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Soheir A. Morsy

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# Arab Regional Women's Studies Workshop



Cynthia Nelson  
Soraya Altorki  
Editors



Contributors:  
Boutheina Cheriet  
Cynthia Nelson  
Eileen Kuttab  
Haleh Afshar  
Lila Abu-Lughod  
Mona Khalaf  
Nadia Wassef  
Nahla Abdo  
Rania Al Malky  
Seham Abdul Salam  
Shahnaz Rouse  
Soheir A. Morsy  
Sondra Hale  
Soraya Altorki



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## KEYNOTE ADDRESS

# FEMINIST STUDIES: RELEVANCE FOR SCHOLARSHIP AND SOCIAL EQUITY IN ARAB SOCIETIES

SOHEIR A. MORSY

### Introduction

I appreciate the invitation of the American University in Cairo to participate in this Arab Regional Workshop. I look forward to our deliberations over the next few days. For the long term, it is with high expectations that I anticipate the establishment of AUC's integrated program of Women/Gender Studies. I also harbor hope that the AUC initiative will catalyze the formation of a regional consortium of academic institutions which would enhance the development of scholarship and feminist activism in the Arab World, and contribute to Feminist Studies internationally. Simply put, I am delighted to be here. This visit to Egypt is a homecoming in more ways than one. It is one of my frequent returns to Cairo, to my Arab homeland. Even as an Alexandrian I must acknowledge that Cairo is the heart of the Arab Nation.

Like some other Arab and Arab-American colleagues, it was my heartfelt connection to this homeland that catalyzed my interest in gender research, and more basically, my appreciation of the social science and humanities in a way to which Egyptian students of my generation had not been accustomed. In this regard I recall Professor Youssef 'Iz El-Din 'Issa's commentary about students who, contrary to personal interest, felt obliged to join the Faculty of Medicine or Engineering just because they got a qualifying *magmou*<sup>c</sup> (total grades) in their *Tawgihiya* (high school) exam. Professor 'Issa compared this reasoning to the irrational act of cutting one's finger so as not to waste the spilled contents of a broken bottle of mercurochrome.

My visit to Egypt this time is also a return to AUC, to the company of colleagues whom I have known as friends who serve the Arab World with commendable dedication. The convening of this workshop is but the most

recent example of AUC's long-term contribution to the promotion of feminist scholarship. Over the years this has taken many forms, including course offerings, graduate students and faculty research, empirical studies undertaken by SRC researchers, and of course the scholarly publications distributed by AUC Press. In support of Women's Studies over the years AUC has also provided institutional affiliation to guest researchers of different nationalities. Some current and former AUC affiliates have been active members of NGOs devoted to women's issues. Others have been associated with U.N. agencies which address these issues within the framework of social development programs.

Regionally, AUC faculty members are part of a growing network of researchers/activists who are committed to gender equity in the Arab World. AUC feminist scholars are among the founding members of Nour, the first publishing house specializing in works by and about Arab women. Published here in Cairo and distributed in the Arab region and beyond, Nour's Quarterly Review of Books has included contributions by both female and male members of the AUC faculty. Woman-centered Arabic language periodicals such as Nour and Hager, and Al Maraa Al-Gadida, provide opportunities for regional dialogue.

Arabic scripted publications which attend to developments in international feminist scholarship also create a space for commentary by local researchers on what outsiders have to say about Women and Gender in Arab societies. As such, these publications relate to epistemological concerns surrounding gender analysis, and the more general issues of social production of knowledge which we will be discussing during the Workshop meetings of the next few days.

Serious consideration of the sociopolitical and historical contexts in which scholarship is produced and propagated is necessary if we are to move beyond the standard critiques of orientalist reductionism and androcentrism. Not least is the need to give due consideration to issues of gender equity within Arab intellectual circles, and specifically in the Academy where feminist scholarship is yet to be given due recognition as a valuable intellectual pursuit. The insistence on attending to gender issues and correcting the marginality of feminist scholarship is not simply a matter of political correctness, to use the lingo of our times.

As a multitude of scholarly works produced over the past three decades have shown, attendance to gender issues is integral to analytical rigor; it

makes for good scholarship. This is not to advocate gender reductionism. In fact, as Virginia Vargas (1995:90) cautions,

A vision stressing solely gender also has its own risks: gender may become a reductionist concept in the sense that it will not reveal the different subject positions of women....(G)ender only gives women a theoretical unity.... It transforms women into an abstraction, forgetting the complex of individual differences inherent in people due to circumstances, environment, beliefs and practice. Gender may easily become an empty concept, not accounting for the specific articulation it evokes on (women's) other subject positions...

Concern with women's other subject positions should certainly include those of female scholars and political activists. As researchers who document the devaluation of women's labor in our selected research communities, it behooves us to subject to critical examination our own status in the Academy and in the larger Arab intellectual community. It is not only charity which should begin at home, so we must struggle against male dominance within our ranks.

Even the most casual glance at the composition of Arab intellectual circles suggests that the token *wazira* (minister) "syndrome" is not confined to establishment politics. For example, a feminist reading of a 1995 publication bearing the impressive title of "Arab Thought On the Verge of the Twenty First Century" leaves one well beyond the verge of indignation. The reader is left with the impression that feminist "thought" is either non-existent or not worthy of inclusion in this collection. The papers included in this compilation were originally presented at a gathering of predominantly male, and I might add, **PROGRESSIVE** male intellectuals. Of about fifty participants, only two women contributed papers and a third woman is recognized in the publication as translator of an essay originally written in French.

The invisibility of issues of Women/Gender, not to mention feminist "thought" extends to Arab male intellectuals' consideration of the Master epistemological theme of Orientalism and Inverted Orientalism. Regarding the critique of Orientalism, I must say to my Arab male colleagues, you have made your point about *el-khawagat* (foreigners) ad nauseam, but you continue to miss another important point which relates to the social production of knowledge in your own backyard. Talk about the carpenter's door being in need of repair. The fact that you, my Arab brothers, are part of

"Us," and not "Them," the fact that you are "Indigenous" and "They" are not, does not excuse you. Not even raising the banner "Toward a New Arab Social Science" entitles you to forgiveness, certainly not mine.

As an Arab feminist I am rendered no less indignant by your continued negligence of "our" political cum epistemological concerns than I am by a Western female researcher's undermining of Egyptian intellectuals' interest in, not to mention elaboration of a central analytical orientation which informs her Egypt-based study. In a similar vein, I am no less offended by your limited inclusion of Arab female researchers in "our" scholarly regional meetings than I am by the exclusion of scholars of national universities from the rostrum of a conference held here in Egypt in 1993 and under the banner of post-orientalist scholarship.

It is high time that concern with the issue of positionality, which is integral to "our" critical commentaries on Orientalism, be extended to knowledge production within Arab intellectual circles, including those identified as "progressive."

Then there are those whose disapproval of feminism is transparent and explicitly reasoned. Specifically I mean those who in the name of either religious conservatism or socialism readily dismiss feminism as part of "imported thought," or "decadent Western capitalism," respectively. To begin, the rejection of "imported thought" in the name of cultural authenticity overlooks the historical reality of the articulation of "our" thought and "theirs," of which Samir Amin (1989) reminds us in his account of the Mediterranean system which existed for a long time, particularly in the Arab-Islamic and Italian regions. Referring to the internal dynamics of this system, Amin explains that as societies are capable of exchanging products and techniques on the material level, they undertake equally intense exchanges at the level of ideas.

It turns out then that today's so-called imported thought is constituted, at least in part, of "our" one time **EXPORT** to "them." During the Golden Age of the Islamic Empire scholarly debates were not limited to exchanges within bounded geographic or religious communities. As Amin (Ibid:134) points out,

...it is indeed difficult to qualify Ibn-Rushd as Moslem, Maimonides as Jewish, and Thomas Aquinas as Christian. They are of the same intellectual period, understand one another, critique each other, and learn from one another wholeheartedly.

Needless to say, this kind of regional "learn(ing) from one another" is very different from that which would result from so-called normalization with those who occupy Arab land and deploy their scientific knowledge and a variety of technologies of oppression to maintain military and economic superiority over the Arab people. Their attempt to disempower Palestinian Arabs through what Majid Al-Haj refers to as *siyasat attajhil* (policies of creating ignorance) is a case in point.

Back to the dismissal of indigenous feminism as "imported thought." It is interesting to note that advocates of such thought policing partake of nothing less than Western Eurocentrism itself. As Kumari Jayawardena observes in her classical study of *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*,

In the West too, there is a Eurocentric view that the movement for women's liberation is not indigenous to Asia or Africa, but has been a purely West European and North American phenomenon, and that where movements for women's emancipation or feminist struggle have arisen in the Third World, they have been merely imitative of Western models.... (Contrary to these assertions), feminism was not imposed on the Third World by the West, but rather that historical circumstances produced important material and ideological changes that affected women, even though the impact of imperialism and Western thought was admittedly among the significant elements in these historical circumstances. (For example), (d)ebates on women's rights and education were held in 18th-century China and there were movements for women's social emancipation in India....In a way, the fact that such movements for emancipation and feminism flourished in several non-European countries during this period has been "hidden from history"(Jayawardena 1986:2-3).

The unearthing of "hidden history," as well as recent accounts of Third World feminists' struggles reveal that although these activists confront a variety of forms of social subordination, they share common political postures. Remarking on Third World feminists' common set of discourses, Nupur Chaudhuri and Cheryl Johnson-Odum (1996:2) observe that

...these revolve around many of the same assumptions, assumption (that these activists) seem to share more intensely with one another than with Euro-American feminists. In particular they have sought to interject class, culture, nationality, and race as salient factors in the discourse of feminist theory, strategies, and aims in an effort to make them more inclusive of the interests and experiences of a majority of the world's women.

The shared opposition of Third World feminists to imperialist internationalism, including its maternalistic form, is also evident in historical accounts during the era of "high" colonialism.

A recent historical study by Leila Rupp (1996) underscores the feminism-nationalism connection as a major point of contention between European and non-European feminists during the early part of the century. Using terminology which is certainly familiar in our times, Margery Corbett Ashby, the president of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, described Huda Shaarawi as "terribly nationalist and tyrannical." If Arab feminists were to call for the lifting of sanctions against Iraq's children today, we too would be similarly honored.

Among other principled positions, Shaarawi was unwavering in her opposition to settler colonialism in Palestine and to the British occupation of Egypt and India. As Rupp documents,

(When) Huda Shaarawi and Dhanvanthi Rama Rau joined the Board of the International Alliance, the Alliance held its congress in Istanbul and the International Council put its seal of approval on a special congress in Calcutta, the WILPF recognized the inappropriateness of allowing British women to speak for India and accepted the Egyptian section despite its position on disarmament (Rupp 1996:18).

The maxim of the foregoing example is repeated in the recent international feminist literature, including the 1995 volume entitled *The Challenge of Local Feminisms*, edited by Amrita Basu. Like other recent works which interrogate the analytical utility and political implications of Western-non-Western dualism in feminist scholarship, this volume underscores the diverse forms of women's oppression and activism. Far from conforming to a generic Eurocentric women's movement model, or a diametrically opposed form, the Basu volume shows that "women's identities (and struggles) within and across nations are shaped by a complex amalgam of national, racial, religious, ethnic, class, and sexual identities" (Basu 1995:4).

While consideration of contextual specificity is no doubt a commendable analytical posture, a word of caution is in order here. The belated "discovery" of feminist diversity, important as it is, should not undermine the need for recognizing similarities, at least for analytical



purposes, if not for the important goal of informed and egalitarian global feminist solidarity. Noteworthy in this regard are recent studies which challenge the assumptions that earlier forms of Third World feminism were essentially feminized versions of anti-colonial struggles, and that today's Third World feminism is primarily concerned with issues of food and labor, whereas biopolitics is the cause celebre of Western feminism. Contradicting these assumptions with examples of Women's Movements in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the work of Saskia Wieringa and collaborators shows that

Issues related to body politics, working conditions, education and political rights, class and gender were seen as legitimate concerns in most early women's movements around the world (Wieringa 1995:18-19).

The fact that vocal Third World feminists have stressed the materiality of power relations should not eclipse the reality that women today and in colonial times attempted not only to subvert foreign powers, but also challenged men's power over them in relation to a variety of cultural practices.

Conversely, in today's industrialized societies biopolitics is hardly a universally shared priority. Issues of food and labor are certainly important to women. April Taylor speaks to this point, and the related concern of broadening the definition of feminism and gender justice in the Fall 1996 issue of *Political Environments*, a publication of the Amherst based Committee on Women, Population and the Environment.<sup>1</sup> Ms. Taylor recalls:

I was giving a talk about Beijing at a local college, trying to make connections between women from a certain class background in the U.S. and other women from around the world when a woman walked up to me and said, "our issues are so very different from global women, we're concerned about glass ceilings, and they're concerned about food." I said to her, "I don't know where you come from, but my mom is

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<sup>1</sup> Having attended the Committee's recent Reproductive Rights conference at Hampshire College, I am inspired by the manner in which members of the Committee have combined scholarship and political activism in an effort to influence Public Policy regarding Reproductive Rights in the U.S. I hope to live to see the day when Arab legislative bodies invite feminist researchers to testify on issues related to women's welfare.

laid off right now and she's wondering about where she's going to get her next meal and the same thing for my aunt and cousin. So I don't know what world you're talking about."...I think that women who are in the "leadership" speak from a certain class vantage point and sometimes they want things as men (do). And that's why I enjoyed Beijing so much because I held people accountable on the "isms"....I found when (women in the leadership) said the word "women" I knew they weren't speaking of me.

In sum, for both the global South and the North, it is important to stress that within their specific socio-economic and political contexts feminists have shared similar concerns. As Seskia Wieringa (1995:20) reminds us, addressing these concerns collectively within the framework of durable alliances requires nothing less than respect for each other's priorities of struggle and analytical positions.

### **Women/Gender Studies Programs: The Past as Guide to the Future**

As we interrogate and celebrate the many ways in which women around the world transgress the confines of social conventions, let us also continue to attend to our own self-affirmation as feminist scholars and activists. Moving closer towards what AUC's feminist Dean, Cynthia Nelson, described as the need for "an alternative construction of knowledge" about the Arab region certainly requires much more than celebrating feminist history, the mere adoption of feminist rhetoric, or the extension of equal attention to women and men in social research. Even the addition of such progressive sounding designations as post-orientalist or post-colonialist is hardly sufficient. While comforting in certain ways, not to mention expedient in others, such rhetorical embellishments are no substitute for informed analysis of the global power relations which generate hegemonic scholarship, including the academic variant of what Jaqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty describe as free-market feminism.

Neither should the pre-mature raising of the post-orientalist or post-colonialist banners blind us to Arab Studies' internal colonialism, including its gender-focused variant. We still live in a world where human rights are nothing less than a "disaster area," to use the terminology of an Arab American Professor of Political Science who once served as a member of Amnesty International.

In the mined terrain of the Arab region, the production of local scholarship is greatly constrained not only by limitations of material resources, but, more importantly, by severe restrictions on academic freedoms and other forms of political expression. In this age of supposed decolonization, the situation of local researchers, particularly the young among them, lends credence to Naseer Aruri's notion of the recolonization of the Arab World, and what an Arab American anthropologist described as the "mining of Third World cultures" to the benefit of researchers of the Global North.

Local researchers are often engaged in relations of knowledge production which bear remarkable resemblance to the colonial model of appropriation of local raw materials to the benefit of manufacturers of the metropolis. Even the most casual consideration of the global political economy of knowledge, including feminist scholarship related to the Arab World, suggests that Ibn Khaldoun's understanding of knowledge as "dependent on the social, economic, and political conditions of society," is equally valid for our times. The wisdom of this fourteenth-century Muslim scholar regarding the Scholarship-Society dialectic remains relevant to both Arab and Feminist Studies of the Global Academy in this age of the "New" World Order.

In these times Western hegemony extends to the domains of scholarship and scientific research, but not without challenge from Third World feminist intellectuals, and progressive voices from within Western societies themselves. In the U.S., while the Academy has not been insulated from the waves of political conservatism which have swept the country since the late seventies/early eighties, these have not completely drowned the spirit of the Civil Rights movement and the anti-imperialist sentiment which had initially catalyzed the development of academic feminism as trans-disciplinary scholarship.

**Back to Cairo.** In creating an integrated program of Women/Gender Studies here in Egypt, AUC educators are privileged with long term and up-close acquaintance with the Arab region, its history, the sociopolitical and economic transformations that it has undergone, and its intellectual traditions. They also have the advantage of being part of a regional and international network of scholars and feminist activists. In developing and implementing its Women/Gender Studies program, AUC stands to benefit

from the so-called Law of Evolutionary Potential, aka as the "the merits of (selective) borrowing."

As AUC proceeds to build on its earlier experience to construct a coherent program of Women/Gender Studies, it has at its disposal ample documentation of the history of academic feminism, the struggle for institutional legitimacy, the different structures and philosophical orientations of undergraduate and graduate programs of Women Studies, and the different models of linking, or purposeful separation, of institutionalized scholarship from feminist political activism. Much of this documentation deals with North America where the U.S. alone has over four hundred programs of Women's Studies. Available documentation relates to a lesser extent to Europe and Australia, and least to Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Even with the expected benefits of learning from the past to plan for the future, AUC is still left with the challenge of rendering its feminist program of research and scholarship socially meaningful in the Arab context of feminist struggles. Relevant to this challenge are attempts on the part of feminist groups such as the Stree Shakti Sanghatana (SSS) to theorize their lived experience as a small group of upper class women who set out to politicize women's issues in Andhra Pradesh. As members of this group explain, they faced the difficulty of maintaining a balance between institutionalization and activism, particularly in relation to research work:

(Eventually) SSS had to make a conscious effort to confine itself to research and documentation, and move away from its pioneering activist role...While a part of the group believed in the importance of outreach in feminist politics, another part felt that research, reflection, documentation, and a consolidation of feminist learning were most essential....Activists began to feel that women's studies, though it derived its original legitimacy from the women's movement, was now seeking to distance itself from the very politics of that movement....Given the politics of First-World/Third-World relationship, it is not surprising that there was a privileging of university-based academic research and that activists with little formal research training were evaluated against standards set by "professional research (Kannabiran and Kannabiran in Wieringa 1997:274, 276).

How AUC will attend to this type of political schism in the local but globally articulated Arab context remains to be seen.

Specificity of context aside, for the Arab region, as elsewhere, creation of a feminist trans-disciplinary alternative to conventional academic

disciplines involves a process described by Catharine R. Stipson as "the deconstruction of error" before taking on "the construction of theory." The very naming of this process of deconstruction/construction, and the scope of the academic terrain on which it would be rendered operational have constituted central points of contention in the ongoing debate between those who insist on the distinctiveness of feminist scholarship and advocates of mainstreaming. This has implications for the very titles affixed to programs of feminist scholarship, to the scope of a program of Women/Gender Studies, and to the details of curriculum development.

### **Women, Gender, Feminist Studies: What Is in a Name**

Years after the coming of feminism to the Academy, debate continues to surround the program titles of Women's Studies versus Women/Gender Studies, and Feminist Studies. Chronologically, Women's Studies related to the emphasis on countering the androcentric bias of scholarship. Gender Studies came to serve as a short hand declaration of concern with both females and males, as well as their culturally constructed and historically variable relations.

Announcements about this Workshop suggest AUC's preference for the Women/Gender designation. I think that this appellation is useful in the Arab context where advocates of gender apartheid would be well-served by the more restricted label of Women's Studies. As for Feminist Studies, this label, to which I am personally partial, is suggestive of the multidisciplinary of feminist scholarship, but more importantly renders explicit its political thrust. This is in no way a suggestion of essentialism. In fact preference for Feminist Studies is an extension of my rejection of the designation Women's Studies. The implicit juxtaposing of Woman to Man conveyed by the latter is certainly reminiscent of Orientalist essentialism, and in some cases, even the Orwellian dualistic logic: Four legs good, two legs bad. As Micaela di Leonardi (1991:26) remarks,

Just as the postmodern era has hosted the renaissance of fundamentalist religion at home and abroad, so it has witnessed the continuation and elaboration of cultural feminist essentialism. The proposition that women are, across time and space, a single oppressed and virtuous class, and its entailed refusal to recognize the trans-historical and cross-class existence of wealthy, powerful, and evil women, has remained popular among many Western feminists.

Such feminist fundamentalism and the related illusionary notion of "sisterhood is global" was certainly contradicted by the all too visible power of Northern feminists at the U.N. International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) which was held here in Cairo in 1994. But this power did not go unchallenged by Third World feminists who raised the question "Where is the "D" in ICPD?"

Adding my voice to the refrain of rejection of Northern "sisterly" arrogance, I must say that I have no desire to forge bonds of sisterhood with those who contribute to the mystification of the "P" in ICPD. Nor do I harbor any sentiment of sisterhood towards those who, in the name of promoting the "D," and women's "empowerment," rationalize the targeting of Third World women as experimental animals for the testing of contraceptives (recently in the form of the so-called anti-fertility vaccines). Not surprisingly, this form of taking license with women's bodies is yet to inspire CNN's curiosity. Apparently the network only deems home-bred violations of women's bodily integrity news worthy (as was the case in relation to female genital ritual surgery during the ICPD).

Some of my acquaintances caution me against being divisive. Others say that my "rhetoric" of exploitation and imperialism, like other terms which some consider to be leftist cliches, is passe in this age of globalization. In response, I invoke the logic underlying a slogan scripted on T-Shirts worn by Diane Bell and Renate Klein in a photograph on the back of their recent book *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*. It reads, "I'll be a post-feminist in post-patriarchy."

## Conclusion

As we gather here for the next few days to discuss AUC's Women's/Gender Studies program, it will be important to consider the scope of this program and the possibility of selecting one or more themes that would distinguish it from the scores found around the world. While multi-disciplinarity has generally characterized academic programs of Feminist Studies, the relation of feminist scholarship to the disciplines remains subject to debate. So is the definition of relevant disciplines.

Given the importance of Science and science-based technology in our world, and the relation of both to women's lives, I am of the opinion that

academic feminism should no longer be restricted to the Social Sciences and the Humanities. Feminist Studies should certainly include the biological and physical sciences.<sup>2</sup>

Whether inclusive of the "hard" sciences or not, the academic investigation of the human experience from a feminist perspective is considered by some to be an utter waste of energy and resources, or even a means of taming feminist political activism. In the same vein, academic feminism is regarded by some as conducive to the propagation of Western values. As with other points of contestation, history has long served as a means of exoneration. In the case of the AUC program also, time will tell. Meanwhile, it is worth contemplating the wisdom of the late anthropologist Roger Keesing who reminds us that

(T)he genuine transformation of social systems--not simply the cosmetic treatments that often pass for "development"--places the ultimate demands on the adequacy of our theories. Commitment to improving the world is no substitute for understanding it...If we do not have the power to see beneath the surface of things, to see processes rather than symptoms, to see whole systems rather than separate parts, then our individual efforts will be dissipated, our voices will add to the confusion that surrounds us (Keesing 1981:497).

The understanding Keesing called for takes us well beyond the rhetoric of women's empowerment and sustainable development to consider the sociopolitical context of the practice of social engineering. As we contemplate the global village, let us not lose sight of the reality of "global pillage" during this age of Structural Adjustment, and downward leveling of environmental, labor, and social conditions. Whether in relation to gender or otherwise the understanding of these developments requires analytical perspectives which transcend by far the boundaries of our individual disciplines of specialization.

My work with the U.N., which in the case of Egypt has always benefited greatly from the research and publications of my AUC colleagues,

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<sup>2</sup> Post-modernists have underscored the sociopolitical instrumentality of Science. This is hardly a new discovery, as even a most casual reading of the Philosophy of Science literature of earlier decades would reveal. Neither is the bashing of Science an appropriate form of "resistance"; understanding Science is. Even with the current proliferation of studies of Science as a social construct, there is ample room for more feminist Gender and Science studies.

brought me face to face with the challenge of interdisciplinarity. Direct contact with women in different parts of the world also affirmed my belief in Rinku Sen's conviction that: "We Are the Ones We Are Waiting For" (Sen 1995).

By way of conclusion I draw on the hope and determination inspired by the Women's Creed, a Declaration of the 1994 Women's Global Strategies Meeting:

We are the women who hunger--for rice, home, freedom....We are the women who thirst--for clean water and laughter, literacy, love...We are the women who refuse to permit the sowing of death in our gardens, air, rivers, seas...We are the mothers in labor to birth the politics of the 21st century....We are the women men warned us about...We offer those men who risk being brothers a balance, a future, a hand. But with or without them, we will go on...We will leap...All this is political...We are the women who will transform the world.



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