Memory Group' (Cairo) could play an important role in this.

4. This pluralism is not necessarily bad, but we need to be cautious about the transformational component of some of these activities. We need to look at why and how they are being undertaken. With high rates of illiteracy amongst women (and men) in countries like Sudan, literacy should be introduced as a basic right. This might contribute to changing the way women and women's roles are defined in society but it will not necessarily transform the 'position of women' in that society. If adult literacy is used as a form of pedagogy - feminist pedagogy - and if women who attend literacy classes are organized around a transformative gender agenda, then that is another story.

5. There should be more struggle towards changing personal status laws but this should not constitute the only activity of women's groups in the region.

6. Feminist theorizing has developed immensely in other parts of the Third World, mainly in Latin America and the Indian sub-continent. I think there are many parallels in experience between women from these parts of the world and women's groups in the Arab world. Struggles of women's movements in other parts of the Third World could inform, and also be informed by, the struggles and experiences of women's groups in the Arab region. Having said that, I believe that the West cannot be approached as a homogeneous entity, and there are theoretical currents that developed in Western countries that can be very

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useful in the context of the Arab region. I will always be indebted to Cynthia Nelson for introducing me to various feminist analytical currents (some of which developed in the 'West') that helped me better to understand and analyze some of the issues that face women in Sudan and Egypt.

7. This question depends on which groups are considered part of the 'women's movement' in any given country. In the case of Sudan, the 'official' women's movement has been traditionally dominated by educated, urban based, middle class and 'Northern'; but women have always organized to address their 'practical' needs, sometimes in ways that could almost be defined as anti-establishment. In the case of Sudan, I believe that experiences of conflict and exile have changed the nature of active women's groups. In my research amongst women's groups in exile and groups that address the needs of women in marginalized and war-affected areas in Southern and Eastern Sudan, I have noticed that women still attending literacy classes are organized and often leaders of women's groups (or branches of these groups), and they are adopting an increasingly transformative agenda.

8. I think that women's groups, like other political and social movements in the Arab world, need to be democratic and transparent. But I also think that in the case of Sudan there are groups that have been formed as a response to lack of democracy and transparency in the mainstream women's movement. In the context of the Sudanese exiled women's groups, the Cairo based 'Maan' (a women's work group), for example, undertake a democratic and non-hierarchical approach to decision-making. The motto of the Sudanese Women's Alliance is 'Empowering Sudanese Women in the Context of Democracy and Social Justice' and the group undertakes a decentralized approach to decision-making.

9. This is a very important question and complicated issue. The achievements of women's groups and women in various parts of the Arab world cannot be undermined. Women's groups have also had different levels of success in these areas depending – amongst other factors - on the dominant cultural beliefs in a society, receptiveness of the political establishment to ideas of change as well as the nature of the women's movement. However, there is a lot that remains to be done in terms of changing gender relations and practices in society and within the family.

*Unfortunately
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There is always a tendency to look at various cultures or at 'our culture' as a single entity. It is important to untie the links between elements of local cultures that are contradictory to women's human rights, and those elements that could actually be useful in promoting women's empowerment.

10. Recognizing the fact that minority or 'Other' ethnic/cultural groups exist, and that they have distinct problems would be a good starting point. In fact this is already taking place within some groups in a number of countries including Egypt and Sudan. In the case of Sudan, given the homogenizing tendencies of the post-colonial state and its attempts to impose a singular Arab and Islamic identity on a multi-racial, multi-cultural population, and the fact that this was linked to unequal distribution of wealth and power, identity questions have been central to our political experience. Mobilization and organization of women in Southern Sudan for example, has taken place in the context of struggle against oppression, linked to cultural hegemony. In the process, they have been challenging the tendency of women's groups to construct women from marginalized regions as victims who need support rather than as activists capable of organizing themselves, and adopting transformative agendas.

11. Yes; also because the term implies that there is a single Arab feminist perspective. I have addressed this in my "Arab Cultures and Human Rights: A Gender Perspective".⁴ Having said that, I believe that there are also many common issues on which Arab women's groups could work together given the socio-economic and political situation in the Arab region and its location in relation to the international system.

(12: not answered.)

13. I am particularly interested in the fact that the number of women interested and/or trained in feminist, women's and gender studies is on the increase, and that this has resulted in a slowly expanding tendency to look critically into existing groups and structures. Unfortunately academic feminists/women's activists are sometimes excluded by the mainstream women's movement and their concerns branded irrelevant. Others feel that this movement does not reflect their beliefs. However, I hope that this will lead to the development of local theoretical perspectives

that will then inform the struggle of women's movements in the region, as has been the case in other parts of the Third World.

14. The absence of democracy and respect for human rights in many parts of the region is a problem, issues of conflict, poverty and a tendency to sometimes use these very important issues to discredit feminist groups is equally important.

As is the case with other Third World women's movements, especially progressive groups that do not identify with religious or ethnic political projects, 'challenges on the ground' are often invoked: where poverty and conflict prevail, challenging prevalent gender norms is often considered a luxury. This can sometimes become a dilemma when setting our 'agendas' and priorities. How can we address complex theoretical issues when there are women around us who simply can't find food and water? Whose children cannot go to school? Who are likely to die young through maternal mortality and through TB for example? The challenge here is to integrate a concern with these issues into local feminist agendas, and to address issues of democracy, poverty and conflict through gender lenses. In the Arab region, the issue of 'universality' versus 'cultural specificity' in relation to women's human rights is an important challenge as well.

15. No less than focusing on the transformation of the current dominant 'neopatriarchal' order, to cite Hisham Sharabi. Meanwhile, I believe that it is important that we all continually sharpen our theoretical tools as well as our tools of practice.

ENDNOTES

1. Ali, Nada M. (2001) "On Being a Third World Feminist" *Eve's Back*, Manchester, winter, no.27.
2. Al-Ali, Nadjé (2000) "'We are not Feminists': Egyptian Women Activists on Feminism", in Nelson and Rouse (eds.), *Situating Globalization: Views from Egypt*. (Bielefeld: Transcript).
3. Ali, Nada M. (1995) "Women and Politicised Islam: Case of the Sudan" Paper presented at the workshop on Women's Education and Empowerment. Hamburg, UNESCO Institute for Education. An Arabic translation has been published in *Ruwaq Arabi*. CIHRS, 2001.
4. Ali, Nada M. (1995) " Arab Cultures and Human Rights: A Gender Perspective", Paper presented at the NGOs Forum, UN Fourth Women's Conference. Beijing, China.

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Translated from Arabic by Lynn Maalouf

1. I believe that Arab women do have common issues, and that there are Arab women's movements with a regional dimension that bring out both the dissimilarities between specific political contexts and regimes, as well as the social realities that Arab women live in.

In spite of the attempt by the Arab Women's Conference to unify women's efforts at the Arab national level, the conference ended up expressing the policies of ruling Arab systems with regard to the status of Arab women, instead of forming a platform for various intellectual, political and ideological trends, as well as women's mass movements.

Despite this, Arab women in general, and the women's movements, have succeeded in increasing the level of women's representation in the public sphere over the past two decades, for example with women being elected to parliament in several countries (eg. Morocco, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine). This can be considered as a step towards a stronger political participation of women. In Bahrain women succeeded in practicing their right to vote and to run as candidates for parliament. But in some countries, Kuwait for example, Arab women are still struggling for this right. They have also achieved changes in the judicial sphere (the family code) in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco. A number of Arab women's movements have also been active in a bid to influence development policies towards securing women's needs.

At the same time it is evident that an important retreat in the role of certain women's movements is taking place. For example, during the first Intifada (1987-1993), Palestinian women's organization played an outstanding role. But despite the severe suffering of Palestinian women during the second Intifada, no unified role of women's organizations has emerged. This absence weakened the role of the women's movement in resisting the invasion, which would have bolstered their role in Palestinian society, and their role in the various fields devot-

Despite the severe suffering of Palestinian women during the second Intifada, no unified role of women's organizations has emerged.

ed to strengthening the resistance of Palestinian women. The unifying tools of the women's movement during the first Intifada, such as the Higher Women's Committee (which included members of women's movements with various political affiliations, and grouped under the PLO) was a unifying tool for all women's bodies. The loss of this unified front has weakened this role in comparison to the first Intifada. The role of women's movements has also receded in Yemen, Algeria, and Sudan. One of their flaws was that they failed to build popular and organized women's movements active in all fields, in opposing discriminatory social realities as regards marriage, or education, and in drawing up programs to eradicate poverty. The work these organizations did, despite its importance, is no alternative to building a broad women's movement with branches in all sectors and levels of the population, one able to bring about real change in the stereotyped role of women. In my opinion, the Arab women's movements have not been able up to this day to make this change. They have also failed to rally the Arab women masses to support Palestinian national resistance to the Israeli occupation, or Iraqi women against the expected American invasion, or Algerian women against ongoing civil strife and violence.

Instead of having women's movements working among women, it would be best to have civil organizations offering services to women, but without minimizing the role of women's organizations, so that they do not form an alternative to organized work but play a supportive role to the larger feminist public movement.

2. The Arab women's movements are part of international women's organizations that strive to improve women's position in all societies, as well as to struggle for peace and sustainable development, and against war and globalization. The common factors between Arab women's movements and international women's organizations are many, taking into consideration the specificities of each society in its cultural, societal and economic reality. Many international women's organizations are currently active in opposing the war in Iraq and supporting the right of the Iraqi people to control their fate. Many Arab and international women's delegations have also been coming to Palestine, in a popular campaign to protect the Palestinian people, and they have been facing violence from the occupation forces.

Many international women's organizations are currently active in opposing the war in Iraq and supporting the right of the Iraqi people to control their fate.

3. The rise of religious fundamentalism in the Arab region is due first, to the lack of democracy, second to the economic situation and its social impact, in addition to the inability of ruling bodies to offer solutions for increasing poverty, rising debt to the World Bank, and the deepening of economic inequality. A third factor is the emergence of religious political resistance groups such as Hizbollah, and its heroic victory against the Israeli occupation forces in South Lebanon; and a fourth is the cultural background of Arab societies that supports religious thought.

4. In my opinion, these activities are positive and contribute to activating the role of women in society.

5. Yes, we do need to sustain the struggle for a contemporary family code. It is also necessary to sustain the gains we have made so far in legal amendments to the family code.

6. Each women's organization starts from a given reality, and works to change reality towards a better future. Many positive examples can be found in this respect, which are well adapted to the reality of our societies. We can adopt them, whether they originate in the West or the East, as long as the vision is clear about changing women's status in our societies so as to integrate them in development as a whole, so that women's issues are no longer isolated from the general effort for development and progress, and so that women occupy their role in Arab societies through society's progress towards a better future.

7. Women's movement leaders in Egypt, Jordan, and Arab North Africa are mostly from the elite and based in cities, far from the mass of women's actual situation and problems. If we aim to form a popular Arab feminist movement, we have to mobilize women from rural and marginalized areas as well as from under-represented sectors, eg. manual and clerical workers, students, and housewives.

8. Fostering democracy in Arab women's movements would enable them to rid themselves of their flaws and to achieve more. Today, these movements must absorb democracy into their internal life so that they can have more impact on their societies, and gain the power to bring about democratic change in their societies.

9. I believe that the Arab women's movement needs to deploy intensive efforts towards changing the understanding of gender roles in our society.

(10: not answered)

11. It is hard to speak of 'the Arab women's movement' in the absence of a framework unifying women's efforts at the Arab level. I believe that all Arab women's movements are linked by a pan-Arab element, ie. a common language, common interests, a common culture.

12. International organizations that address women's issues contribute to translating the resolutions of international conferences into local structures and programs aimed at improving the situation of Arab women. I believe that these international organizations have positive effects on women's status.

13. All research related to the status of women helps in the creation of programs and plans aimed at meeting the needs of women in all sectors. They should be focused on indicators that arm every Arab women's movement, regardless of the direction it is taking. If these research institutes do not coordinate, they will not serve the interests of the women's movements, especially in regard to meeting the policies of donor countries. This will be more the case if they focus on issues that are not directly linked to the needs and concerns of the feminist movements. From here comes the fear that there are too many research institutes, and that they are being formed solely with the aim of receiving donations.

(14: not answered)

15. The main aim should be to bring change that would foster democracy within Arab women's movements, so as to transform them into influential social movements.

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Translated from French by Lynn Maalouf

1. It is hard to talk about a unified and homogeneous Arab feminist movement, since there are important differences between Arab societies (for example, between Tunisia and Saudi Arabia). There are many countries where this movement is just emerging, and other societies where this movement does not even exist.

Women's gains in the Arab world are the result of a silent revolution. Through education and work, they have managed to achieve social visibility and a place in the media. In fact, the feminist movement comes as a result of these social and economic changes. The need to call for women's specific interests, to change women's conditions, and to organize in groups, results from the will of educated women to liberate themselves from the tutelage of their families. The most significant achievement of the Arab women's movement is to have produced the 'woman issue' as a political and ideological factor that other social and political actors have to take into consideration, and not neglect.

The worst failure is that the Arab feminist movement has not yet managed to become a political actor per se, with a significant bargaining power compared with other social and official forces. It does not at the present time have the power to impact decisions and laws regarding women. Algerian women activists, for example, have been struggling for nearly 20 years to bring about a change in the family code, without having achieved any results so far.

2. Until the opposite is proved, the Arab feminist movement is indeed influenced by Western feminism. But how could it be otherwise? This is not a flaw. After all, no one has ever blamed the Arab nationalist, socialist and unionist movements for coming under Western influence. Western feminism is the only model that Arab women have so far. They have no other identifications or models in the sense of a struggle for equality and absolute liberation of women regarding their choices in their daily lives. Is there a 'Third Worldist' Arab feminist movement efficacious and strong enough for other women to identify themselves with? Is this accusation justified? This is not an accusation that is applicable to feminism only, as the westernization of societies goes beyond the women's movement. It is a global process that started with colonialism. Women are not the ones who imported it. So these accusations do not stand. The best response is to go on struggling for women's

The Arab feminist movement has not yet managed to become a political actor per se.

basic rights (education, work, judicial and civil equality, contraception, etc.), by choosing the means that are best adapted to the Arab societies. If the goals of Western feminism and those of Arab feminism come together, the means and ways towards achieving these goals have to be adapted to specific societies. It is not possible only to emulate the struggle methods that succeeded in another historical context. We have to think based on the realities of the Arab world.

3. This is a complex question. Many researchers are trying to find the answer, without having so far offered convincing explanations. One can briefly list some reasons: the failure of developmental models chosen after independence (unemployment, poverty, the housing crisis, the accumulation of problems), the frustrations linked to the Palestinian problem, and the status of religion in our societies. The socio-economic situation offers favorable ground to all forms of messianism, among them Islamic fundamentalism. All this contributes to encouraging extremism among the young, who represent the majority in Arab societies.

Can religion serve as a basis for women's struggle? Frankly, I don't know, but we may suppose that women with a continually deepening understanding of Islam will be able to use it to demand certain rights contained in the Qur'an, but from which they do not benefit today (for example, inheritance in those regions where women are excluded through customary laws in contradiction with the *Shari'a*).

Women who form part of Islamic movements described as moderate are quite combative: the Movement for Society and Peace had a woman elected to the (Algerian) National Assembly, and the Al-Islah movement also has a woman who was elected to the new Assembly (2002). They are also very numerous in student organizations, and quite dynamic.

Their divergence from secular feminists mainly relates to the status of women in the family, and to the family code. Islamist women must manage the contradiction between their duty as believers (duty towards God, and fidelity to precepts concerning, for example, the veil and polygamy), and their rights as citizens in a secularizing society - not an easy matter. But if any change is to occur in religion, it will most likely come from women.

4. Yes, absolutely. It is necessary to take into

The elites are primarily concerned with their own equality, and the equality of their status with men, and not with solutions to social problems experienced by women of the masses ...

consideration the situation of rural women, as well as working women and women at home. They are the basis of the movement in the long-term. All these activities give social visibility to women's movements, and are necessary to convince women. Their problems are unfortunately sometimes ignored by the women elites.

5. More than ever! The family codes are unjust towards women, and are in contradiction with constitutions (as is the case in Algeria). Only women who have been deeply wronged by these discriminatory codes can develop the struggle for their rights.

6. Yes. Priority should be given to reinforcing relations among feminists in the Arab world, and to extending them to the rest of the Muslim world. For example, the greatest Arab feminists are not well known by generations of franco-phone women in North Africa: their writings are not available in French, and not found in libraries; and their struggles are not known by the women's movements. Problems are common to these societies and often differ from problems in Western societies. These societies are all dominated economically and culturally. Women would gain by knowing about the experiences of women living in Islamic societies, and by adapting their struggles to the means and conditions of these societies. The experience of feminist movements in the Western world is very rich, but it cannot be imported as it is, without discernment. After all, isn't it the same problem with development?

7. The women elites remain in spite of everything very distant from the problems and concerns of women of the 'people'. Their discourse is often one targeted towards foreign audiences, and seldom addressed to the mass of women (rural women, workers, housewives). This prevents women of the masses from identifying with these leaders. The elites are primarily concerned with their own equality, and the equality of their status with men, and not with solutions to social problems experienced by women of the masses - poverty, school failure, lack of housing. The women elites think as individuals, but the women of the 'people' think first as mothers of families. We also remember that women lack the time and freedom to struggle. Finally, the women's movements have not obtained sufficiently impressive results to serve as an example. In a situation of internal conflict

for example, women are divided along lines based in events: during the conflict in Algeria, many mothers or wives of terrorists suffered ostracism or injustices without any reaction from the women's movements. The movement of mothers of the 'disappeared' is not supported by other women's movements because it is suspected of being close to certain political movements with which these women's movements do not agree.

8. Certainly. Women's groups reproduce the hierarchies and bureaucratic forms of organization within their movements. Leadership conflicts often lead to splits. Instead of having one large unified movement (even if with autonomous structures), we find ourselves with small groups of women having no real impact, and prey to endless internal divisions.

9. It's not so much the feminist movements, it is individual women who have carried out mini-revolutions in their families from the moment when they started studying and working. This has contributed to changing family relations. Yet have these relations really changed? Many women have succeeded in having a professional life, but at the expense of their family life. They have not found either the help or the necessary understanding to lead both at the same time. Only women are submitted to these painful choices. So what has changed?

10. If feminist movements are democratic, they should favor the expression of all citizens (majority and minority), and should be ready to listen to problems of women within all social groups, since language is not a barrier between women. But movements within these minorities are often monopolized by men, and women serve as a springboard only for the global project – nationalist or regional. Women don't dare assert themselves outside the group for fear of being rejected by the community.

11. This question seems to me a bit ambiguous. On the contrary, we should keep the term 'feminism' to denote women's struggle for their rights and the defense of their interests. When we talk about Arab syndicalism, socialism or liberalism, etc, no one thinks of not using it.

12. It is impossible to measure precisely. At least it has allowed us to recognize international resolutions in favor of women. This is why Algeria

ratified CEDAW (Copenhagen) in 1996. But we have to remember that eight Arab countries have not ratified this convention. Besides this, I don't really see any impact on the daily situation of women.

13. Has there been a feminist movement that was not guided by intellectuals and that succeeded? The leaders of feminist movements are often intellectuals. This new fact should contribute to increasing the research done on women's conditions and to developing knowledge of their different situations. To this effect, we should encourage the development of laboratories of research on women's issues, sociological enquiries, etc. This element of knowledge should help in gaining a better understanding of what women really want.

14. The obstacles are inherent in the societies in which women evolve and in women themselves. Our societies need democracy and freedom in order to evolve. As for women, they must overcome an age-old fear to learn to organize themselves and struggle for their rights. This is not really the case today.

15. I am not a specialist in predicting the future. The Arab feminist movements have no future outside pluralism and democracy. This is a meeting ground. The Algerian experience has proved it in the course of a decade of violence. Violence has been a powerful brake on the development of the feminist movement which really started organizing from 1989. Everything was put on hold following the events, and the women's movement drew back in its claims for women's rights. Peace and democracy are factors that would allow the movement to build itself a bit more, and to deepen its claims.

If we could change one element in this situation, it would be in the functioning of these organizations. Women's organizations must prove their rejection of the authoritarianism that is within them, and function in a democratic manner. For this to happen, one has to hope for and imagine a functioning based on the participation of the greatest number of activists, and not at the top of the hierarchy only. If organizations do not pay attention to their whole membership, then they will nurture the indifference of the majority, and become empty shells.

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Only women who have been deeply wronged by these discriminatory family codes can develop the struggle for their rights.

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Translated from Arabic by Lynn Maalouf

1. That the voice of women, their concerns and ideas are now in the forefront of the public sphere; and that the hidden potentialities of women have been discovered beyond imagination, beyond what the women's movement anticipated. Another great achievement has been that women are allowed to join the public sphere, starting with education and going on to politics.

Their greatest failure is the fact that they have not been able to find a culturally relevant discourse concerning the private sphere, and how to empower women 'within' it, not 'against' it. As a key concept for describing and understanding Arab family relations and structures of power and empowerment, 'patriarchy' is not appropriate. Yet the Arab women's movement has failed to introduce another conceptual frame of analysis.

2. My position is that this is the way the Arab women's movement has been and is portrayed. But there are other histories, and Islamist women and men were always a part of the movement. If we review history we can see this. Of course there were those who saw Islam as a challenge, but I claim they were a small minority. Even Qassem Amin is now being re-read, and the Islamic component of his ideas recovered. We should avoid the ideological classifications and over-politicization of stances that have dominated this debate for so long.

3. My answer is short and affirmative: I do not see any spread of fundamentalism in the negative sense. These trends are strong but they are NOT spreading. I see a mainstream that is re-discovering the liberational potential of Islam. And I see Islam as susceptible — like any other religion or frame of reference — to being abused at times by certain trends. But the issue for me is clear: religion is about dignity and equality, and Islam is the basis of Arab culture and women's liberation.

4. I celebrate pluralism. So I ask you, where is the problem? Women have the right to choose

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which avenue of participation they would like to join, and the road should be open. On the contrary I do not think putting all women on one path is useful. We realize justice through participation, not by talking about liberation.

5. Yes, but towards more Islamization; and here I mean towards greater justice. It is a must to do proper professional *ijtihad*, and this is one part of a wider movement for religious reformation that actually seeks the understanding of the holy text anew, towards a more authentic view of the Islamic *Shari'a*, one that goes beyond inherited *fiqh* without either attacking it or ignoring its social contributions throughout history. This should aim at fostering the family, not destroying it.

6. Yes. But the question is on what basis? If the basis of our approach is Western secular feminism then we would just be spreading and fostering Western feminism. I think we should build on a mutual Islamic identity; or the common potential of the progressive role of religions in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. We need to transpose our modes of thinking beyond the polarization that has dominated for the past century, and come together to appreciate our heritage, religious identity, and different ideologies, cultures and ideas. We are still very divided from other women of the East, and the new factor that has come into the picture is that states are building bridges with secular feminism, and against Islamic voices of liberation. The sad truth is that attacking religion has become their mutual objective, at the price of a withering away of democratic concerns.

7. What has stopped the spread of this struggle is precisely an alien discourse that marginalizes religion or attacks it as only a 'patriarchal' mode of culture.

8. Without doubt the Arab women's movement should adopt more democratic structures and methods. Of course. But this can only happen if they are ready for democratic change that includes the whole society, and for cooperation with mainstream Islamic movements that are sometimes more democratic than progressive voices and circles.

9. Sometimes they have destroyed them, and this is what has deprived them of credibility in many

cases. I can tell you that many Islamists are more successful in this matter, and hence are more credible even if they are not as progressive or revolutionary as the secularists. There are really many paradoxes here.

10. Here again Islam has been a unifying factor. If you put it aside you will have real problems addressing those minorities.

11. Yes.

12. More globalization, more secularization, more westernization - this is saddening. On the other hand the Islamist contributions allowed for a real silent reform on many issues, and this was a benefit

13. I cannot say, I cannot really judge.

14. The greatest obstacles to development of the Arab women's movements in my view are: political divisions; Western funding of specific agendas; and political authoritarianism.

15. Give Islam more weight, give democracy more importance, and give the silent majority of women more opportunity and attention.

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1. The Arab women's movement cannot be separated from political movements and social liberation movements. Egypt was in the lead, having started its movement towards modernization in the 19th century, earlier than any other Arab country. Then other countries followed suit. Women's development in the Gulf states, for example, started at the end of the 1920s, when the first public school for girls was established in Bahrain in 1928. However, there was no women's movement in the Gulf region until the '50s when the first women's society was established; in the '60s and '70s, women joined underground political parties in Bahrain and started their movement within their ranks.

In my view, the greatest achievement of the women's movement in all Arab countries took place in Tunisia, in 1956, when President of the Republic Habib Bourguiba granted Tunisian women the most advanced personal status law in the region. The women's movement in Tunisia was given a push forward, and women at large benefited from this law.

Their greatest failure can be linked to the failure of Arab political regimes to modernize, especially in countries where women's associations became part of the political establishment.

2. Most Arab women's movement leaders were either educated in the West, mainly in the US, France and England; or even if educated in their own countries they were influenced by Western thinking. As a consequence, they borrowed from the experience of Western women. But at the same time, Arab women never forgot their cultural background and the Islamic teachings which are part of their culture. In my opinion, borrowing from Western ideas does not harm the women's movements; on the contrary, it adds to them and enriches the experience of those who are involved in developing them, whether men or women.

3. Religious revivalism and religious reform started at the end of the 19th century when many religious scholars such as Jamaluddin Al-Afghani, Mohammad Abdo and Rifa'a at-Tahtawi were exposed to Western ideas, and started questioning certain religious practices in what we consider today as a beginning of religious reform. With the defeat of the Arabs in the 1967 war, combined with the dictatorship of the Arab regimes, individual men and women had nowhere to go except to their own culture and roots, which in this case is Islam. Arab regimes and the West encouraged this movement. It was in the interests of the West to fight the atheists (the Soviet Union), especially in Afghanistan. To me there is no contradiction between modernity and the practice of Islamic rituals, or women wearing the *hijab*, as long as this does not keep them from attaining education and employment.

Whether or not Islam can offer a long-term basis for struggle for women's rights depends on individual Muslim countries, and the pace of development that each has reached. For example Turkey, a Muslim country, has recently passed a Personal Status law similar to any in Europe,

Women's movements are an essential part of civil society, which is considered the pillar of democracy.

Munira Fakhro

whereas countries such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain or Yemen need to use various *hadiths* or *Qur'anic* verses to convince the people that Islam offers gender equality.

In addition, the Muslim world includes non-Arab Muslim countries such as Turkey, Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan. These countries have gone far in Islamic interpretation to make Islam more compatible with modernity. In the Arab world, many scholars such as Fatima Mernissi and Farida Al-Banani have written books to explain that Islamic teachings include many modern elements, and do not contradict human rights. Islam can indeed offer a long-term basis for the struggle for women's rights. We must remember that the UN charter calls for gender equality, and that all Arab and Muslim countries, as members of the UN, have to abide by its agreements, including the Prevention of Violence Against Women Agreement.

4. Arab women's movements need to undertake all these activities so as to reach all groups in society. Such activities will help them develop into grass-roots organizations. Women activists should work with such groups politically to have a wider base from which to be elected to parliament and reach legislative power. Being a member of parliament is in itself an achievement, opening many doors to women leaders such as making laws that serve women and the family.

5. Indeed yes. Women have to exert more effort to achieve modern family laws. At present this varies between countries: for example Tunisia has the most advanced family law in the Arab world, while most of the Gulf states still have no family law at all, except for Kuwait, which follows the *Shari'a* and individual judges. Many conservative elements in Arab societies are fighting back to block any reforms regarding women and the codification or reform of family law.

6. I support the idea of forming strong ties and relations with different women's movements all over the world, especially those of the Muslim world. Islam covers a vast geographical area with a population of more than one billion people. Many Muslim countries have made advances in issuing progressive family laws, eg. Turkey. In Malaysia, many women's organizations, for example the Sisters in Islam Organization, have gone further, publishing books dealing with *ijtihad* and *fiqh*. Since India is a secular country,

'Arab feminism' varies in degree, not in kind, according to the pace of development in each individual country.

Muslim women there are ruled by the same civil code that governs all citizens. While Arab women's movements should look towards other Muslim countries, they also should have strong ties with Western women's movements and international human rights movements, so as to adopt laws suited to modernity.

7. Women from other classes of society are seeking equality too, especially when they face divorce without being granted any alimony or the custody of their children. They understand equality as a part of what Islam calls for. For that reason, the Arab women's movements should go back to the essence of Islam, and find those elements that call for equality and justice.

8. Women's movements are an essential part of civil society, which is considered the pillar of democracy. Through non-governmental organizations individuals learn how to practice democracy, through the election of board members, and through the daily practice of debate and transparency. It is true that many Arab women's organizations are characterized by non-accountability and authoritarianism. However, we are witnessing today an improvement in handling the affairs of NGOs in most parts of the Arab world, because of a growing individual awareness of international developments. Modern technologies such as Internet used by Arab organizations to communicate with each other have helped to spread such values.

9. Absolutely not. The women's movements have a long way to go, they need to modernize and communicate with international organizations that have similar goals and values. They need to create new programs for young people, and to attract different segments of society. In addition, they should put more effort into introducing gender equality into the curriculum of all schools to reach the new generation and change their attitudes and values.

10. Often described as a 'cultural mosaic', the Arab world contains many groups of different ethnicity, religion, and sect. Non-Arab minorities need to preserve their own culture and language. At the same time they need to learn Arabic since they are citizens of Arab states, and exposed to Arab culture. The best solution for them is to learn both languages: their 'mother tongue' and Arabic. The Kurds in Northern Iraq are bilingual, since the Kurdish language is part

of the official school curriculum. Algerian Berbers are calling for a similar solution. Since the UN's charter upholds the rights of minorities, it may eventually pressure countries to treat minorities as equal citizens.

11. Although Arab countries are not politically unified, the term 'Arab world' is common usage everywhere. 'Arab feminism' varies in degree, not in kind, according to the pace of development in each individual country. The Arab Human Development Report (2002), published by the UNDP, stresses the fact that Arab women suffer from many kinds of discrimination, including in the field of education, with nearly 60 million women illiterate. I believe that we should not avoid the term 'Arab feminism' because, whether we like or not, the world looks at us as one entity.

12. The UN Decade for Women has helped the Arab women's movement to a great extent. International conferences have strengthened women's movements in general, starting from the first conference held in Mexico (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), Beijing (1995), and Beijing+5 (New York, 2000). All those conferences have stressed gender equality. Many Arab women's organizations as well as individuals took part in these conferences. They learned a great deal from them, such as techniques of successful organization. They used UN recommendations as guidance in their local projects, and on how to lobby governments on women's issues such as reforming family law.

13. It is true that the number of women professionals and scholars in the Arab region is expanding, but the number of illiterate women is also increasing. As a consequence, Arab society is being polarized between those who are pushing for modernity and gender equality, and those who oppose any change in the status quo. This situation creates a dilemma among professionals and scholars. However they are trying to organize their efforts to represent the situation of women, and to overcome the many obstacles facing women through conducting research.

14. There are two main obstacles: the first is the authoritarian regimes that dominate the majority of Arab countries; the second is the extremist conservative movements which create more terror than the regimes. These two forces prevent Arab liberal movements from attaining any kind of reform.

15. To create a more democratic atmosphere in the women's organizations would be my first priority. Then to change some old faces who have stayed at the top of their organizations for decades, and to replace them with new, capable women. This also depends on the general situation in each individual country. As I said earlier, the authoritarian regimes will resist any change, and are apprehensive of the 'domino effect' that might occur if reform is introduced in any sector, leading to the collapse of the whole regime.

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Translated from Arabic by Lynn Maalouf

It is true that the number of women professionals and scholars in the Arab region is expanding, but the number of illiterate women is also increasing.

1. I believe that women's groups in the Arab world have not yet reached the point of forming a movement in its full sense; at this point, they are still local groups that do not have a unified approach, and do not agree on specific demands or even specific goals. They have not benefited from previous experiences, except in taking the name 'movement' from these formations. I believe that this is the greatest failure of the Arab women's movements so far. There are several other problems, especially with regards to the leaderships of women's groups, some of whom are members of Arab governments. These flaws will last as long as the way that Arab governments deal with their societies, including women's organizations, remains unchanged.

2. This accusation is not directed only at women's movements but at all human rights' organizations that have emerged in Arab countries, because of their great reliance on the experiences of other people, including in the West. This accusation is justified in that their concepts and methods are copied from others as is, without integrating them into the specificities of their societies' cultures. The leaders of these movements are responsible for adapting these principles to those of their societies, and for translating them into local terminology so as not to arouse fear, and so that we can achieve the results we all aim at, namely equality, justice, security, safety and democracy for all. If we cannot work with these

Suad el-Geddy

methods, then these have to be adapted to each society without hindering the goals, which are the claims of all sectors of society.

3. The rise of Islamic and political fundamentalisms stems from various factors, including repression, containment, backwardness, ignorance, poverty, and non-respect for dissenting views: in other words, the lack of democracy as a way of addressing a unified society. It is no surprise that all Arab countries should suffer from a rising wave of fundamentalism, because these societies do not enjoy a real democracy. This fundamentalist rise is detrimental not only to women's organizations but affects society as a whole, threatening to have a negative impact on all those who call for rights and for a dignified life, because they do not trust dissenting opinions, whether of men or women or any social sector. As for religions in general, there are thinkers who can adapt the notions and meanings of religion to the variables of life in such a way that they do not represent an obstacle to society, including to women. But if we continue to follow antiquated notions unadapted to our age, devised by thinkers of another age, this is detrimental to society in general, and to women in particular. In Islam for example, an issue that can be debated is any related to jurisprudence. Only the basics that relate to man's relation to God are not debatable. I believe that if there are religious clerics who are knowledgeable and experienced, and who understand the demands of our age, they could introduce positive changes for human rights in general, and for women's rights. So we should interact with such people, and attract them to the cause of women's rights.

4. The variety of women's activities is a positive thing in itself. It would be a mistake, however, not to distinguish between this kind of work, and the women's movement in general. It is good that women are participating in social and developmental efforts but we should not identify the women's movement with these efforts. The women's movement should have a prominent role, based on a specific ideology, to which all women adhere, and from which they develop their demands to the local and international community, and work towards securing these demands through unified means. This is because the women's movement should aim at introducing positive change in culture, policies and direc-

It is good that women are participating in social and developmental efforts but we should not identify the women's movement with these efforts.

tions that are detrimental to women and their rights. The women's movement cannot be limited to such activities.

5. We still need, and will continue to need, a lot of struggle to amend the family code and personal status code, as well as all laws that were drawn up in the past and do not accord with the spirit of the present age, using new methods. Whatever means and resources are available have to be used. As for those that are not available, we should work to make them available.

6. We need to learn from the experiences of the East, the West, and of other women - not import and imitate them as they are. We have to make use of the experience of those women who have moved ahead of us in their struggle to secure their rights, so that we take from their experience what we can use in our Arab society. We could thereby attract supporters, instead of opponents who take the pretext that we are imitating the West or the East. So the issue is not the source of experience. Rather the problem lies in ourselves, that we have not been able to use these experiences for the benefit of our own struggle.

7. This was one of the causes of failure of past women's movements that died without any achievements at the popular level. These movements relied on educated women, and restricted the debate on women's rights to educated circles, as if these rights that were being fought for concerned only educated women, and this is why the ideas were those of the educated class exclusively. This is why the movement never involved any women beyond the elite. I am one of those who call for the need to reach all women, especially because we in the Arab world have a majority of illiterate and rural women, and nothing prevents us from assimilating rural and non-educated women into women's movements, so that they will increase trust in their role in society, and work for equality and justice for all sectors of society.

8. Yes, this is true. We see a lot of women's organizations run by women who were elected when these organizations were first founded, and who have remained presidents for an unlimited term. This is due to the lack of awareness about the need for true democracy in the Arab countries, which has its effects on these organizations, as well as other civil society organizations. Also,

these leaders do not see the need to change leaderships on a regular basis.

9. No, we don't see any real efforts for change, whether at the level of gender roles, or at the level of family or society. This is partly due to the lack of awareness and full understanding of these notions on the part of the women who lead the organizations, so that these notions remain limited to certain sectors of society, and fail to reach to a majority. It is also due to the use of a Western terminology that is not adapted to a society that from the beginning is resistant to anything Western. The leaders of women's organizations need to work on this, without altering the basics of the issue, however.

10. The minorities in the Arab world that do not use the Arabic language are subject to the culture they live in. The important thing is that those like women, who are demanding their rights and freedoms, should extend their call to all sectors of society, because what is at issue are rights that cannot be more for some than for others. I don't think that there are rights specific to Arabic-speaking individuals and others for those who don't speak Arabic, so we have to respect human rights and the call for equality and justice.

11. There is nothing wrong in having women in the Arab world create a movement of their own. There is nothing shameful in it. What would be shameful would be to work for women's interests alone, not for society as a whole. We cannot call for rights and for change for women only, without looking at society, because it is society that is responsible for this lack of freedoms and rights. The Arab women's movement needs to adopt broad social rights in their call for justice, equality, safety and security; only then can it attract supporters from all sectors of society.

12. The United Nations and its agencies have generated much positive change for women around the world, including women in the Arab world. The problem lies in the Arab governments who fail to carry out the international conventions and resolutions. There is a need to develop the United Nations' resources for greater effectiveness, and force the states that refuse to implement these conventions to respect them.

13. The increasing number of women researchers and experts in the Arab world is a natural result of the leap in education. But these researchers can

only have an impact on the women's movement if they make the same demands. These women have to be assimilated into these organizations, which can only happen if the movements adopt the demands of women in all sectors. We cannot oblige experts and researchers to work in women's movements if they feel no allegiance to them, so the question is how to create feelings of allegiance among these women.

14. We can classify the challenges and obstacles as following: First, internal obstacles within the movement such as isolation and fear of using others' experiences, and the inability of women leaders to accompany change and progress; the lack of a clear vision and goals, and consequently the lack of clarity about the work to be done. There is a confusion prevailing in the activities of organizations that call themselves a movement.

Second, external obstacles: society is not ready to accept the women's movements' demands; the lack of true democracy in Arab societies; the spread of religious fanaticism and political radicalism; and male-dominated societies that accept no relinquishing of their privileges.

15. If I were able to change one factor, I would work first on developing a clear vision and clear goals for the women's movements, so that women's demands are linked to, and unified with, the demands of society as a whole, that is justice, equality, safety and security.

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1. In my view the greatest achievement so far has been the space taken by women in the public sphere. The greatest failure has been women's lesser empowerment in the private sphere, where they continue to be socially and legally under the control of men.

2. This charge is largely justified in my view for both sides: concerning the conservatives forces because they put all their efforts into fighting radical Western feminism, and place all western women's movement in one basket; and concern-

The United Nations and its agencies have generated much positive change for women around the world.

Raufah Hassan

ing the Arab women's movements because they spend more time on defending themselves and trying to prove their independence of them. The best response should be in the recognition of similarities and differences wherever they may apply. It's important to create linkages with supporting forces inside our societies, as well as with outsiders, whether Westerners or from other parts of the world.

3. Several factors have led to the spread of religious fundamentalism in the Arab region, among them the failure of state-directed development. Equally important is the unresolved conflict in the Middle East, in addition to the support of the United States and some Arab governments for the Islamic groups during the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Religious revivalism does not really threaten the Arab women's movements — on the contrary, it has put back in the front line of discussion women's main objectives, equality in both public and private spheres, particularly among lower middle class women. The experience of women in Iran and Sudan make us believe that some of women's rights can be achieved through advanced understanding of the dynamics of religion interacting with other social and economic factors.

4. If the old ways did not give the desired results, new ways will do no harm. Good or bad is a value that differs according to the position one takes. In my view this fragmentation is a reflection of today's social reality in the region more than any thing else.

5. Laws have never brought solutions for women in the region. They change too easily in accordance with the mentalities of governing forces. New Arab women's movements will lead a new struggle.

6. The new Arab women's movements do not look to the West for models. The West is led now by the United States, which is not a heaven for women rights. The old women's movement is no longer a force able to play a leading role in the region. Other universal forces beyond the division West and East are emerging to take their place, and to find new ways and theories to solve their problems.

7. The new Arab women's movements are mainly lead by educated urban women from the lower classes, unlike the old movement leader-

The old women's movement is no longer a force able to play a leading role in the region.

ship that came from the upper and upper middle classes. The new movement is still in process of formation.

8. Yes, they should be more democratic in both structures and practices.

9. Very few have been able to do so.

10. The policy of the women's movement toward non-Arabic speaking minorities has been different according to the status of the minority. Minorities linked to Europe in nationality or religion have been involved in women's movements in some countries; minorities of African origin have not been involved in most cases. The old Arab women's movement cannot change its attitude in this matter, while the new movement is not clear yet.

11. Problems of terminology will continue no matter what term we are using. But the term 'feminism' is widely contested in the region and is more misleading than 'Arab women'.

12. It has helped in putting the issue of women on the political agendas of states.

13. The expansion of women professionals and scholars has not so far had a clear effect on the women's movements, but the development of the new women's movement is the direct result of this rapid expansion. Its full results will come in the near future when they find their own voice and way.

14. The greatest obstacles to the growth and development of the movement today is, first, the total confusion between old and new methods of approaching women's issues; and second, not having answers to the problems of every day life.

15. I would have them involve men in every institution possible, bring them into the movement, and not to be alone.

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1. Women's movements' achievements vary from one Arab country to the other. However, I would

say that in general there has been an increase in Arab women's awareness about their rights and issues. On many occasions, certain movements in certain countries forced governments to take action and make some change in favor of women, even though it was not always enough. One example is Egypt. Many women's groups and individuals united their efforts with the government to fight the harmful practice of female circumcision. Although government statistics show that the number of people resorting to this practice has remained unchanged since recording first began, still the issue has been brought to the surface in all its aspects, and people are talking about it. The same happened with 'crimes of honor' in Jordan. Women's groups and individuals worked hard at one point in time to press the government to take action against these killings and to change the laws that offer leniency to killers. Many changes resulted, such as open discussion of a once taboo issue, changing some laws, and a proposal to establish a women's shelter. Amendments in the Civil and Personal laws were achieved in Egypt and Jordan, guaranteeing some measure of justice to women. The *khula'* law was introduced in both countries, and ended the sufferings of women who spent countless years in courts fighting for a divorce that they could not get. In Yemen, even though the women's movement was relatively new and commanded few resources, yet they held several workshops to tackle domestic violence, and worked on rehabilitating female prisoners.

Several women's organizations have devoted their work to helping women prisoners, and exposing the violence which they allegedly suffer from prison officials. They also collect donations to provide women prisoners with basic needs lacking in prisons, and have launched several campaigns exposing violence against women, and to fight the 'house of obedience' (*beit at-ta'a*). The movement succeeded in temporarily freezing the application of the 'house of obedience' custom after winning the support of the Yemeni president. However some Yemeni deputies later managed to revive the issue and passed a law in parliament without the knowledge of the women's movement. Activists blamed this on the absence of women deputies in the Lower House.

Lebanese women's organizations have also focused much of their work on violence against women, and have succeeded in changing some

of the laws that relate to violence against women, especially honor crimes.

However, I would say that the inconsistency of the women's movement in some major issues has reflected negatively on them and on their efforts. I perceive that some women's and other organization's work is 'seasonal' and lacks persistence and continuity. Also many organizations lack the skill, or maybe the concern, to keep track of what politicians promise women and what they actually do. Politicians make glowing promises to women that they will call for gender equality, improve women's lives and fight against discrimination, but once they reach office their promises remain ink on paper. Other factors that hold back the women's movements include poverty, illiteracy and unemployment in the Arab world in general, and among women in particular. I believe that the absence or low percentage of women in Arab legislative bodies, when they exist, and women's slight presence in decision-making positions, are also factors that work against women.

2. Of course this charge is not justified. Conservatives in all Arab countries use this excuse to abort any improvement or change in favor of women, so as to perpetuate their control over women in their societies. Conservatives simply do not want to lose power, and they like exercising it over women. This is why they fight and resist change - they are afraid of losing power.

The best response is for the women's movements to close their ears, and continue with what they believe is the right thing to do.

3. I believe the factors are closely related to people's financial and social situation. Poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and inadequate knowledge of the true teachings of religion play a major role in spreading fundamentalisms in all religions. Oppressive regimes and the media in some countries contribute to this phenomenon by manipulating what people see, and preventing them from expressing their feelings and thoughts, or taking their own decisions. Fundamentalisms do indeed threaten the women's movement because many extremist religious leaders claim that its leaders are backed by the West, and that they are going against the teaching of religion. In some instances they issue rulings that have no connection whatsoever with what a religion really says. They manage to convince people that women's movements

I perceive that some women's and other organization's work is 'seasonal' and lacks persistence and continuity.

Rana Ahmed Hussein:

are really working against their societies because they are adopting Western ideas.

I believe that all religions can make positive contributions to the advancement of women's status and rights if discourse is controlled by moderate religious leaders, who would not twist religion to benefit their interests instead of the general interest.

4. I believe this work is very important and needs to be carried out consistently. As I said before, these services are badly needed in some parts of the Arab world, especially in rural and impoverished areas where women need most help. I noticed that most social work is concentrated in the cities.

5. Of course, because most family laws - they have different names in different Arab countries - contain many clauses that are discriminatory, and that I feel are meant to control and restrict women. It is very important for women to continue to concentrate on this area because more equal laws would mean more freedom for women and less oppression. This would ensure women's better status, and earn them more respect in their families and communities. Without this they will always be looked at by their families as the weaker side of the family, and this is not good for women's mentality, self-image and status, whether in their family or in society at large.

6. I believe it is very important for the Arab women's movement to establish relations with women's movements worldwide, because the women of each country have a different experience, and a different way to deal with their problems. It is very important to examine stories of success and failure in different societies, and to learn from their experiences for their own future work.

7. This is a general judgment. In some countries women in urban areas are major players in their communities. The problem is, of course, lack of resources. Women who have more resources have better opportunities in life, eg. better education, and more freedom to travel and be exposed to other cultures and experiences.

8. Of course. This has been part of the problem for the Arab women's movement in general. Many leaders refuse to let go of their positions, and remain at their posts for the longest time. If they ever happen to lose a post, they shift to

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another one at another organization, or start a new organization so as to remain in charge. As I said before, this restricts diversity within organizations, and restricts opportunities and ideas to a single person. We only need look at our situation in the Arab world, and see how far have we gone as nations, to know that this policy of non-elected and non-accountable leaders will not take us very far.

9. Women's movements have worked on this issue, but the problem is that there is so much that needs to be changed in laws and social attitudes towards women. In addition, some women's organizations had other priorities. I know of many Arab women activists and Arab families in general who paid attention to this problem, and are bringing up their daughters and sons on an equal basis. Of course the number is not large, but this is a good start.

10. The women's movements should be sensitive to all minorities within their country, because these share the same society, and may need help or assistance, but have no channel to express their demands. Any individual who lives in any society should be treated as a citizen of that society.

12. I believe that UN agencies, especially UNIFEM, have played a vital role in developing Arab women's societies, exposing many of the problems they face, and helping them in various ways. These agencies have conducted valuable research and studies, and come up with important findings that can be used to prove certain arguments. They have also conducted programs in remote areas, in Jordan, Yemen and Morocco, to empower women economically, and helped raise their legal awareness. But I believe that these organizations, with the resources they have, can contribute more to our societies, and I know that they realize this and are working towards achieving it.

13. I believe this increase has been one of the pillars of the women's movement. The visible activities and positive presence of these professionals and scholars has made many young women adopt them as role models, and encouraged them to work hard on themselves to be as successful and effective as these women are.

14. I believe poverty, illiteracy and unemployment among women are some of the main obstacles. Women's absence from the political

scene also prevents them from taking part in the decision-making process. I also feel that many women do not believe in themselves or in other women, and are blocking the path of women's development as well as their own. We also see the same faces appearing in gatherings and conferences over and over. New blood needs to be pumped into the women's movement in order for new leaders to carry the message to their communities, and to younger generations.

Another obstacle, as I see it, is that work is focused on developing women and their status. The women's groups mostly neglect to work with men and raise their awareness of the importance of women's issues, and to see women as their partners instead of their competitors.

15. Electing the leaders of women's societies and NGOs and liberating them from some of the unnecessary bureaucracies they are currently adopting.

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Translated from Arabic by Lynn Maalouf

1. We cannot talk of a homogeneous Arab women's movement, carrying out carefully planned goals and common achievements. Each Arab region has its own context, and each Arab country has its own specificities. Despite the common factors - the most important being language, religion and history - we cannot consider that women's movements in the North African countries can be compared with those in the Gulf, for example.

The women's movement as a movement with its own dynamics emerged in the early 20th century, in the countries that had close cultural interactions with the West, in particular Egypt and Bilad al-Sham, especially Lebanon. Several pioneering women deployed serious efforts towards securing the minimum of women's rights, such as the right to education, to work,

and later to vote. It is also worth noting that these women were from the aristocracy, and because they were Francophone or English - educated and were familiar with the status of European women, they felt the need to improve the status of women in their own societies, even if their efforts did not reach beyond their own social class.

As for the other Arab countries, this movement came at a later stage and often emerged from within and through political regimes, to serve the latter's goals. This was especially the case in those countries that had adopted socialist doctrines and one-party rule. As for the Gulf countries, the women's movements only emerged recently to demand the rights that other Arab women had secured decades earlier. Despite the many achievements that Kuwaiti women were able to secure in various sectors, they, along with women from other Gulf countries, failed to secure their right to vote. This is a good illustration of the relation between the development of women's movements and the political and social environment, including society's level of openness.

Thus we find numerous differences in the situations and contexts of the Arab women's movements, and as a result, differences in what they have achieved and what they have failed to achieve. In general, the common achievement, which is the basic minimum, is the right to education and to work. The greatest failure is that they have not managed to bring about the amendment of the personal status code, which would have led to improving women's legal situation, and thereby forging stability of the family and of society.

2. This question already implies a position, and asks, "What is the best answer to this accusation?" What if I agree with the conservative forces?! In any case, there is no doubt that the Arab women's movements have been influenced by the 'Western feminist movement', especially since, as I mentioned before, they emerged as a result of interaction with the West, hence the actual model for the 'liberated' woman was no other than the Western woman.

As for the extent of this influence, its scope and persistence, it differs between one movement and another, and between one society and another. It is also related to the movement's intel-

Carrying out the necessary amendments in family and personal status codes is probably one of the Arab women's movements' priorities.

Zeinab Joma'a

lectual, political and economic affiliations. It is worth noting that the course of Western women's movements is entirely different from that of their Arab counterparts. In the West, the feminist movement emerged as a result of several factors, the most important being the industrial revolution and the ensuing socio-economic changes, the world wars with their destructive impact on family and society, as well as the intellectual and philosophical trends that surfaced in the mid-20th century, especially existentialism, which led Western women to organize themselves along a continuous course. So Western feminist movements resulted from a variety of interacting factors. Obviously, it was not a homogeneous movement, as there were various parties and trends, some moderate and some radical, and many revisions and changes were introduced (especially within the radical wing).

The Arab women's movements - just like many other things in our societies - emerged as a result of Western influence, and of what Western women had been struggling for and had achieved. But the Arab movements did not have situations comparable to the West, and we did not have a continuous drive leading to anything in particular. There was always the force of tradition, the supremacy of the Western model and the need to emulate it. So far, very few Arab women's movements have been able to overcome tradition or imitation; a lot of them still represent an extension of patriarchal, male-dominated thought that has no relation whatsoever with feminist thought.

3. The Islamic movements are not one and homogeneous, any more than women's movements are. There are various movements with differing directions, ranging from the most backward to the most open and contemporary.

The main reason, I believe, for the rise of religious movements was the failure of nationalist and socialist ideologies, and their inability to achieve their slogans and goals. In addition, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the continued bias towards Israel of the West generally and the United States in particular, has made the Arab peoples lose all trust in the West, and pushed them to turn more and more towards their past, which helps them evade a harsh reality. When the Arab individual loses all faith in life and his daily means of survival, when he loses his freedom of expression, and everything he strives to do is negated,

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the only safe haven he finds is religion. The fact is that others - organizations, rulers and the new imperialist forces - have not left him anything but that margin in order to carry on his life and feel that he exists.

As to the question whether this rise of religion threatens the Arab women's movements, this reverts to the movement itself. If it stays elitist and isolates itself from the pulse of the street and people's real worries, then of course it will be isolated and fail.

But if one examines the positive aspects of this religious revival, and if you discuss with Islamic activists issues concerning women, this would yield important results, as we would understand that there are many important opportunities in Islam to guarantee women's rights. Realizing this depends on the vision and program of the party that interprets Islam, and its position on women. So this can only happen from the inside and through dialogue, not through alienation and estrangement.

4. The proliferation of activities and types of professionalism in the Arab women's movements is not negative. On the contrary, it is healthy and necessary, so that the movement will no longer be confined to the realm of words but become active on the ground, especially because women's issues interact with a number of 'sectors', and cannot be isolated as a single factor in society. Also, the reality of our Arab society is harsh and painful, and needs a lot of effort to push it forward.

5. Of course. Carrying out the necessary amendments in family and personal status codes is probably one of the Arab women's movements' priorities. But this must be done with cooperation with all sides, and without provocation. We should work in a carefully thought-out way that does not conflict with the Islamic *Shari'a*. I feel that there is no contradiction in saying this. We can achieve much without falling into a violation of Islam. We have important experiences, such as in Iran, where women were able to secure rights that Arab women could not dream of, and all this in the context of an Islamic regime. Unfortunately there is no space here to enter into the relevant details.

6. If the Arab women's movements wanted to be in harmony with their environment, and really to

be active, they would have to open up to non-Arab Islamic women's movements. This would enable them to take advantage of the latter's experiences, and to get out of the shaky situation they find themselves in with regard to women in our Arab societies, and their failure to make any worthwhile achievements. In Pakistan, Turkey, Bangladesh and Indonesia, women have succeeded in becoming prime ministers, leaders of political parties (both loyalist and opposition), whereas until now this has not happened in any Arab country. Also, the recent important achievement in Iran in amending the personal status code - as I mentioned above - represents a model and experience that could be taken advantage of. There is no problem in using both Western and Eastern experiences, while taking into consideration the cultural specificities of our own societies as well as to be open to recent achievements in the West.

7. It is only natural that the leaders of Arab women's movements are mostly educated, urban women from the middle to upper classes. This is mainly so because the struggle can only be carried on if it is accompanied by awareness, education and intellectual openness, and these qualities are more to be found among urban educated women. In the 1970s and 1980s education for girls in Arab countries began to expand, and by the 1990s the level had reached its highest point so far, though with variations between one Arab country and another. This led to the rise of a new group of activists within the women's movements. Unfortunately however, despite the progress achieved, illiteracy is still high in the Arab world, especially among women in rural areas. As for obstacles to the spread of the women's struggle to all social classes: when a woman is under the pressure of poverty and illiteracy, she doesn't have time to think about the struggle to secure her rights. She needs - just as men do - a minimum level of decent living.

Change does not seem to be achievable in the short-term, especially in face of economic globalization and International Monetary Fund recommendations, which rule out any social guarantees, and leave citizens facing their fate on their own. One of the most dangerous results of this trend is the disappearance of the middle class, which is generally the most stable and active class, and the division of society into only two classes: the rich who do not care about what

goes on around them, and the very poor who hardly know what is going on.

8. Arab women's organizations are a reflection of political and cultural (if it exists) life in the Arab world. All parties, whether loyalist or oppositionist, have leaders who are not elected and, as such, they practise power in a dictatorial way. I do not know whether it is possible for women's organization leaders to overcome the reality surrounding them and be more democratic. Certainly if they want to be a vanguard, and more effective, they should do this.

9. I am surprised at the way so many Arab women's movements adopt the notion of gender without even debating it. I think it needs a lot of debate, especially since it originated in an entirely different culture from our own, and is the result of a post-modern stage in the West, where all the values, thoughts and paradigms have fallen one by one, so that people are left in a world devoid of values and morality. This represents a leap above our cultural specificities, and serves to heighten the isolation of Arab women's discourse.

10. I don't know what the policies of Arab women's movements are with regard to minorities. I have not monitored this issue, and have no information about it. But what should these policies be? They really should not be different from their work with the majority, because women's problems are one, and their issues are similar among the majority and the minority, whether this is religious, or racial, or national, taking into consideration that minorities often suffer from isolation and discrimination. I believe that if women's conditions improve in society as a whole, or if there is an amendment of the laws, then this will reflect positively on everyone.

11. As I said in the beginning, there is not one Arab, homogenous women's movement, but several movements. It is important to note that the expression 'Arab feminist movement' is different from 'Arab women's movement'. Feminism is a trend that originated in Europe (I talked about it earlier in answering question 2), that struggles for equality between men and women, and sometimes calls for the superiority of women over men, and 'feminizing the world'. Of course, not all women's movements in the Arab world agree with this; some do not believe in male/female equality and refuse the idea from the beginning. I do not think there is an 'Arab

Work on awareness has to be conducted with both sexes, because women's cause cannot be isolated from society as a whole.

Zeinab Joma'a

homogeneity' and generalization will not help us in realizing achievements. It is true that the cause of Arab women is homogeneous as far as the fundamental facts, but the approach and tools of work can differ, as well as priorities, between one Arab country and another.

12. From the beginning the impact of the UN Decade for Women was limited to official delegations, since it gave them the responsibility of representing Arab women, and of participating in the various conferences. The last of these, the Beijing conference, led to some studies and statistics. Today, the circle of influence has started to expand a little, and a few notions and issues are being activated, such as violence against women and reproductive health.

But I believe that we have to remain cautious, because the priorities of international organizations may differ from our priorities, and their approach to women's issues may also differ, since they originate mainly from Western societies. We should not repeat everything they say in parrot-fashion, nor should we adopt everything they demand without thought. The minimum level of respect for our national and cultural specificity demands a careful revision of what emerges from international organizations, so that we should adopt it only when it suits our societies and helps our women improve their status, but firmly refuse it when it contradicts our values, such as the call to legitimize adoption, or legalize homosexuality, and allow marriage between homosexuals.

13. This is a very positive development, since research and specialization are the right way to help women achieve their goals. They must themselves conduct research into different aspects of women's situation, and try to discover solutions to women's social problems. Women researchers should make more effort to coordinate their work, so as to benefit from a variety of approaches and fields of expertise, and to avoid duplication.

14. I believe that the greatest obstacle facing Arab women's movements today is the patriarchal system that runs deep in our Arab societies, and prevails among women as much as men. No one should believe that religion is responsible for this situation; rather, it is the wrong interpretation of religion and the faulty use of religious texts that serve the system, which dates back to thousands of years. This original

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patriarchy and the faulty religious interpretations together form traditions and customs that are very resistant to change.

15. In light of the political, military, economic instability prevailing in most Arab countries, discussion of the future of the women's movements should foresee a difficult future. Despite this, I believe that the women's cause is making progress, even though slowly. One proof of this is that younger generations (both male and female) are much more aware of women's rights, and practise them more.

It is not enough to work on women alone; this change has to happen among both men and women. Work on awareness has to be conducted with both sexes, because women's cause cannot be isolated from society as a whole.

If I wanted to change anything in the Arab women's movements, it would be to give the opportunity to younger generations to participate and have a role. I would also try to give an enlightened role to men and cooperate with them, and rely on the practice of democracy to infuse some new blood into these movements, which are suffering from stagnation.

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1. a) Achievements always have multiple sources of input. The achievements of the Arab women's movement have been multifaceted, but among the most visible is the high development of education among women in a selected sector of Arab societies and as a result the entry of women into critical professions.

b) Failure: While the responsibility for failures cannot be attributed only to the women's movement, one must say generically the lack of equal citizenship for women in terms of suffrage, voter participation, election/appointment to high political office, and the rights of women to pass citizenship on to their children and spouses. Under this umbrella, I would put the inability to produce civil personal status laws in most Arab countries.

Parallel to this, are the problems of addressing poverty/health issues and the general education of the women not in the more advantaged sectors of society.

2. First, the Arab women's movement is over a century old and has its own history which has long been in conversation with Western feminist movements. Second, we should not overlook the influence, in complex ways, of the Arab women's movement on Western feminism. Western feminism developed with a gaze – a gaze on the East. For better or worse, Western feminism, in many ways, defined itself in relation to the Third World woman as “other”. As Aihwa Ong has pointed out, no category of Third World women has figured as large in the Western feminist imagination as Arab and Muslim women.

Third, few large movements of the past century can claim themselves to be purely culturally specific. We live in a global and globalizing world in which ideas as well as commodities and people travel. One has to ask why those same conservative forces who are concerned about Western influence in feminism seem unconcerned about Western influence on technology (if such a designation can be made for products that are developed all over the world). They seem to adopt the illusion that technology is innocent of culture. The assertion of cultural purity is a strategy for control over innovation and change. It cannot be allowed to preempt constructive dialogue and engagements across state boundaries.

3. Religious fundamentalism is spreading world wide. And world wide, it has a political arm. And world wide, it has made inroads into state power. One has only to look at the religious right in the US and in Israel. The fact that the West focuses on the rise of fundamentalism in the Arab world as if it were an exceptional situation has much to do with global politics which defines Islam globally and the Arab world in particular as the evil other. Power has the privilege of defining its enemy and naturalizing itself.

That said, it is important to look at the specificities of the rise of religious fundamentalism in the Arab region. Many scholars have offered plausible reasons for the rise of religious fundamentalism: the corruption and tyranny of Arab regimes; the corrupting uses of oil wealth; the alignment with the West of many Arab regimes, discredited by significant sectors of their own population;

the heavy-handed alignment of the West with Israel, seen as an occupying force; the economic instability, uneven social development, marginal political freedoms.

In principle, there should be room for women's emancipation within religious frameworks. The simultaneous embrace of Christianity and feminism by many Western women has not worried Western feminists as much as the simultaneous embrace of Islam and feminism by many Arab women. That in itself, is a worry. Many Muslim feminists have argued that Islam can and does offer women their rights and therefore religious revivalism should not threaten the Arab women's movement. Thus far, where it has taken power in the Arab region, or where it has comprised itself into a political movement, religious revivalism has either compromised women's emancipation or left many concerned about the constraints packaged with the liberties. While in principle there should be room for women's emancipation within religious frameworks, the path cut so far has proven difficult if not impossible to walk.

4. Pluralism is not only good, but it will happen regardless of our judgement. I would be worried about institutionalizing “activity police”. Women must work wherever they feel they can and want to. Who could possibly be the judge of the long term impact of the various kinds of work? What might appear to be simple acts can have far-reaching and important political consequences.

5. Family law must continue to be a high priority for the Arab women's movement. It is the lynch-pin, within the political arena, for most other legal constraints on women. Women's lack of full citizenship is linked to the ways in which family law defines them as subordinates to their male kin; their economic inequality is similarly rationalized in terms of their familial roles (deemed subordinate); and their control by patriarchal religious clerics is anchored in the power that religious institutions have over family law.

6. The Arab women's movement is already engaged with and networking with women's movements in the ‘East’ and ‘South’. This is important not only in the quest for alternative models and strategies for women's rights, but also for general social change. In a globalized world with one superpower, those outside the arena of power have been given two options –

Family Law ... is the lynch-pin, within the political arena, for most other legal constraints on women.

Suad Joseph

align with the power center or align with the de-centered. Non-alignment was itself a strategy for maneuvering. A bipolar world (us versus them) is not a better world. But when power centers impose those binary choices, those marginalized from power can concede power or creatively invent new alliances for power.

7. The Arab women's movement is not unlike the women's movements in most of the world which have attracted primarily women of educated classes. It is not unique in this regard. Where it differed was in countries with aggressive state - sponsored women's federations. What stops the struggle for women's rights from moving to other classes is that political struggle of all sorts may be a luxury of leisure and the privilege of certain historical moments. Other social classes are not flocking to labor movements either. To the degree they are 'signing up', it has been mainly the religious movements which have claimed their support. But even here, the 'signing up' in the sense of 'active' participation in a movement is not widespread. In addition, women who are struggling to feed their families and keep them alive often feel that gender issues are secondary to the issues of economic, political and health security. Even Western feminists struggle to link the economic, political, health issues with gender issues for women in less advantaged classes.

8. Sadly, as I have argued elsewhere, Arab women's movements often reproduce the hierarchal structures of their societies within their own feminist organizations.¹ To struggle for women's freedoms and rights but to not practise them within their own organizations suggests that the struggles are within the movement as well as outside of it.

9. Arab women's movement members do struggle to change relations within their societies and their families. It goes without saying that more needs to be done. I have argued elsewhere that there is a reluctance among Arab feminists to take on the family as an issue of inequality.² In some sense, literary figures have more dramatically taken on the family in the form of novels, movies and plays than has the women's movement as a 'movement'. In part this reluctance is linked to the absence of viable alternatives to the family in Arab societies (other than religious alternatives), given the perceived distance, ineffectuality or repressiveness of many Arab states.

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How the family is to be addressed in Arab societies will have to be quite different from the way it has been addressed in Western societies by Western feminists. The specificity of that engagement is taking shape.

10. The Arab women's movement has tried to embrace ethnic and religious differences. This continues to be a task before the movement and is one of monumental importance. Law stands against these solidarities as the devolution of family law to the different religious sects in some countries often creates different legal realities for women of different religious sects. It is a challenge that must be faced.

11. Little is gained by avoiding the term feminism in the effort to avoid creating a false notion of Arab homogeneity. We use the term 'Western feminism' even though it is utterly the case that there are theoretical, political, and ethnic/religious/national differences among Western feminists. The term feminism is a strategic insertion on behalf of a cause. As long as we do not collapse all Arab women into a homogeneous category and as long as we are aware of the strategic use of all our terms (including the term 'woman' which is also homogenizing) – that is all we can do. Language cannot perfectly reflect our understanding of the world.

12. The UN Decade for women and its offshoot agencies (eg UNIFEM) have had an important impact on the Arab women's movement. First it made Arab governments pay attention and, for face saving, if nothing else, claim victories on behalf of women's rights. Second the Decade provided an arena, a set of fora for networking and developing bodies of knowledges about the conditions of women. Third, the UN Decade was the backdrop for various international conventions having to do with women's and children's rights that have provided a critical stage of activism on behalf of women. Fourth, the UN Decade made many of us aware of the similarities as well as the differences among women around the world that needed to be addressed.

13. The women's movement moves not only through the efforts of self-identified feminists, but through the efforts of all women who empower themselves. The increase of Arab women professionals will, de facto, change the gender equation in Arab societies, and is therefore most welcome.

14. There are many obstacles to the growth and development of the Arab women's movement. The repressiveness of regimes leaves little room for public discourse for women or men. A fall out related to the repressiveness of regimes is that religious political movements are often the most vigorous alternative to the repressive regimes. Most of these religious political movements have brought with them further constraints on women's rights. A further related phenomenon to the repressiveness of regimes is that women often cling to family systems which are patriarchal because families provide a security from the state and a security that the state cannot provide.

15. The Arab women's movement is not a unified organization or set of institutions, so it is not possible to argue that the change of 'one' element of the movement will magically transform the movement. That said, the increased democratization of the movement from within women's organizations would be important to opening up future possibilities of growth of the movement. Leadership that invests less in its own reproduction and prioritizes the advance of the goals of the movement is critical. We can envision a future in which a primary goal of leadership is to replace themselves with others who are dedicated and empowered to act on behalf of women's rights.

ENDNOTES

1. Suad Joseph (1997) "Shopkeepers and Feminists: The Reproduction of Political Process among Women Activists in Lebanon" in Dawn Chatty and Annika Rabo eds., Organizing Women: Formal and Informal Groups in the Middle East (Oxford and New York: Berg).
2. Suad Joseph (2002) "Feminism and Familism", paper presented to the WOCMES conference, Mainz.

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Fatima Sbaity-Kassem:

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1. The greatest achievement has been women's acquisition of suffrage rights in many Arab countries. The greatest failure is the limited political participation of women (3.4% of parliamentary seats were occupied by women in 2000). Second, the inability to break with harmful prac-

tices (e.g. FGM) and customs, norms and traditions that limit them.

2. There is no harm in emulating good practices to consolidate the status of Arab women in society; since women are a major partner/stakeholder in the development process.

3. The main reasons are the vacuum in ideologies and disappointment with current political regimes. And Yes, religious fundamentalism could threaten the Arab women's movement if enlightened women activists do not raise gender awareness of the real status of women in Islam.

4. There is room for all types of activities to empower women. In a holistic approach, work should proceed on all fronts and at all levels.

5. Yes, by all means, legislation and laws are the backbone of the Arab women's movement. The gap is still wide between de jure legislation and the laws as they are carried out in practice.

6. Yes, we should form alliances with the West and East and "pick and choose" what is the best for us. Alliances ought to be built with women and men. Arab women should organize!

7. Ignorance, illiteracy and poverty change women's priorities and create a large difference between urban and poor rural women.

8. This is a leading question! But of course, we should push for the pursuit of a more participatory approach to development. In fact, one of the twelve critical areas of concern identified in the Beijing Platform for Action is related to decision-making and power sharing. Good governance is premised on transparency, accountability and responsibility.

9. Obviously more has to be done and the road is still long. Women have to practice what they preach at the domestic level, especially with their children and foreign domestic helpers.

10. Violence against women is not acceptable. Foreign domestic helpers should be treated humanely and with respect. Women should reflect on how they treat their domestic non-Arab helpers and should avoid class discrimination.

11. There are disparities among women in the Arab countries, and women's movements differ

The gap is still wide between de jure legislation and the laws as they are carried out in practice.

Fatima Sbaity-Kassem

from one country to another. The short answer to your question is Yes and No. There is no one Arab woman. But there are issues and concerns that are common to all Arab women. The intensity of the problems differs from one country to another and even within the same country between rural and urban areas.

12. The UN Decade for Women (1975-1985), and the subsequent four conferences on women have been instrumental in raising awareness for women's issues and putting these issues on the global agenda. UNIFEM, INSTRAW, the regional commissions and the Division for the Advancement of Women, have played a major role in making the cause of women move forward.

13. This is true. But it may be too early to say what is the impact of this expansion on the culture and agenda of the women's movements. There is more than one women's movement in the Arab world and each has its salient features. This should be documented and explored. Overall the impact should be positive and forward looking.

14. Political instability in the region. Traditions and customs. Legal and alphabetical illiteracy among women. Poverty among women which shifts the focus of their priorities and demands. The dominance of a patriarchal society. Gender-insensitivity or –blindness in our society.

15. I believe in a holistic approach. Therefore, we need to work on all fronts: continue working and believe that you can make a difference; organize, call for solidarity among women; highlight the potential role of women in peace-making; believe in the right to choose; work on changing mentalities and laws.

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1. Sudanese women fought hard beside men from the 'forties for the independence of Sudan, achieved in 1956. Thus the women's movement in Sudan did not start as a movement to obtain

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women's rights, but as a political struggle against British colonialism. After independence, women's struggle continued, making demands for Sudanese women's political and civil rights until they got these rights. The first Sudanese woman entered parliament in the 'sixties, and was followed by others. A new era in Sudanese women's lives had started. Through all the political struggles against dictatorship, Sudanese women stood beside men and strengthened the efforts for freedom and rights, which resulted in them enjoying a more advanced status than other women in the region.

The Sudanese Women's Union was the largest women's organization in Sudan, and the one that played the leading role in obtaining and defending women's rights, to the extent of being awarded an international prize in 1993. During the 'seventies, as a result of the Sudanese Women's Union's efforts, Sudanese women were able to get more rights, despite the fact that the Union was accused of being a communist movement, and was banned by the May and June regimes. The following are gains for women made by the Union:

- The right to education for all.
- The right to vote and to be elected.
- The right to employment.
- The right to equal pay for equal work.

The struggle continued for other rights, including campaigns of literacy education, training and raising awareness in many different parts of the country. As a result, more rights were obtained: to maternity leave with full pay; to a free breastfeeding hour; and for a working wife to accompany her husband abroad without losing her job. During the seventies the first Sudanese woman joined the army and the police force; and Sudan was one of the first countries in the area that had women judges in the *Shari'a* courts.

But there were also failures:

- The movement seems not to have struggled for the enforcement of laws for the equality of women, though this was also due to the restrictions put by military governments on Sudanese organizations' freedom of expression.
- The movement did not fight enough against the abusive articles of the Personal Law; their fight for the abolition of the '*Bayt al-Ta'a*' (house of obedience) was frozen.
- The issue of female circumcision was not

one of the priorities of the movement.

- The political affiliation of some women's organizations (eg the SWU) with the regime and the boycotting of others, caused the alienation of the Islamists, and resulted in the government supporting their own women cadres and excluding others.
- The structure of women's organizations was and is not transparent and accountable.
- Leadership in women's organizations and their relationship with the grassroots is very weak.
- The long duration of the leadership of the women's organizations without new elections, as well as the conflict between old and new generations, has also affected the growth of the women's movement. To some extent this is due to the absence of democracy and of freedom of work under the military regimes, and the fact that they prohibit open activities, meetings, freedom of movement, and the sense of democracy.
- The belief of some organizations that a united women's movement means dissolving all organizations in one body has made many women prefer not to join the movement.
- The poverty of the women's organizations has made them unable to reach different regions and local organizations.
- They have failed to address the conditions of women in distant areas, especially in the war zones While there is not at present an united Sudanese women's movement, some women's organizations have recently made attempts at networking, indicating a renaissance of the women's movement. For example there was a co-coordinated effort made by women's organizations, including the Islamic ones, against the Labor Act of 2000, when over 45 women's and civil society organizations sued the government.

Another example of cooperation is the Sudan National Women's Convention, which was held in Kampala, in 2002. 120 women activists representing Sudanese women's organizations and political parties attended the conference. For the first time, women from the war zones joined their sisters from the government-held areas in the conference to discuss their rights together.

There have been other initiatives bringing women's organizations together to work for peace, and one can say that, despite all the

shortcomings, women are working for a united women's movement.

(Qu 2, 3, omitted)

4. Definitely pluralism is good and essential. Women have always proved their strength in fighting for their rights and in obtaining them. Now women are occupying leading positions and have proved their success in their jobs. However, networking between the different specializations is as important as specialization. In some societies, families may refuse to allow women to receive education or other services unless delivered by women, so in these cases it is important to have qualified women to deliver these services. It is the duty of the movement to encourage women from different backgrounds to work in the different areas because pluralism of experience is needed for the advancement of the women's movements. Pluralism is important, and it should be accompanied by a widening of women's participation and the democratization of the organizations.

5. I strongly believe that women and male activists should struggle hard for the reform of family law. Women's organizations and activists, female lawyers and judges should participate in writing the laws, not only because women should always take part in making policy but also because family law mainly affects women. All Arab societies are patriarchal and men have always interpreted religion in ways that serve their interests, and in many cases laws strip women of their rights. Women's participation in writing law will limit male control, and will add justice to the spirit of laws.

6. It is important to benefit from women's experiences in different movements, in the east - Iran, Africa, India, Pakistan - as well as in the west, since the west has a long history of women's struggle. The western schools of feminism have had a profound affect on all women's struggles for rights. Listening and considering doesn't necessarily mean adopting and, given the difference in women's situation in different societies, women need to be careful when dealing with these issues. It is easy for others to accuse them of being 'western affiliated' and so damage their image and work.

7. In the case of Sudan there are many causal factors:

Sudan was one of the first countries in the area that had women judges in the Sha'ria courts.

Muna Khugali:

- The absence of democracy that would allow women's organizations to function freely, and to move to the rural areas in order to deliver education and awareness.
- The concept of a women's movement is sometimes limited to political participation, leading to targeting women from the urban areas and neglecting the rural areas. This means lack of communication between educated and uneducated women.
- The emigration of qualified cadres from rural areas to cities.
- In the case of Sudan, the war, the centralization of services in the northern cities, and the economic and political marginalization of the rural areas, has created different classes.
- Poverty deprives women of the time or ability to think about women's rights.
- The high illiteracy in rural regions, especially among women.
- The wide gap in living standards and life style between urban and rural Sudanese women.
- The absence of the concept of women's rights in rural areas, and the prevalence of male domination.
- The extreme distances between cities and villages in Sudan, the lack of proper transport, and the poverty of women's organizations.

8. One of the main reasons for failure of the women's movement in general, is the widespread phenomenon of a few leaders controlling the organizations and ruling without democracy. In our organizations, the phenomenon of the 'life-leader' is a common fact. Women at the grassroots are used as members without being consulted. Some women's organizations are created by governments, and their leaders are appointed according to the government ideology and not according to women's needs. Some are appointed to serve certain individuals, which raises questions about the legitimacy of these organizations. In the absence of legitimacy, credibility is also absent.

There is a fear on the side of the older women leaders and doubts about the new cadres. The women's movement has enough obstacles without this. It should adopt more democratic practices instead of acting like an oppressive regime.

In order to be able to improve the women's orga-

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nizations/movement, they should evaluate themselves and other voices should be heard.

9. Women have gained a better position now in their communities because of their successful efforts to obtain their rights, and because of the active roles they have undertaken in family and society. The image of women has definitely improved in many countries. However, the road of struggle is long and the overwhelming majority of women are still far from full rights. The women's movement is a continuous process of struggle for obtaining rights, and for the enforcement of practice of these rights. This means to seek true equality in gender relations and practice.

10. The first principle in human rights is the right of minorities. In Sudan there are over 400 spoken languages, but only Arabic is officially taught and used. This means discrimination against, and marginalization of, many Sudanese citizens including women. It is important that the women's movement should use the languages of the minorities so to bring them on board, and to create a sense of belonging to the movement amongst them. This would definitely help the movement to spread more and gain strength. The movement can use the local cadres in these minority areas to train women leaders to take leading roles in their communities.

(Qu **11** omitted)

12. The UN declarations on human rights, the conventions (eg. CEDAW), and the UN international and regional conferences on women, have had a great impact. For example the conferences and seminars organized by the UN agencies have brought women from different backgrounds together and enabled them to discuss the issues affecting them. They have also helped women in setting up education and training programmes, and have provided women with opportunities to improve their positions, and to address different issues that matter to them like women's rights, poverty, political participation, etc.

13. This has added strength to the activities of the women's organizations and consequently to the advancement of women's rights. Organizations that lead the women's movement now benefit from the expertise of professionals and scholars. This has definitely improved public ideas of

women's activism and is leading the movement to a better future.

14. The political regimes prevalent in the region, and absence of democracy; leaders for life; gaps between old leaders and young ones; lack of economic resources; lack of communication between local organizations; conflict and competition for funding from donors.

15. Organizations should encourage each other's work, adopt more democracy, and widen participation and coordination in order to create a strong women's movement.

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Valentine Moghadam:

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1. Forming organizations and raising public awareness, including governmental understanding, of women and gender issues – especially as regards nationality rights, family laws, honor killings/domestic violence, and political participation – have constituted the greatest achievement thus far. Of course, women's movements have had varying degrees of success cross-nationally. The greatest failures have been the lack of coordination, cooperation, and coalition-building across the region (and sometimes even within a country), and lack of participation in transnational feminist networks.

2. The charge is not justified. First, there is no unitary 'Western feminism'; the history of feminism and women's movements in the West (first- and second-wave) has been characterized by different priorities, strategies, discourses, and ideologies (eg. socialist, liberal, radical, Marxist, post-modernist feminisms). Second, feminism is a set of ideas concerning problems facing women (oppression, inequality, discrimination, second-class citizenship) and the means to achieve equality, empowerment, an expanded rights (eg. educational attainment, paid employment, legal equality, women's organizations, political representation); these ideas are found among women in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Arab region, Europe, and North America. Third, the United Nations Decade for Women and the

Beijing Platform for Action represent an international and cross-cultural consensus on women's 'critical areas of concern' and the means and mechanisms needed to achieve women's economic, social, and political empowerment. Fourth, Arab women have developed a number of priorities, strategies, discourses, and ideologies to draw attention to problems and to attain rights, including socialist, liberal, and Islamic feminisms – all of which, in my view, are presented in a distinctly Arab idiom.

3. In my view, Islamic fundamentalism is on the wane in most of the Arab region as a major oppositional political movement (although it is rising in other regions, e.g., sub-Saharan Africa and perhaps southeast Asia). It has been shown to be very violent in countries like Algeria and Egypt (and non-Arab countries like Afghanistan); where it has been in power, it has been unable to solve any major problems (e.g., Sudan). On the other hand, there is a strong strain of religious conservatism among Arabs (in contradistinction to Iranians), and this is of course a major threat to any of the 'new' social movements, such as women's movements and human rights movements. Any form of religious conservatism, whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, is often antithetical to progressive social movements.

No Islamist movement has produced anything resembling a theory or practice of democracy, human rights, or women's rights. On the other hand, Islam does have egalitarian and emancipatory elements to it, as do Christianity and Judaism (the other Abrahamic religions). For this reason, women have identified themselves with their religions – thus, Christian, Jewish, and now Islamic feminisms. What is clear, however, is that no religious state or religiously-based legal frameworks can provide equality for all citizens, because religions tend to favor their own and to privilege men over women. Islam, for example, at least as far as it is currently interpreted and practiced around the world, privileges Muslims over non-Muslims and men over women; hence the inequality of non-Muslims and of women in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, etc. The same goes for Judaism, hence the inequality of non-Jews and women in Israel.

It may be that the problem of Israel was one of the factors in the emergence and spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the Arab region (the other factors being political authoritarianism, the

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Valentine Moghadam

failures of economic development, and the emergence of 'public women', considered offensive by conservative men of the petty bourgeoisie). The solution to the problems of the region, however, is not religious revivalism but a rights-based development strategy and regional cooperation.

4. I think you mean Arab women's NGOs. Social movements tend to be diffuse and diverse, with various organizations undertaking different activities – all, however, directed towards the same goal. If Arab women's organizations within the broad Arab women's movement(s) are undertaking social work, adult literacy, research, legal counseling, etc., toward the goal of enhancing women's status and promoting their empowerment, then these diverse activities complement each other and have a positive cumulative effect. If, however, these activities are carried out in a routine and bureaucratic fashion, as a substitute for social-service delivery by the state rather than as a political act to empower women, then the activities serve to foster the state rather than women's empowerment.

5. Isn't there already struggle going on around this issue? Certainly this has been the case in Algeria and Morocco – and in Palestine, as well, until the second Intifada. Reform of family law is at the forefront of Arab women's movement demands, as it should be. Different movements have used different strategies – examples are the confrontational stance of Algerian feminists, the consensus-building strategy of Egyptian feminists, and the 'social dialogue' with the state in which Moroccan feminists participated.

6. I'm not convinced that Arab women's movements have looked to the West for models and affiliations, but they should in any event form relations with women's movements elsewhere. In fact, I believe that one weakness has been the lack of formal affiliation with transnational feminist networks – that is, those organizations that unite women from three or more countries around a common agenda, whether it be a feminist critique of economic policy, or Muslim women's human rights, or women's reproductive health and rights, or peace and conflict-resolution. Feminists in Africa, India, Pakistan, and Latin America are more deeply involved in TFNs (for example, they have regional offices as well as 'movement intellectuals') than are feminists in the Arab region.¹

I believe that one weakness has been the lack of formal affiliation with transnational feminist networks.

7. Historically, women's rights/feminist movements have been middle-class movements. Working-class women are more likely to be involved in trade unions, where they try to raise feminist issues (e.g., women's equality and participation in decision-making in the unions, a better deal for women in the labor market, etc.). However, there have been alliances between feminists in women's organizations and women activists in trade unions in a number of countries (India, the US, European countries, Mexico). I believe that some cooperation in that area has occurred in Morocco and in Turkey. I believe there should be forums, meetings, or other activities to encourage dialogue between the middle-class women's organizations and the women trade unionists so that they can reach consensus on strategies for the realization of women's civil, political, and socio-economic rights.

8. Again, I believe you mean Arab women's organizations within the broader movement. I am not as familiar with decision-making processes in Arab women's NGOs as I am with other women's organizations (e.g., the TFNs that I have been studying). Certainly one of the defining features of women's organizations in the West has been their non-hierarchical structure and democratic form of decision-making. If the Arab women's organizations are personalist, and decision-making is unilateral, then that would reflect the larger society and existing political processes, wouldn't it? In any event, if the women's organizations regard themselves as part of the larger movement for democratization (as well as for women's rights) in the Arab region, then it is important that they adopt democratic structures and practices. This would help them develop theories of women's rights and democratization.

9. Change within the family is a good measure of the efficacy of the women's movement and the success of its members/activists. The extent of such change in the Arab region is an empirical question, and I don't have enough information about it to be able to comment on it. Have gender relations and practices changed in the Arab region, and is the Arab women's movement responsible for it? Certainly patriarchy is in crisis in the region, and has been for some time (hence the Islamist backlash), but that is largely the result of longer-term, structural changes such as women's educational attainment, lower fertility

rates, and their involvement in the public sphere. In some countries, however, the women's movement has raised public awareness about women's rights and gender relations in very visible ways – eg. in Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco (also Iran and Turkey, among non-Arab countries).

10. One of the deficiencies has been the neglect of issues pertaining to the rights of non-Arab or non-Muslim minorities. Also, the rights of migrant workers, and especially women migrant workers, should be promoted by the Arab women's organizations.

11. I'm not sure that there is an 'Arab feminism' in the sense of a homogeneous and undifferentiated women's movement across the region. Again, consider the differences between Algerian feminism and Egyptian or Syrian feminism. Algerian feminists are much more likely to use the language of modernity and of citizenship in their public pronouncements than are women activists in Egypt or Syria; and they have engaged in 'direct action' which we have not seen in Egypt or Syria. At the same time, there is a kind of 'Arab idiom' that is inevitable, given the region's history and culture. For example, Arab feminists are more likely to cooperate with men than are feminists in some other regions; they do not regard the family as the source of oppression, even though they call for the modernization of family laws; and they are not hostile to religion (as opposed to fundamentalist movements), as feminists in some other regions have been.

12. The UN Decade for Women exposed Arab women's organizations to international feminisms and allowed them to engage in some international networking. The International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in September 1994 had perhaps the greatest impact, in that it imparted to Arab women's organizations a forum and legitimacy. The Beijing Conference continued this process and provided sources of funding, additional opportunities for international networking, and a forum for the exchange of ideas and strategies for women's empowerment. UNIFEM may be regarded as a 'movement agency' in that its Executive Director comes out of the transnational women's movement and is committed to promoting women's rights across the world. European donor agencies also got involved in the UN Decade and the Beijing process, and they have been a source of

support (and funding) for women's organizations in the Arab region.

13. This can only have a positive effect, inasmuch as more women will become involved in the Arab women's movements.

14. Political obstacles: state repression and in some countries the influence of Islamist parties. Cultural obstacles: fear of being labeled 'Westernized', and the constant need to defer to religion. Economic obstacles: the fact that Arab women participate less in the paid labor force than in other regions of the world-economy means that they have not articulated the sort of economic grievances that have led feminists in other countries to develop ideas about women's socio-economic rights. Organizational obstacles: there needs to be coordination, cooperation, and coalition-building across countries, and deeper involvement in transnational feminist networks (such as DAWN, WLUM, etc.).

15. I would have a working conference of women's organizations across the region to discuss an array of issues; and I would form some arrangements with transnational feminist networks.

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ENDNOTES

1 See Samia Tabari's review of [Women@Internet](#) in this issue.

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Emily Naffa:

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1. I think the greatest achievement of Arab women during the 20th century — the century of struggle for women's rights — was the attainment of the right of girls to education. This achievement has been a decisive factor in women's progress, especially in the labor market, leading to economic emancipation.

The Arab women's movement has had another great achievement, in being one of the major Arab social movements of the 20th century that brought changes in all aspects of daily life in the wake of the national liberation struggle.

Emily Naffa

On the other hand, the women's movement has failed to a shocking extent to become part of legislative and political decision-making bodies, so as to bring about real change in the laws related to women's rights, especially family law.

2. This charge is not justified since the movement for the liberation of women is international. As far back as 1910, socialist women in Copenhagen adopted March 8 as International Women's Day to commemorate the struggles and sacrifices of women all over the world for their rights. One example is working women in the United States who were burnt in a factory for demanding an 8-hour working day. It could be that the struggle for women's rights started in the industrial countries, but it has spread all over the world. We cannot ignore the effect of the struggle of the Egyptian or Algerian women on the common struggle of the international women's movement, as well as the effect of the achievements of women in the former Soviet Union, or the struggle in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The best response is to say that social progress is the fruit of all and for all, a world heritage. At a certain point in history the leading feminist activists were from the 'progressive West' not the 'conservative West'. The West is not one. It has classes, and the struggle for women's rights was led by middle class and working class women activists, and progressive forces of men and women world wide.

3. The factors that account for the spread of religious fundamentalism are mainly: poverty, backwardness, illiteracy and lack of democracy and general freedoms. Religious revivalism threatens the achievements of the Arab women's movement because it calls for re-imposing segregation of, and discrimination against, women, as was the case in Afghanistan.

4. Today, women's NGOs find themselves working among communities that are becoming more and more marginalized, especially the women in them. There is an urgent need to emphasize the importance of poverty-eradication, and the participation of women's NGOs in taking action against the feminization of poverty. Much is still needed to be done in eradication of adult literacy, legal counseling, research, and other fields, as part of the march for women's emancipation.

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5. Yes. Much needs to be done to obtain progressive family laws. The research is done. Women know what urgent changes are needed. Struggle should be directed to decision-makers to adopt reforms in spite of the growing conservative trend in the Arab world. At the last Arab Women's Summit, a Jordanian declaration amending the Nationality law came from the head of state, after years of struggle by women activists.

6. The Arab women's movements were, and still are, affiliated to international progressive women's movements such as the International Democratic Federation of Women, which include in their ranks women's organizations from the East, eg Iran, and India. Women worldwide struggle together and exchange experiences in their endeavors to promote women's status. It is now an urgent need to build relations between women in the North and the South to face the negative impact on women of neo-liberal globalization.

7. Historically speaking, it is known that the agent of social change is the middle class. So it is normal and logical that educated upper middle class women activists have taken the leading role in the struggle up to now. But with the massive education revolution of recent years, newcomers from the lower middles and working classes are joining the movement. Therefore, change in leadership is coming.

8. The whole liberation movement in the Arab world, whether at the level of politics or of social change, has been the victim of non-democratic leaders or, in more precise analysis, from the absence of institutionalization of the movement. It is high time to impose reform on the liberation movement as a whole. It is not fair to generalize. Most of the leaders and the active members of the Arab women's movements have been victims of non-democratic measures practiced against them by the authorities and reactionary elements in society. It has always been necessary to struggle for reform in the structures of the women's NGOs.

9. All that has been achieved in this respect is not enough. Much should be done with the support of civil society organizations.

10. Principles of democratic governance should be adopted to solve the problems of minorities,

whether of language or of ethnicity. The Arab women's movements are progressive in demanding the end of all discrimination and inequality. Therefore they must adopt a position against discrimination against minorities, and for equality for all. They should support the demands of minorities to have special schools, and TV and radio programs in their own languages. Thus minority children will learn about their own culture and keep their own identity within the Arab world. Their representation in legislative bodies is also a must.

11. The content of the term is what is most important. 'Arab feminism' is broader than 'Arab women' and it cannot be replaced. Whatever term is used, we should make it clear that gender equality is our target, and that we don't struggle against men. We struggle against discrimination, and for equality and justice.

12. The UN Decade for Women, the pre- and post UN International Conferences, and the UN specialized agencies have been decisive in giving momentum to the struggle of women activists in the last quarter of the 20th century. It has helped counterbalance the extremely negative effect of Islamist fundamentalism on the women's cause. It has helped the Arab women's organizations to focus on problems that hindered the advancement of women; and to adopt their own platforms of action and long-term strategies. In addition, it has launched awareness campaigns among women, and demanded the modernization of laws that govern women's rights in society, family and work.

13. It has helped increase the representation of the Arab women's movement in the different social sectors, and to create the image of successful working women. It has also increased the number of women activists struggling for the advancement of women in the political, economic and social fields.

14. Many obstacles are still in the way, old and new. First; the absence of democracy, an old obstacle that is still blocking the way, and needs to be achieved to open better opportunities to fulfill the agenda of the women's movement at its beginnings in the last century. Second, the fundamentalist mentality is becoming a strong new obstacle that is trying to reverse all the achievements gained up to now. New strategies are needed to confront this new phenomenon, because it is difficult to face those who use the

teachings of an essentially tolerant Islam to create an intolerant atmosphere against social progress, and against women in particular. Thirdly, there is a new obstacle in threats to women's NGOs from Arab governments and conservative forces, because NGOs are seen as part of the human rights and progressive civil society movement that is building ties with the international anti-globalization movement.

15. In future, the Arab women's movements need to struggle against old and new obstacles, and to change all laws that discriminate against women, especially family law, to put an end to the multiple miseries of women at the grassroots level; and enable women to reach decision-making posts especially in parliaments.

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Translated from Arabic by Lynn Maalouf

1. It is difficult to say that there is one great achievement we can consider as primordial. Rather, there are a number of achievements that have been attained through years of work, and that have been instrumental in changing women's situation in society in general. The Arab women's movements have succeeded in imposing their existence on society, and in crystallizing certain women's issues. As a result of this, most Arab states have admitted the necessity of reducing elements that discriminate against women in their laws by ratifying the UN Convention to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, even though the articles of the convention have not yet been implemented.

Regarding their failure: I would rather use the term inadequacy since I see it as lying in the inability of the women's movements to put enough pressure on their governments to implement the articles of the convention and change local laws in accordance with these articles. Another inadequacy lies in the fact that most of the women's movements are not protesting against the Arab states' reservations concerning the articles of the convention that touch on personal status laws. This means that they accept

... the problem of violence against women is a phenomenon that shows the patriarchal system at its worst.

the status quo, although these laws have to do with the core of women's issues.

2. Women in the world suffer from different problems: some are common to them all, and some differ according to the particular circumstances of each society. However, all these problems, whether they be general or particular, and regardless of differences of religion, race, country or culture, have one source, and this is the patriarchal social system which exists in all parts of the world, and which is the reason for the subjection and subordination of woman, while it has established man's almost complete authority over all areas of decision-making, whether in society, economy, law, culture, etc.

We believe that many issues unite us to women in other parts of the world, for example the problem of violence against women, a phenomenon that shows the patriarchal system at its worst. There are also problems from which women in other societies used to suffer, and which they were able to overcome, unlike women in less developed societies who still suffer from the same problems, such as laws that discriminate against women. Besides this there are some issues that pertain to specific societies only, or that take on different aspects in different countries, such as so-called 'honor crimes' or female excision.

3. There are probably several reasons for the spread of religious fundamentalism in Arab societies, the most important of which are social and economic crisis, and deterioration in living conditions, besides the military defeats the Arab world has suffered in its wars against Israel. All these factors have added to the resentment of the Arab masses, while their undemocratic rulers do not permit this resentment to be expressed. It is necessary to introduce the changes the masses consider indispensable to put an end to the crisis. If we add to this the weakness, or even the absence, of democratic and secular forces that could replace the existing regimes, the masses find no way to express their resentment other than taking refuge in religion. This is a sensitive issue but we have to tackle it. The essence of both Christianity and Islam call for social justice, respect for people and their rights, redressing corruption, and other similar reforms that in fact express the needs of the subjugated masses. Our problem is that the extremist fundamentalists have appointed themselves as replacement for the present

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regimes, but are no less repressive than them. The main problem for the women's movements when facing the fundamentalists is their mental stagnation, and their refusal to change rules and customs set hundreds of years ago.

4. To improve the situation of women in the Arab countries we might need even more diversity than we have at present, due to the enormous dimensions of women's needs. But for this diversity to yield better results, women's organizations should evaluate what are the most urgent needs of women today. Until now the Arab women's movements have not been able to reach a consensus around priorities, nor about how to develop a program that will encompass the different services, nor how to work toward clear aims with definite time schedules, and according to the priorities agreed upon.

Here we have to take note of a sensitive point, which is that the programs of some of the NGOs are subject to the donor's agenda. Indeed some of these organizations have been established according to this agenda, regardless of whether it complies with the people's needs or not.

5. We believe that family law, or personal status law, is one of the major issues, if not *the* major issue, on which the work of the women's movements in all the Arab countries should be centered. It should also be a priority of Human Rights organizations, and all those calling for democracy. How can we call for democratic institutions without establishing the bases of democracy inside the family, which constitutes the nuclear cell of society? The personal status laws are not based on equality between man and woman, or on a relationship of complete partnership between them. They are based on the man's almost complete power over his family, including his wife and female 'subjects'.

6. This description of relations between the Arab women's movements and the West is probably exaggerated. In the past there were more energetic frameworks than today encompassing the women's movements in the Arab world, and there also were universal frameworks joining women from various countries, western as well as Second and Third world countries. However, there is no doubt that women's organizations in the West have succeeded, due to their general economic and social development, in realizing

achievements that women's movements in the Arab countries have been unable to reach; and this is why the West became for some an example to follow. But this does not eliminate the need to open up to women's movements in other parts of the world, especially those working in social and cultural conditions closer to those in our Arab countries. This is important in order to exchange experiences and benefit from the very significant experiences of women's movements in the East, as well as in Latin America.

7. It is not surprising that a higher awareness of women's issues should have first crystallized among educated women, some of whom were able to raise essential issues and basic problems from which women in their societies suffer, creating an awareness among women of different social classes and backgrounds. Here we can point to the large demonstration which Moroccan women organized on March 8, 2000, coinciding with International Women's Day. The number of women and men participants was close to a million. But this does not eliminate the other side of the problem, which the question has overlooked, ie. the charitable work that women in Arab societies customarily undertake. Limited to women from the educated and well-to-do classes, such work could not be transformed into a movement calling for women's rights, or spreading awareness of women's issues among the different social classes. This limitation applies to most women's organizations either close to the ruling political elites or affiliated to them.

8. Undemocratic procedures are not restricted to women's movements alone, but are prevalent in many NGOs, parties and associations of civic society. The weakness of democratic practices and the absence of accountability is a problem in all Arab societies, and comes to the fore in the electoral system, wherever there is one. It is thus not surprising that these weaknesses should prevail in civic society in general including women's associations. However, this does not excuse civic society organizations, especially those calling for change, from setting an example of democratic procedures within their framework, and seeking to ensure an appropriate environment for the human development of their members, and raise their level of group responsibility, as well as ensuring an atmosphere appropriate for questioning, and a sense of responsibility and accountability towards the issues that are raised.

The UN's adoption of women's issues proved that the problems from which women suffer are international.

9. The use of the word gender is still relatively new in Arab societies, although its content was not completely unknown to feminist discourse in the Arab world. But this discourse has not yet been able to bring about the desired change in social relations. This is due, on the one hand, to difficulty in realizing the desired cultural change in understanding gender roles, and on the other to the fact that many of the women's societies are themselves affected by the patriarchal social system and do not call for radical change to this system. Thus their proposals only touch the superficial forms of this system and do not tackle its essential problems, such as the personal status laws, for example.

10. I do not think that that the Arab women's movements have a single policy towards the minorities in their countries. These policies depend on the intellectual, cultural and political structures of these movements. It is not a secret that some of the women's movements support their governments in the repression of which the minorities are the victim. As a matter of principle one cannot deny the right of minorities to preserve their language, culture and traditions, as embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and it is not admissible that women's movements which are supposed to defend women's human rights should deny other women these rights.

11. The meaning of this question is not clear to me.

12. The United Nations Decade for women greatly helped the Arab women's movement, especially in raising the pattern and tone of their demands for legal reforms, and in pressuring their countries to sign the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women. The UN's adoption of women's issues proved that the problems from which women suffer are international, and this has had a positive effect on the role of women's organizations in their societies.

13. There is no doubt that we are in need of research either directly on women's conditions, or on the conditions affecting women indirectly, such as poverty, the economy, and health, among others. Undertaking research that is 'gender-sensitive' will contribute to giving us a clearer understanding of women's social and economic conditions as well as women's needs. We

Fatima Sadiqi

hope that the new researchers will tackle issues that have still not been sufficiently dealt with, such as family relations as affected by law, beliefs, traditions, etc, and their effect on women's daily lives.

14. The instability that many Arab countries face, and that has reached a peak in Occupied Palestine, as well as the possibility of a war against Iraq with all its likely repercussions on the Arab region, these are conditions that relegate women's issues to second place. But we cannot overlook the spread of the fundamentalist movements which call for our isolation from the world on the pretext of fighting the West. This is a current of which women will be the first victims.

15. What we aspire to is for the women's movements to be more down-to-earth, and to break away from theory and 'superiority discourse'. They need to be more aware of the real problems that women in the Arab world face, and thus be more capable of raising essential demands, ones that have priority, and so be able to attract larger numbers of women to their ranks.

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1. In my view, their greatest achievement is making women in the Arab world aware of their position in society and of their rights. This is most visible at the academic level: in addition to a plethora of associations dealing with women's issues and women's rights, there are two graduate units of gender/women studies which will certainly ensure continuation. There is also a great number of publications (articles, books, seminars, conferences, etc). The women's movement has indeed opened the door for women to reach positions of decision-making and public power, and this is no small step. If we consider the profile of any Moroccan women in decision-making positions today, we notice that most of them have espoused the core aims of the movement; all of them still struggle for the same aims.

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The greatest failure of the Arab women's movement is the tendency to exclude men in societies where they still lead the show.

where they still lead the show. Men should be more involved at this stage, as we still need credibility at the social level. In my view, struggle for women's rights in the Arab-Islamic world is different from this struggle in the Western world, whose literature reaches us most. I think it is too early to focus the struggle on 'women only'; focus needs to be put on women but not by excluding men, because our societies are built on the family and not the individual.

2. Yes and no. Western feminism is like Western mathematics or Western physics. We cannot simply ignore them. I think we need to make a clear distinction between studying phenomena for the sake of knowledge, and applying these phenomena to our societies. In the latter case, we have to take culture into consideration. The accusation is part of the overall international atmosphere where tension has shifted from the Cold War between two major powers (the ex-Soviet Union and the USA), to the new world order where Islam is being used by some US leaders as the indispensable 'demon' other. Because such leaders focus on gender and victimize Arab/Muslim women to legitimize their 'civilizing' mission, we need to empower women in our countries by making their voices heard.

3. International causal factors should be placed first: the 'success' of the Iranian Revolution, the fall of the Soviet Union, the increasing power of the US, wars in the Middle East, poverty and disillusionment. Religious revivalism is not a reaction to liberal feminism, it is the result of the causes mentioned above. I have no clear strategy of how to deal with it, but I certainly know that we have to find a way around it. Revivalism is backed by political power (influential men) and the Arab women's movements are not. We need to tackle this issue more seriously.

I may also add that religious fundamentalism is part of a global turn towards conservatism. The spread of extremist fundamentalism is nourished by the already poor and deteriorating economic conditions of Arab Muslim populations.

4. I think it is good. Social policies in Morocco are becoming more and more the territory of civil society, and the private sector. Women are more active in civil society. By engaging in this type of work, the women's movements will become closer to the people.

5. Yes. For example, the present Family Code in Morocco is discriminatory. It is based on the wife's obedience to her husband and not on partnership and equal rights. We need to fight for reform by underlying that the Code does not reflect the true essence of Islam: equality and interpretation.

6. Yes. We need to work on our own models. Even in the Arab world, there are differences in the readings of 'struggle', and the tools that are used. We share things with Western feminism, Arab-Islamic feminism, Third World feminism, and other feminisms. My view is to be democratic at the theoretical level; we have no other option. Feminisms never grow in a theoretical vacuum; and if our theoretical frameworks emerge from social realities then they will be viable.

8. Yes. We need more democratization in our women's movements. I mean by this more structuring at the level of administration, for example limiting leadership of organizations to a specific duration, more transparency in the management of funds, and elections.

9. Not yet. In Morocco, with which I am most familiar, gender relations are still regulated by heavy patriarchy even in households where women are feminist leaders. Such changes surely take time and depend mainly on attitudes acquired outside the family, in school for example. One way of improving things is by working on school manuals from a gender-equality point of view.

10. Non-Arabic speaking minorities need to be more integrated into the women's movement. There's something new, however - a burgeoning awareness among democratic movements of the importance of language in this region. Morocco is a multi-lingual country where language is a powerful identity-builder. Within this 'linguistic' revival, Berber, a hitherto marginalized language (and culture) is emerging as a 'democratizing' factor; a factor which could keep the balance between religious extremists and the state. Linguistic rights are being understood as part of other human rights, and militancy to obtain them is part of the overall democratic project in Morocco. I read this development as a continuation of the type of struggle which the women's movements have been engaged in. However, it also problematizes the

term 'Arab' in Morocco as this excludes Berbers, who form 40% of the Moroccan population. The term 'Arab women's movement' is itself problematic for me: my country Morocco is officially Arab, but although I am Moroccan I am not Arab!

11. Linguistically the term is legitimate, but within each specific culture it should deconstructed. I said something about this above (10).

12. Very positive especially in consciousness-raising.

13. A 'dissemination' effect; it is like wearing the scarf for religious 'feminists'.

14. Female illiteracy and the misuse of populist ideology.

15. Prepare as many students as possible to take over. Make choices available for the younger generation. Encourage multilingualism.

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The term 'Arab women's movement' is itself problematic for me: my country Morocco is officially Arab, but although I am Moroccan I am not Arab!

Camillia Fawzi El-Solh:

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1. Among the achievements is contributing to the discourse on Arab women within the Arab region as well as internationally, and particularly in the Arabic language, specifically in the fields of development and literature.

Among the failures are: weak link with political processes; failing to involve more men in the gender equity debate; viewing income/capability poor women as 'the other'; failing to involve the younger generation of both genders more effectively; supporting women's liberation/gender equality in the public sphere while failing to translate this into reality in the private sphere - what I call 'pseudo-feminism'.

2. The charge is not justified in the sense that gender equality is a universal human rights issue. Keep in mind that there are reactionary/anti-gender equality movements in the West (eg. the Born Again Christian move-

ment which has been active in fighting women's reproductive rights etc, and on which the Bush agenda depends). We also need to keep in mind that 'gender equality' has been also pushed by international NGOs as part of their development agenda; and Arab governments dependent on foreign aid have had to adopt these agendas. The conservative male elites ruling the Arab region have taken on this agenda out of political necessity and expediency, and not necessarily out of conviction. Keep in mind also that elite Arab women are not necessarily real modernizers; they may be 'modern' (western) in their dress and lifestyles, but they also contribute in many ways to reinforcing the class/poverty divide and existing gender power relations. Just think of elite women's dependence on female household help, now increasingly from South East Asia. This is part of what I meant regarding the public versus the private sphere in relation to 'feminism', in response to question 1.

We also need to remember that Western feminism is generally opposed in the Arab region as being anti-family. We should not generalize this as there are obviously many Western feminisms. In reality and universally, supporting gender equality and addressing gender gaps imply changes in gender roles, male and female self-images, that is, changing power relations at the personal level. The reality in the West (as reading the press in the UK reveals again and again) is not so different: women there are considered to be mainly responsible for the care of children and family. So Western feminism has not necessarily achieved its aims, except maybe for the economically better off women.

Our best response is to stress the universalism of human rights, of which gender equality is an integral part. Cultural specificities can all too often, in fact tend to be, used as an excuse not to rethink gender relations fundamentally in ways which address class divides and other divides (ethnicity, religion, location, the political system, etc.).

3. Religious revivalism must be seen in the context of the complex linkages between the cultural/social, political and economic. Keep in mind that the political elites in the Arab region are linked to/dependent on the West economically and politically. Parallel to this is the reality that poor and marginalized communities in the Arab region are increasingly unable to depend

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on state social and welfare services (because of the impact of 'structural adjustment'). These factors form an obvious link with conservative/fundamentalist Islamist forces.

By definition no patriarchal-based religion can be the basis for a pro-gender equality struggle. Here is where the concept of citizenship becomes so important in my view, because it stresses, or ideally should stress, the common factors that link citizens with one another irrespective of gender, age, religion, etc. This is also why I am politically so against the debate on 'majority/minority' in the Arab region, using religion as the divide.

4. There's nothing wrong with pluralism in this sense. We should remember that women are not homogeneous politically, socially, economically, or culturally. But pluralism should not lead us into forgetting to stress that gender equality, like all other equalities, is a human rights issue, and to keep this common factor in mind.

5. Absolutely. And this means getting both women and men to work together, and avoid the current situation where men/male elites apparently feel 'threatened' by such a struggle. Again the stress on human rights is vital since it helps us to get disentangled from these endless debates about 'cultural authenticity'. Another key word here is 'choice': for women to have the choice to be as 'modern' or as 'conservative' as they want, and not have this imposed on them by others.

6. Why not? There are many political and economic commonalities on which to base affiliations. However, we need to remember the heterogeneity of women, their interests and agendas.

7. See answer 2.

8. Absolutely. The question is how? This involves and includes engendering the discourses on democracy and civil rights. Arab women need to be more pro-active politically. And that is the heart of the problem, i.e. the social cost to women in terms of male kin resistance; the social and economic price they may have to pay to be active politically; the danger of our assumption that when Arab women are politically active they will necessarily be progressive on gender issues; and the generally insufficient

male support. But then look at the difficulty of getting women into Parliament in the UK! To repeat: as long as family life is considered to be primarily women's responsibility, this means that the 'time factor' (ie. women having time to organize) will remain a huge problem. Yet there are many examples (eg. Bangladesh, parts of Latin America) showing that women's political action at certain levels and within certain boundaries is possible.

9. No; see answers 1 and 2 above. We still live in a world where women working for change are perceived to be 'strong' (*qawiyya*); implicit in this is the notion that the male kin (father, husband, brother, etc.) must be 'weak'. To some extent the notion of gender equality continues to be perceived in terms of winners (women) and losers (men).

10. This is what I meant above about gender equality being an integral part of human rights; also the concept of citizenship. But we also need to admit the reality that non-Arabic speaking minorities face serious political, social and economic problems linked to prevalent notions of the nation-state, and dominant nationalisms. In any case this is another debate where the crucial cross-cutting variables of gender and poverty have been ignored.

11. I prefer the term 'Arab feminisms', which is more realistic in view of the many divisive variables. I would also stress that when Arab women are 'active' on women's issues this does not necessarily imply that they are politically and socially progressive.

12. On the one hand it has been positive, by making many gender issues more visible. But it has also had an adverse impact in providing the 'reactionary brigades' (which I define as those who do not accept any discourse on equality, whether in respect of gender or any other variable) with the platform at which to launch their 'arrows'. Further, if UN agencies have a gender policy this does not necessarily imply that all their staff are 'gender-aware', or supportive of gender equality. Apart from UNIFEM's obvious mandate/focus of activities, the only UN agency that to my knowledge has an explicit corporate gender policy is the World Food Program. The recent evaluation indicates that while much has been achieved, a lot remains to be done. But there is now the expectation of

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accountability for gender mainstreaming among senior staff; and that is crucial. The World Bank is improving too, at least in its stated policies, though a lot remains to be done in respect of staff accountability. UNDP has also done a lot vis-a-vis gender, but staff accountability remains a problem.

13. Generally positive in my view, but we need to keep in mind that Arab women have diverse agendas, political and otherwise. Less positive effects have been the way that 'WID', 'WAD' and 'GAD' have led to a new female professional category called the 'gender expert', hence a new type of occupational segregation. Though it needs to be said that male professionals have generally not shown much interest in gender issues. Attitudes in organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank, but also in quite a few UN country offices in the Arab region, illustrate this point. It also needs to be said that professional women have in some cases tended to exclude men (after all gender has provided new employment opportunities for professional women who for various reasons do not have access to employment in the public and/or private sectors). We still have not reached the stage where gender, like poverty, is the business of everyone involved in development. Part of the problem is that the so-called gender experts have not always been clear or successful in getting the message across that the priority focus on women is because of the need to tackle gender gaps; but that gender is about changing existing power relations between men and women at all levels.

14. Divergent political and economic interests; failing to develop effective strategies to actively involve men (though this does not mean that we overlook the serious obstacles which men may put in the way of such cooperation; ie. the 'male brigades' who feel individually/collectively threatened by change).

15. More transparency and honesty in discourses. This means stressing what unites women individually and collectively, but also realizing that this notion of 'sisterhood is global' tends to become an excuse for avoiding serious debates about what divides women within individual Arab countries, as well as between Arab countries.

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