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Arab Regional Women's Studies Workshop



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THE INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES IN THE ARAB WORLD: THE NATURAL OUTCOME OF THE FIRST WOMEN'S COLLEGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

MONA KHALAF

When I was asked by Dean Nelson to prepare a paper on the setting up and development of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), I felt perplexed. I was not quite sure how far back in time I wanted to go. Talking about the IWSAW is not an easy proposition. Its twenty-five year history, unlike that of tether centers in the Arab World dealing with women issues, is closely linked with that of the first women's college in the Middle East; the American Junior College for Women which was established in Beirut in 1942. The situation prevailing in the area at that time seemed to be ripe for such a venture. In its report dated July 30, 1920, the Presbyterian Mission for Syria and Lebanon stated that "there was a need and opportunity increasingly felt for a type of more highly trained womanhood than is now produced in any of our girls' schools... The situation of the American School for Girls fixes it in the minds of many Syrians as aiming to do for girls what the American University does for boys" (Roberts 1958:10).

In fact, the American University of Beirut (AUB), known at the time as the Syrian Protestant College, had already established in 1905 a School of Nursing. It started admitting women in its Schools of Medicine, Pharmacy and Dentistry in 1920. This action was not, however, intended to introduce coeducation at the University because when requests were made by women to join the School of Arts and Sciences, the University Faculty were reluctant to take this further step. This led the University to convince the Presbyterian Mission to develop a college for women. In the fall of 1924, a new and separate class of college students was created at the American School for Girls in Beirut, in which eight students enrolled, three of whom had come from other schools than the American School for Girls. Three years later, three students graduated with a sophomore degree. "The aim was to offer courses of the freshman and sophomore years at the end of which the

students might terminate their college studies, or might enter the upper-class courses in the American University if they so chose" (Ibid:85).

An affiliation relationship was established between the American University of Beirut and the American College for Women. The University agreed not to admit women students to its freshman and sophomore classes, in return for which the College committed itself to: 1) maintain adequate academic standards which would enable its students to automatically join the upper classes (Junior and Senior) of the University and graduate from it; 2) provide hostel accommodation for women students at AUB. In addition, students of the College were allowed to visit the University library twice a week, attend lectures and cultural activities carried out on its premises on condition that they would be chaperoned by a teacher from the College.

In 1930, the Presbyterian Mission bought a piece of land within a walking distance from AUB and the cornerstone of the first building of what is today the Lebanese American University Campus in Beirut, was laid on March 2, 1933.

The American Junior College kept on expanding, and in 1938-39, student enrollment reached 116 students from ten different nationalities. The bulk of its graduates, however, did not pursue their studies and finished their formal education when they left the College. In fact, the primary mission of the College as seen by its President Mr. Stoltzfus "is to broaden the intelligence and spiritual outlook of the women who in their homes and society carry the responsibility for the social, cultural and religious life of the country." (Stoltzfus, *Annual Report*, 1938-39).

During the year 1947-48, the College introduced a junior class and in 1949-50, a senior class. By 1950, the College became the first four year college for women in the Middle East after having been granted a charter of incorporation by the Board of Regents of the University of the State of New York. As a result, its name was changed to Beirut College for Women and it was allowed to offer courses leading to the degrees of Associate in Arts, Associate in Applied Science, Bachelor of Arts, and Bachelor of Science. It should be noted here that based on a recommendation made in 1940 by the Senate of the American University of Beirut--which was in line with the mission the College had assigned to itself--special emphasis was placed on

developing and widening the curriculum of Euthenics,¹ a major which attracted, along with education, the bulk of the student body.

In the 1970s, the College became coed and its name was changed to Beirut University College. It is presently a full-fledged university--the Lebanese American University (LAU)--with professional schools in Engineering, Architecture, and Pharmacy along with a Business School and an Arts and Science School. It has three campuses in Lebanon and an enrollment of more than 3,500 students.

The Institute for Women Studies in the Arab World was established in 1973 by the University under the direction of Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr who sought to maintain the College's commitment to women seeking higher education. It was initially conceived as an academic unit that designs curricula, conducts research and sponsors conferences and seminars on women's issues. More specifically, its objectives were set as follows:

- 1) To enhance the University curricula.
- 2) To engage in academic research on women and children in the Arab World.
- 3) To serve as a cat bank and resource center on subjects pertaining to Arab women and children.
- 4) To serve as a catalyst for policy changes regarding the rights of women and children in the Arab World.
- 5) To facilitate networking and communications among individuals, groups, and institutions concerned with Arab women and children.

It is important to note here that children have always been, along with women, at the center of the IWSAW's concerns, basically because in our part of the world: 1) taking care of them is almost solely a woman's task; and 2) improving women's welfare entails improving family welfare. I have not included the children's activities carried out by the Institute in this paper because I felt they were beyond the scope of this workshop.

The Institute had hardly started operating when the war broke out in Lebanon and went on relentlessly for seventeen years. Women and their

¹ Euthenics may be described as the science of improving the home, the family, the child, and indeed the whole psychological, social, economic, and cultural environment (Shannon, 1977).

families were displaced,² the number of women-headed households increased from 10.6% in 1986 to 14.2% in 1995 (Comité National de la Femme, 1997) and the feminization of poverty was much more salient than any time.

At this point in time, the IWSAW felt that it could not limit itself to academic activities, but had to undertake a program to help women and children in the lower social echelons who desperately needed this help to survive. As a result, the IWSAW developed in two ways: first by pursuing its academic endeavors, and second by developing action programs for the community.

Academic Activities

The most important academic activities carried out by the Institute (IWSAW) could be grouped under:

Courses in Women Studies. Several women studies courses have been introduced in the University curriculum, for the first time in Lebanon since 1976; and few of them were opened to the public. There is not, however, a full fledged women studies program at LAU in the sense of getting a degree in women studies. The courses offered are: "Women in the Arab World: Social Perspectives", "Issues and Debates in Feminist Theory", "Women and Economic Power", "Psychology of Women: A Feminist Perspective", and "Representations of Women in the Arts and the Media." Unfortunately, these courses have not succeeded in attracting a large number of students. The only course that has been given on a regular basis is the first one, namely "women in the Arab World: Social Perspectives".

Research. A series of research projects have been undertaken by the IWSAW since its establishment. Among the most important ones carried out during the last five years, one could mention:

- "Images of Women in Children's Reading Books";
- "Effects of War on Women and Children";

² It is estimated that 22.5% of the 1991 Lebanese resident population was displaced, excluding voluntary internal migration (International Bechtel Inc. and Dar al Handasah Consultants, 1991).

- "Conflict Control Program";
- "Well-being of War Widows and the Wives of Kidnapped"; and
- "People in Beirut".

Several projects in progress and expected to be completed this year are:

- "Women in the Labour Force in Lebanon";
- "The Role of Women in the Media in Sustainable Development";
- "Women Writers and Poets";
- "Women in the Literature of Tayeb Saleh"; and
- "A Biography of Salwa Nassar".

The project is of prime importance because it will enable us, once it is completed, to assess accurately the economic contribution of women to determine the impact of this contribution on the status of the Lebanese women in society and link University curricula to market needs.

Documentation. The IWSAW houses a Documentation Center, located at the Stoltzfus Library of LAU, with 5000 books, 200 periodicals and unpublished papers in Arabic, French, and English. New national and international publications are regularly acquired to facilitate research work. The holdings of the Center are computerized and will be soon on the Internet.

Publications. The IWSAW publishes a quarterly journal in English, *Al Raida*. Its first editor was Ms. Rose Ghurayyib. Established in 1976, *Al-Raida* aims at:

- 1) Disseminating information regarding the socio-economic and legal conditions of women in the Arab World;
- 2) Enhancing networking between Arab women and women in the rest of the world;
- 3) Promoting communication among individuals, groups and institutions interested in Arab women's issues.

In addition to *Al-Raida*, a series of monographs and books have been published by the IWSAW, both in Arabic and English. Among the most important books, one could mention:

- *Women in the Lebanese Legislation* by Laure Moghaizel (in Arabic);
- *Sisters of Men* by Shereen Khairallah;
- *Women, Media and Sustainable Development* by Irene Lorfing;
- *The Lebanese Women's Movement* by Rose Ghurayyib (in Arabic);
- *Women and Economic Development in the Arab World* by Julinda Abu Nasr and Irene Lorfing.

Conferences and Seminars. A series of conferences and seminars have been organized by the IWSAW during the last five years. The proceedings of the conference have been published. They include the following:

- "Lebanese Women and the Environment", 1993;
- "Arab Women and the Environment", 1995;
- "Arab Women and Management", 1995 (in collaboration with the Lebanese Management Association);
- "Equality, Development and Peace", 1995, (in collaboration with the Beijing 1995 Committee).

The Institute has also been very active in organizing panel discussions, lectures, and film series. Some of the topics presented have included:

- "Violence Against Women";
- "Female Sexuality";
- "Women's Legal Rights";
- "Women's Movement in the Arab World";
- "Women and Education";
- "Women's Role in Economic Development".

Action Programs For Women

The Basic Living Skills Project (BLSP). It is a non-formal integrated educational program with an innovative approach to deal with

social literacy. It is designed for illiterate and semi-literate Arab women to be used by social and health workers as well as educators in community development programs. Its objectives are: 1) to improve the quality of life of Arab women, that of their families and society at large; and 2) to increase their active participation in the process of development by making them aware of their responsibilities, potentials, and opportunities.

The integrated program is written in simple Arabic and is divided into eight units: health, environment, home management, sex education and family planning, legal rights (for Lebanon), child care, civic education, and nutrition.

It consists of 140 lesson plans with attractive audio-visual material, colored illustrations, slides, games to accompany the written text, and a complete manual of instructions for the teachers on how to use the materials and how to evaluate the teaching process.

Based on the information available in the BLSP, thirty five short stories have been written for women with minimum reading skills. The purpose of this program is twofold: 1) developing the personality of the woman through the BLSP; and 2) improving the quality of income generating programs offered by the Ministry of Social Affairs and the NGO's.

Income Generating Activities. Since 1985 the IWSAW administers and implements a variety of income-generating activities to the displaced Lebanese women with skills which will help them earn an income.

The choice of training areas is based on surveys carried prior to these workshops to investigate market needs. These workshops are held in several centers in close cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs. The total number of women trained so far is around 3,000. The candidates have been trained in the following skills: sequin embroidery, secretarial studies, hair dressing techniques, professional sewing, factory sewing and carpet weaving, floral arrangements, and upholstery.

With the help of three social workers, the Institute selects the centers for training, identifies the training personnel, screens the candidates to place the right person in the right workshop, upgrades current programs of the centers, introduces new ones, and provides criteria for evaluation. Upon completion of the training, trainees are assisted in finding jobs.

Literacy Books. Based on the information available in the BLSP, thirty five short stories in Arabic for second level literates have been designed to help women develop social awareness. Topics deal with environment, legislation, and social behavior.

Rural Development Programs. Rural development programs include workshops to develop social and political awareness, income generating activities, and social and legal literacy activities.

The Institute for Women Studies in the Arab World has obviously done pioneering work in the Arab region. It is a natural complement to an educational institution which has dedicated fifty one years of its life exclusively to women's education. By combining its academic activities with action at the grass root level, it has reached a wide and varied array of women in different social strata, has succeeded in increasing their awareness, and has contributed to their empowerment. Similar and concerted efforts, if carried out in other Arab countries, would help improve the status of the Arab woman and promote a better image of her to the rest of the world.

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