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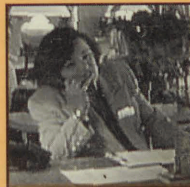
Arab Regional Women's Studies Workshop



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INTRODUCTION

WHY A GENDER/WOMEN'S STUDIES PROGRAM AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO?

CYNTHIA NELSON AND SORAYA ALTORKI

For over 100 years, despite the widespread Western perception to the contrary, the historical record in the Arab World and Egypt in particular bears witness to women's struggles to change traditional attitudes and institutions which have often prevented women's enjoyment of equal human rights including full participation along with men in all of society's functions. Progressive voices throughout the Arab region have long argued that a necessary condition for the optimum development of society as a whole rests on the participation of men and women in all spheres of activity. In more recent decades the challenge facing both men and women of the Arab region is the struggle to maintain a measure of cultural authenticity and material well-being in a world that is becoming increasingly more interdependent and structured by economic and technological forces originating from and orchestrated by powers that are beyond their control. These very forces not only offer the potential for new and more creative solutions to age-old problems, they also constitute the source of tremendous social and cultural rupture in societies that are traditionally structured around powerful gender-based roles and relationships.

The changes that are taking place in contemporary Arab Middle Eastern societies dramatically impact on both men's and women's lives and raise serious challenges about the future social structure and value system upon which gender roles and relationships will be defined. Key issues include societal development and the conditions for women's empowerment. The impact of these challenges calls for special analysis which must be undertaken and understood within the cultural and historical specificity of the region as Arab societies are neither homogenous entities nor variants of Western societies moving in a similar direction but at a slower pace. In terms of the impact of economic and technological change on gender questions and societal development, Middle Eastern societies probably share

more in common with those of Africa, Latin America and Asia than they do with the highly industrialized societies of Western Europe and North America. In recent decades the recognition of gender as a critical element in social organization as well as a category of analysis has opened exciting new directions for research and has provided new dimensions for a range of instructional offerings in Western universities. However, over the past five decades most analyses of "the woman/gender question" in the Arab Middle East has been through the prism of either androcentric Western social science or more recently through Western feminist scholarship.

What is needed in the region is a regional gender/women's studies scholarship that is capable of (1) stimulating research, curriculum development, and community action that focuses around and emerges from the Arab Middle Eastern experience in a serious sustained manner; (2) interacting with and contributing to an international gender/ women's studies scholarship. There is tremendous potential for such scholarship and praxis to take root within the region itself as is demonstrated by the experiences at Birzeit University in Palestine, Beirut College for Women in Lebanon, Ahfad University in Omdurman, Muhammad Cinq University in Morocco, the Center for Arab Women's Research in Tunis, Kuwait University, and al-'Ayn University in Abu Dhabi.

Given Egypt's historical and cultural centrality in the Arab world there is need for a solid and broad based program in Egypt that would enhance gender-based research, curriculum development, and community outreach. The goals of such a program aim to provide continued scholarship in this area, to deliver the products of research directly through educational programs, and to reinforce and strengthen other emergent gender/women's studies programs across the Arab Middle East by promoting dialog between and among scholars of Egypt, the Arab region, and other nations of the world. There is a great need to understand gender based roles and relationships and the changes occurring in them both. Such comparative scholarship and dialog as we envision can only lead to a greater understanding of parallel but different dynamic processes of change and transformation occurring in both Western societies and those of the Arab Middle East

The American University in Cairo is well positioned to serve as a central focal point through which to fulfill this research, educational, and outreach agenda. For over thirty years the graduate departments of the social

sciences and humanities have produced nearly two hundred Master's research theses written by and/or focused on gender related issues within an Egyptian society undergoing dramatic social and political transformation. The Social Research Center since its establishment in the mid-1950's has conducted numerous studies involving women, women-headed households, and women in development. In the early 1970s, the Open University Seminar Series provided a forum for dialog on issues to be addressed at the 1975 Mexico City Conference on the Decade of the Woman. In 1977, the university launched **Cairo Papers in Social Science** which has consistently published monograph length studies on women/gender related issues. Individual faculty efforts across the departments of the university reflect wide ranging interest in and publication on a variety of gender related themes.

Although a significant amount of research experience exists in many different areas of gender/women's studies at AUC, a recent survey undertaken among faculty across the university to determine the number and type of courses with a gender/women's studies orientation revealed only a few courses that specifically dealt with gender-related issues. There are a few courses that are tangentially related and could be developed with a greater gender awareness, but generally speaking there exists a great lacuna particularly in areas that would appear to be relevant, such as biology, political science, performing and visual arts, and women in science. From these results it is clear that there exists no concerted study that deals with gender/women's studies in an effective interdisciplinary manner. Students at AUC, however, are interested in these topics. That interest needs to be served in a way which effectively cuts across departmental lines and enables students to develop an interdisciplinary focus on these issues as part of their broader liberal arts education which the university espouses as its chief mission.

Determination of research priorities as well as the output of scholarly activity should stem from and lead to programmed dialog within the campus as well as with appropriate representatives of Egyptian society and between researchers here and in other institutions in the Arab region and elsewhere. The results of research and study, enriched by dialog, has the potential to lead to more effective teaching and publication, which in turn could lead to changes in understanding and modification of attitudes among students and the public.

An important first step in the planning strategy for the development of a Gender/Women's Studies program at The American University in Cairo would be to learn from the experiences of others, especially from those who have recently initiated Women's Studies programs within the Arab region but also from those with long experience with programs in other areas of the globe.

The rationale and centralizing theme for this workshop is to establish links with others in the region so as to be aware of what is going on in gender/women's studies within the university context of the Arab region. The main purpose is to learn from each other as the American University in Cairo begins to sharpen its own goals and objectives towards the establishment of a gender/women's studies program. The workshop would also provide an opportunity for those engaged in gender/women's studies programs in the region to meet together, get to know each other, define priorities in research agendas and curriculum building, and most importantly, to share knowledge on what is happening in the field within the region. What challenges do gender/women's studies programs face in the context of university education in the Arab region? This is the central theme and question that the workshop set for itself, and the proceedings that follow offer some preliminary answers.