

Arab feminists map out the status of women's rights in the region

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Arab women are more likely to win political rights than secure personal and civil status rights, said participants at an international conference on Arab feminism, held at the American University of Beirut Oct 4-7, 2009.

Attracting a strong turn-out that was overwhelmingly female, the conference was organized by the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers, Bahithat, in partnership with The Anis Makdisi Program in Literature (AMPL), the Women and Memory Forum in Cairo, the Department of Women's Studies at Bir Zeit University, and the Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World in the United Kingdom.

The conference was introduced by Professor Maher Jarrar who heads AMPL.

Najla Hamadeh, a former AUB professor of philosophy, said that Arab tradition does not denigrate the humanity of women, as is reflected by the Arabic language. For instance, she said, the Arabic word 'insaan' [human] is used for both genders, unlike Western languages which often use "man" to denote human beings. On the other hand, Arabic terms for sex with a woman can be disrespectful of women, said Hamadeh.

"This explains why women do not have family and civil status rights, although they can obtain political rights," added Hamadeh.

Religion and religious interpretation, too, have contributed to restrictions on women's freedoms, she said. Hamadeh suggested to activists to push for women's family rights before pushing for their political rights. "Studies have shown that a woman's happiness is closely linked to her wellbeing as a mother," she said. "If a woman doesn't have rights with respect to her children, she's not happy."

Some participants said that the absence of a unified Arab feminist movement was attributed to a historical preoccupation for fighting colonialism, occupation, and pushing for regime change. However, others argued that the Arab feminist movement does not necessarily have to be unified in order to achieve tangible results. It only needs to converge and collaborate on specific themes, some participants said.

Keynote speaker, Mervat Hatem, president of the Middle East Studies Association and a political science professor at Howard University in Washington DC, mapped out the future of Arab feminism, noting that both Arab states and religious groups have curtailed the progress of the movement.

Hatem argued that while secular regimes, such as the Baath regimes of Syria and Iraq, and Arab nationalism in Egypt and Tunisia, had expanded women's rights to education, public work and political participation, these rights were confined to middle and upper class women. "In exchange for these formal rights, middle and upper class women have remained silent about the needs of working class women," said Hatem. "These states presented themselves ... as socially progressive although their political authoritarianism could not be doubted."

Moreover, Hatem said that "the rise of political Islam and its successful re-Islamization of the discourses of many Arab societies have been viewed with hostility and suspicion by secular and nationalist elites, feminists and intellectuals."

Nevertheless, this "does not justify the objectionable language used by some secular feminists to denigrate and devalue the Muslim women who have chosen to return to the modest and conservative Islamic mode of dress," she added.

In fact, Hatem said that the modernization discourse had, for a long time, "convinced many Muslim women that Islam is an obstacle in the struggle for women's liberation." Moreover, this discourse had claimed that "the only way they could achieve equal rights is through secularism which marginalized Islam as the source of gender inequality in divorce, inheritance, marriage, and testimony in court," she said.

But "Islamic feminism lays this argument to rest," she said. "It makes an important distinction between the religious texts and the male interpretations that have dominated our understanding of the Islamic tradition ... It is possible to be simultaneously opposed to the political project of Islamism which is the creation of a religious/Islamic state, but to support the project of Islamic feminism."

As for Zeina Zaatari, who is currently the senior program officer for the Middle East and North Africa at the Global Fund for Women, her presentation prompted a loud round of applause, after she called for pushing for women's sexual and reproductive rights and advocating for women as human beings, not just as mothers and wives.

Several other topics were discussed during the conference. These included feminist expression in Arab fine arts, modernizing Koranic interpretations, colonial feminism, examples from various Arab countries, and Islamic feminism.