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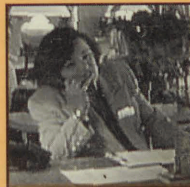
Arab Regional Women's Studies Workshop



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DISCUSSION

LILA ABU-LUGHOD

I want to say how honored I am to have been given the opportunity to open the general discussion of these two excellent papers, very different from each other, which nevertheless lay out so many important issues. What I will try to do is to highlight a few points that I think are crucial to discuss for a group concerned with women's studies and women's issues in the Middle East.

I found refreshing the fact that both papers were free of a knee jerk cultural nationalism and rejectionism of anything Western. Both suggest that feminism (which both papers see as a fundamental impetus to women's studies) is too important not to be at one level global. But both are also cautious about some problems with feminism and women's studies.

The Papers Did Not Pay Enough Attention To the Specificity of the Middle East Context

They didn't really come to grips with, though they both talked about, the most significant feature of women's studies or feminism in the Middle East and the problems it has to confront or the tricky paths it has to negotiate. They underestimate the legacy of colonialism and contemporary neocolonialism or the new world order, what I prefer to call East/West politics.

I think it is symptomatic that both Afshar and Abdo could not write about feminism, women's studies, and the Middle East without dealing with Islamism. Abdo is clear in her position: she considers it one of the internal reactionary forces and sees it as silencing and domesticating women. Afshar is more open minded, arguing for the need to make coalitions with, and certainly to try to understand Islamist feminists. Abdo says debates about authenticity and cultural imperialism have stifled research. Afshar is resentful that anyone could say that Western theory was not applicable to non-Western societies but on the other hand condemns those who are intolerant of other ways of being feminists.

But I think what they underestimate is how the association of feminism functions, and I would argue that its very basis in modernity, with its own complex association with the West, renders it vulnerable to various kinds of charges and indeed structured by certain values and assumptions.

It seems to me that the implication of feminism in East/West politics affects every aspect of what is possible and gets done here in terms of women's studies:

1. It affects how comfortably we can draw on Western feminist theory.
2. It affects how comfortably we can frame women's problems in terms of universals.
3. It affects the kinds of research projects to undertake, and most importantly, what to do about funding.

In the Arab World where foreign and international donors scramble to give money, how to negotiate relationships to UN Agencies like UNICEF, to WHO, to US agencies like the Population Council and the Ford Foundation, to the Dutch embassy, the Danish, the Germans and others, is an issue. All of these give support for women's issues, research on women, and even women's studies programs, but why? Do they push certain issues over others? How can a women's studies program have independence? Or be recognized as independent by those hostile to it and to Western interference? It also affects what kinds of social and political criticism can be voiced by feminists: domestic violence vs. the issue Abdo recommends we look at. This is not, in a Middle Eastern context, just a feminist or women's issue but opens one to the charge of airing dirty linen in public, especially to a West that has long condemned the Arab world for its maltreatment of women and justified its superiority and right to rule in those terms. In the U.S. when black feminists are critical of gender oppressions in their own communities, they are accused of being race traitors. How to balance nationalist, culturalist, and feminist loyalties is always going to be a troubling question, as Jean Makdisi pointed out so eloquently yesterday.

I think this specificity affects **why we would want women's studies programs and what kind of program they should be.**

I would add several others to the reasons Haleh Afshar gives for the need for women's studies or feminist studies: she argues for it to help see the world through a gendered lens, not just look only at half of the world; to understand women's experiences; to fill in gaps in knowledge; and to set up

a space where intellectuals and activists can meet to discuss problems of women and strategies.

In addition, it is important to have a place where thinking about issues of women and gender are legitimate we can really begin to think and explore, without having to fight the most basic battles about the very worth of the enterprise and the subject all the time. [That this is necessary here was brought home to me a couple of months ago when I attended a conference on women and the trade unions at Cairo University. Most of the invited speakers were women yet at one session, a male head of the trade unions had been invited to chair the session. He hijacked the whole thing, monopolizing the platform, ignoring female audience members who had questions, and instead pontificating in a retrograde and arrogant way about the necessity for women to balance their responsibilities at home and at work. This justified in terms of the dangers of devil worship, for which he blamed women as negligent mothers.]

Even more important is having a **space** to think through and debate openly such issues as the relationship of feminism to the local context and to the West and all sorts of other things that I don't think we have thought through adequately. Can we develop ways of thinking about feminism like nationalism or secularism as something that is neither imported nor indigenous so, answer those charges? I personally think that place needs to be within the academy, apart from policy-making bodies or interested parties. In the Middle East, academic spaces are especially precious if they can be (as one hopes women's studies would be, and one could be confident, at the American University in Cairo that it would be) not something whose line has to be determined in advance and where self-righteous posturing and ideological condemnation of others destroy any possibility of learning, but spaces for thinking critically and analytically together about how the social, political, economic, and cultural world works. I was impressed by the kind of critical engagement Haleh Afshar described for her work on Islamist feminists with Kandiyoti and Moghissi arguing back. It is a space for this kind of sharpening of our thinking that is needed.

I sensed in the papers, and in some of the remarks yesterday what I think is a dangerous tendency these days to denigrate the academy or theory in favor of an unexamined *activism*. The reason this makes me afraid is that we slide too easily into assuming that we already know what we need to do for women's situation here or anywhere. Women's studies is a critical

enterprise about some very serious matters and it **must** be intellectual. We need adequate theories to be able to effect transformations that we want to live with. The academy is one place where we can develop these theories.

This brings me to the final issue the papers raise.

How Relevant Are the North American and British Experiences of Women's Studies? What Can We Learn From Their 20 Years or So of Experience?

Abdo, I think very rightly, is not afraid to see that despite the apparent real differences in the situations of North America and the Middle East, the big crisis in Western feminism and women's studies, the crisis of "difference" and the fact that it was perceived as largely white and middle class and excluded or ignored the experiences of women of other classes, races, and ethnicities as not relevant.

If you are beginning a program here in the 1990s you can learn from the mistakes of Western feminists: the problem here is not white as opposed to non-white, but certainly middle to upper class and educated. And the discourse of feminism associated with this class can be in my opinion, patronizing and uncomprehending toward the rural, the illiterate, the Bedouin, and the urban poor. And this includes the many women who find Islam and Islamism appealing, something that I think Haleh Afshar has alerted us to. How are we to be tolerant of, respectful toward, and analytic about internal differences? There is not enough self-examination of the modernist assumptions and attitudes of superiority of feminists, whether Middle Eastern or Western. Haleh and Nahla call for attention, not just to issues of class, but even ethnicity and religion as just as important in Arab societies as Euro-American societies.

Another lesson we can learn from the crises of North American women's studies and feminism is about Eurocentrism. I am part of a project at New York University to internationalize women's studies: to include in our curriculum and our women's studies courses more of a global perspective which considers the experiences of women in other countries, especially the non-West.

No program here would need this sort of help since by nature it would consider non-Western societies. But I think that developments in the 1990s offer great new opportunities for a curriculum and an intellectual program

that doesn't want to look just to the West for theory and methodology. The most exciting developments in theorizing in the 1990s are in what is broadly called post-colonial theory (and the label post-colonial doesn't imply that colonialism is over but rather shows the fundamental importance of the legacy of colonialism to the societies we are concerned with). I think programs in the Arab World could benefit from looking equally east and south: not just for comparative purposes, to look at the facts about other places (which is indeed useful too) or what feminist movements have looked like there, but for theory itself, theories of the impact and nature of colonialism, dependency, nationalism, and so forth. In my readings, South Asian studies has the most brilliant thinking. But people working on and in China, Vietnam, and Africa are also developing some very interesting ideas. I would like to see a syllabus for the introduction to women's studies that used this thinking, not just the standard American and British fare about work, gender oppression, public and private, sexuality, epistemology, and so forth.

This will further differentiate Middle Eastern women's studies from American, but it seems to me (and you can correct me if you think I'm wrong) that the direction gender studies is taking in the U.S. now--not anything Nahla or Haleh or Soheir discussed--is not one that would possibly be followed here. There is no doubt that the real energy now in U.S. gender studies is Gay and Lesbian studies, or what is called Queer Theory. I think that is related to the historically specific peculiarities of the development of identity politics in the West, and I would be surprised to find it developing that way here in the Middle East where there is still plenty of energy among women and feminists and lots to do.