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Arab Regional Women's Studies Workshop



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OPEN DISCUSSION

Haleh Afshar: Women and development projects have been really successful; e.g., the overwhelming changes in the personal status laws in Iran in the past 17 years. The question of empowerment and how women should engage with the state to assert their rights is also important. In light of the idea of the lack of dichotomy between theory and practice, the question to raise is how to deal with the situation of women whose position you disagree with but whose achievements you commend? Referring to the Iranian Islamist feminists, one is bound to reassess one's entire position. If we say that there is no divergence between theory and practice, it is difficult to say that we understand but will not support them.

Boutheina Cheriet: Concerning the defense of development, I will be critical. There is a difference between the development notion and the actual destructure and restructure of various social formations world wide along the capitalist mode of production. Debating that development has restated the question of participation, one can argue that there is no empowerment of various social groups who are not participating in the development process as citizens and social actors. There are only technocratic decisions taken by male elites with the view of incorporating the rest of society and so there is no emergence of civil society with its confrontation with the state. What is happening today is confrontation between civil society and the state. This is the impact of the establishment of the capitalist system and what is welcome now is the process of confrontation between secularist forces and others using religious, ethnic, linguistic and identity-based types of arguments because we need to break asunder the monopoly of the male elite. Public debating is essential as far as the participation of citizens in the Arab world is concerned. We are authoritarian and there is little contestation, confrontation and public debating. What happened in Iran is very positive.

Shahnaz Rouse: I commend the need for public debate and discourse, but there are two questions: 1) How do the states position minorities rights? They should have a right to live as full-fledged citizens and participants. 2) Another question is the way debates in the Muslim

world tend to center around the question of organized Islamist groups. For example, in Pakistan, Islamist groups have been contenders for political and state power since the country's very inception. This has to do with the particularity of Pakistani experience, since it is the only country other than Israel that has its birth in a religious identity. These groups have never been able to win more than a handful of seats meaning that they do not have popular support in Pakistan. What is interesting is that when we talk about the question of religion and identity in our societies, what we are overlooking is that we are still talking about a select few, not about the mass of the people who believe and identify culturally with Islam but it means something entirely different to them. I am bothered by the fact that the studies that are done on Islam are based on these Islamist groups and not what is considered by the Islamists as heterodoxy within Islam but which for a lot of people has the real meaning of Islam in their lives. There is a need to talk about which Islam and whose Islam and not take it for granted that what we have at the level of public discourse and power in the states that have undergone Islamist experiments, in one form or another, are actually representative of the meaning of Islam to all people.

Barbara Ibrahim: I agree with Dr. Cheriet that issues of participation are capable of being subverted and marginalizing and that token participation can come to be seen by some as real participation. There is a need to be aware of what is real and what is not. Yet I am concerned about the possibility of taking a concept like development and essentializing it and failing to see it as having historical evolution, then we would be guilty of what we had been critical of others for doing. In that regard, if we return to the 60s and look at what was happening in socialist authoritarian states in our region and international development, it is the same thing--essentially big top-down development projects that were supposed to transform society. But by the end of the 1970s something was happening in the development community internationally that was not necessarily happening in the dialectic of these regimes. That has largely to do with the entry of feminist thinking, perspective and strong women into the international development community in certain areas that begin to insist on the focus on women as political actors and where in the political process they have influence. There is an insistence on having another look at poverty and how it evolves from one generation to the next, and also an insistence on re-looking at systems

of education in terms of how ideologies are transmitted from generation to generation and what are the problems of access in our educational institutions. This happened because of the feminist perspective, and therefore we must be careful and recognize that the development community today has a great deal of diversity within it and a lot of contestation, even in huge institutions like the World Bank because women are inside struggling.

Boutheina Cheriet: As far as the concept of development is concerned, my problem is with the methodology of it in terms of formulation and implementation. No matter how many cosmetic types of reforms one can bring upon it, it will remain attached to its first form and its first nature; i.e., it has not posed the question of the participation of the citizens in the affairs of the city at the world level or at the level of the nation-state. Even people working as consultants of the World Bank and other bodies worldwide have been critical and mentioned the adverse effects of development policies in Africa and especially on women who have been marginalized by modernizing development policies especially as economic actors. Yet 20 or 30 years later we are doing the same thing with gender; i.e., it is being formulated and implemented in the same way as development. We have a nice notion of the need to bring in women as active participants, but we have not at all undertaken the fieldwork mentioned. Even if it is done, the system is so hard-headed and stubborn that it will keep on being done in the same manner. What I would like to remind us of is that the concept of development has not posed the essential notion of human rights that we are posing today but again for the needs of the international system. We are posing the notion of women's rights in order to establish "infatih" all over the place. It is a matter of the nature of the concept of development and its historical emergence that we need to address.

Shahnaz Rouse: Concerning the situation in Pakistan, those responsible for introducing a women and development component from outside the country, did not take into consideration what was happening to the legal constitution of the country (wherein women's status was being legally rendered subservient to men through the *haddood*, *qisas*, and *diyat* ordinances, as well as those pertaining to the laws of evidence). Thus, even though women in development projects provided space for women, they did

so through a pre-determined package with little regard for what was actually transpiring on the ground. The latter developments (of which the legal changes referred to are simply one component) make it extremely difficult for women to experience any fundamental transformation, speaking here not in quantitative but in qualitative terms. Practitioners in the women and development field demonstrated a complete omission of these realities. What does this tell us? It suggests there is an extreme schizophrenia in the development field regarding the totality within which women live. Different practitioners in the field are working in ignorance of each other's efforts and at counter purposes.

Pakistan witnessed its most vibrant women's movement precisely after Zia ul Haq came to power (and when the above mentioned laws were introduced) and before NGO-based money hit the scene big time. What the availability of these large sums of money has done is to co-opt a large segment of those involved in the women's movement into precisely the sort of technocratic development scheme that Dr. Cheriet was referring to. A large cross-section of women in development studies undertaken in this period adopted an empiricist approach to women's issues, concentrating on data gathering and analysis that could be manipulated by anybody. Rather than questioning the assumptions of mainstream women in development practices and thinking, they have proceeded unquestioning with its biases and assumptions. In large measure, this has had a negative effect on women's struggles in Pakistan, rather than carrying them further substantively. It has served to pacify the women's movement, though not entirely, but to a large extent.

Member of Audience: The relationship between the private and the public is important. This is particularly related to the domain of family power relations and dynamics which is understudied in our part of the world. This is an area that the new endeavor at The American University in Cairo can work on provided that they do it right by networking with all the national universities and institutions to be properly networked nationally. A huge area of contribution is to pick up the private domain and make it public. This is one area very much necessary in Egypt and it is not only for citizenship. It is also integrally related. Family determines citizenship in this part of the world; not only that, it also determines labor space (not labor market because we are not yet a full-fledged capitalist social formation to

talk of labor market). 60% of our women are in unpaid work which is family-based. Thus the kinds of things family determines both in terms of citizenship and labor space are infinitely important in the whole power struggle and feminist struggle. We don't know much about the family dynamics taking class into consideration within these types of social formation. Thus family is an important domain to pursue for gender studies at The American University in Cairo.

Seteney Shami: I would like to make a comment on linking issues of women with minorities and definitions of a region: inclusion and exclusion. If an entity is called Muslim then we exclude Christian; Arab excludes non-Arab. For example, how do we include Berbers in North Africa as Arab or Muslim? The word minority is a problem--it assumes something called majority which is seen as natural rather than constructed and therefore feeds into the whole nation-state construction. Such issues need to be looked at in terms of citizenship but also in terms of development. It is not a very widely visible fact that development projects, especially the state-building, massive kind of infrastructure development projects, have a great deal to do with structuring majority/minority relationships. The standard Arab nationalist line has been that these problems are colonial, that is, created by colonial states and hence the problem of minorities and identity. But looking at the state-building development projects and what they have created in terms of identities that are ethnicity-based and community-based is a very interesting exercise; e.g., the effects of the various phases of building the Aswan dam on the Nubians, and in Syria, how agrarian reform displaced hundreds of Kurds, many of whom went to Lebanon. These issues could be interesting if placed in a feminist framework to explore groups that are reformed through such dynamics construct the position and role of women.

Nadia Farah: One of the things that can be stressed because they are understudied is the question of the globalization of capitalism. All across the world, not only in the Middle East specifically, women are constrained to give space to males especially with the economic recession of the seventies. There is no transformation, appearance of auto industry and getting into information systems. The backlash has been in both advanced countries and in the Third World. We stress Islam so much because it is usual to stress Islam in the Third World and we are saying that Islam is imposing a set of

relations, especially gender relations that are patriarchal. But what about Christian fundamentalism especially in the U.S.? It is really the same phenomenon but we weigh one phenomenon to the detriment of the other. What about the call for the return to the home even in the most advanced countries. The question is that we should really study the processes and dynamics (the global dynamics) and then look at our niche but without being blinded to the similarities of situations that cut across--whether gender, ethnicity, or class. Perhaps in gender it is more complex because we have gender, ethnicity, and class together, and therefore there is a need for more in-depth studies of the international processes of globalization and how these processes have engendered specific images perhaps we look more at because of they are exotic; we do not recognize what is happening somewhere else. There is therefore a quest for a more global view of the dynamics so we can see our niche within them.

Cynthia Sheikoleslam: I agree with the position of Boutheina that a lot of development theory is a new kind of patriarchal domination. A lot of rhetoric is very much like the American rhetoric of my childhood in talking about women as the guardians of tradition as a way of maintaining and imposing the double standard. My impression is when talking to students here about what do they mean by tradition, they need to preserve the key; it is particularly the double standard that they are concerned with maintaining. One of the things that seems to be interesting in state-sponsored education is that the other part of the traditional women's function of religious instruction has not been co-opted by the state and takes place within the school. This is a further diminution of a potential function of a woman which could be positive. This could be an interesting area for further research and discussion.

Cynthia Nelson: In response to Nadia's reiteration of your plea Shahnaz and the call for the need to study the global and have a global perspective; I ask, how do you study the global, the world, without in-depth knowledge of some place somewhere and hence the knowledge of in-depth historical specificity somewhere in which there is a comparative base upon which we could share with each other to build up that sense of the global. I do not know how to study the global. It is difficult to work and think within a political economy framework when one is not trained in that way

because one is coming at it with respect to some issues and questions that would have been vain had we not listened to what it means to be a woman living somewhere. Our problem is not being relegated to the margins of academia or being deprived because somehow we are neither capable nor involved in storming the ramparts in the sense of changing that which oppresses because we need to be able to consolidate and to bring our experiences together in some way that has some force behind it other than just gathering and creating programs in order to validate our jobs, so we can get a salary, and create departments and get grants.

Shahnaz Rouse: It is important to know the relationship between form and structure and not just to operate on structure without understanding the form, which is what the local represents. Otherwise you cannot really have a struggle. This is why it is really crucial to emphasize the particular.

Soheir Morsy: The comparative perspective is the context of our discussion. Even the comparison of two experiences related to women's studies as a program and the differences between them underscores the specificity of the needs of the region. The comparison between the Algerian, Iranian, and Pakistani cases is what it means in terms of the generalizations that we can make from this kind of comparison. It was important to problematize the nation-state in relation to development and in relation to the creation of space for participation by women: who are these women, what are their spaces and to what end? This is an important issue which also brings to our attention the need to historicize the nation-state, having grown up in Egypt at a time when the collusion of the state took a different form. Here there is room for comparison. People were talking about schizophrenia and somehow it really had a bad rap because I think that something creative could really come out of schizophrenia. There is the other side of the role of the state in creating spaces in the 1960s; e.g., with the introduction of education in the rural areas for young women who, although not tying their personal problems directly to the public discourse, nevertheless felt a certain empowerment as citizens of Egypt in a way which we do not have today. So the ideas of progress that are questionable in terms of the overall result of that kind of trajectory nevertheless has had a very positive impact on certain segments of society. Even in relation to something like female genital mutilation. It was one thing for women who

have internalized the ideology of the state about progress who were actually in a position to shelter their younger sisters from being circumcised. So there is something going on. Indeed the technical solutions the state has adopted were there but there was something else going on. Especially when we compare it to the spaces that have been created by international agencies in this era including the World Bank which is, in fact, very supportive to ideas related to women's health, eradication of female genital mutilation, and so on. But then again it is the same kind of positive technical solutions. So the technical solution is behavior modification rather than looking at the possibility of actually transforming the conditions which reproduce that kind of practice. It is again important to emphasize the historical context in which development takes place.

Aida Seif Aldawla: Because we chose to refuse certain set-ups, stereotypes, and positivistic attitudes, we end up with nothing coherent. However, without anything coherent, there is hardly a solid point to start from. I find it difficult to agree with the notion that the word development is a product of international agencies. We shall face this problem all the time. Whenever our language is co-opted we start looking for other words, for another language to refer to what we want to say, instead of reclaiming our language and retaining its original meanings. Why do we have to be so critical of the term development as a whole, instead of spending some more time and adding a few additional words to describe what is and what is not development by our terms?

An additional worry I have has to do with the relationship between state and citizen, which according to Shahnaz, always has the same thing to offer women, whether it is an Islamic state or any other kind of state. I would think it is an oversimplification to reduce the Egyptian experience, for example, into those two elements of an acting state and a recipient oppressed citizen. I cannot see this relationship between citizen and state as one homogeneous relationship since 1952 until the "infitah", for example. It was undoubtedly an authoritarian regime, but the way this regime came into being was not totally out of the blue. It was the result of a long history of struggle that, fortunately or unfortunately we may disagree, ended up in this coup or revolution, which supposedly held the agenda of the people at that time. The citizens themselves saluted this revolution, except for a minority. Nasser dissolved parties, but parties also dissolved themselves and fed into

the liberation project led by Nasser. There was a project of development that did not target the private space of women. However, the advancements on the public space spilled over into the private space. Our personal status law, for example, was always based on Islamic jurisprudence, interpretations thereof, since all religions, once mediated, are already interpreted. There is no religion in the abstract. However, what was going on at that time reflected on the people, how they looked upon women, and how women perceived themselves. Take the image of the young Egyptian woman in the media of the sixties for example: young university students, working towards their careers, choosing their partners, starting from scratch and marrying the men they chose, frequently in defiance of their families. Those images were positive images at that time, quite different from the images we have today. In both periods the personal status law was more or less the same. The collective consciousness of people was shaped by something else.

Furthermore, regarding the role of civil society, I wonder what is the role of civil society which has a space for everyone in Egypt today. The Islamists, are they not part of civil society? I am afraid that we keep on deconstructing themes and issues and at the end we find ourselves with nothing that is correct, nothing that is new, nothing that is affirmative.

There are many problematics in practice that cannot be reduced to the idea that there is an authoritarian state and a recipient marginalized citizenship, among which women are the most marginalized. We need a gender analysis of the political context. The situation is not black or white. An Islamist state is not necessarily the same as a nationalist state for women.

Also the Islamist state is not one and the same everywhere. Those differences do matter. We hear of a space allocated to women, or seized by women in Iran, for example. This is different from the situation in Sudan where women are faced with incredible difficulties, forcing them almost underground and the brutality of the regime indicates no such possibilities of dialogue in the near future. Which is going to be our references when we talk about women ruled by Islamist regimes? I do understand the need to highlight certain issues, but I do not think it would be right, in order to do that, to marginalize other issues and factors to the point of non-existence.

Shahnaz Rouse: I do not think that either of us (Dr. Cheriet and myself) was trying to argue that there is a homogeneity, but that there is in fact a process that is problematic and needs to be looked at closely. Part of what has created Islamist movements (though it is more complicated than that) is the very serious repression of other kinds of alternatives within our societies. This is something we cannot get away from. Another is the question of funding. Perhaps it is different in Algeria, but in Pakistan, the Islamist groups were heavily funded from abroad. It seems that the question which has to be examined is the question of the process whereby the state invokes citizenry or civil society. Obviously it is a dialectic between the two and not a one way interaction. That is where I think questions of class become really critical. The state operates in the interest of a particular class although it may make certain concessions to particular segments of the population, depending on the particular form of the state and articulation of classes and their related struggles. But ultimately, despite what it might concede at a particular moment, the state in peripheral capitalist societies is committed to the maintenance of the (capitalist) status quo, with some possible variations as to the form it assumes and political structures and institutions through which these are reproduced. There is a difference between seeing gender in everything, and in seeing the state through a gendered analytical framework. If you adopt a gendered lens in analyses of the state, certain issues become relevant which might not otherwise emerge. These are the two points both Dr. Cheriet and I are trying to emphasize: first, about process; second, about retheorizing the state by adopting a gendered perspective. Clearly the character of the state itself can only be understood in relationship to history, that of peripheral capitalist formations and their ensuing tensions and dynamics, each with their own particularity.

Boutheina Cheriet: I need to clarify something about the development concept. Again I say that being critical of a concept is just a scientific attitude and we are here for that--to deconstruct and to have doubts; mainly and I think that science is constructed on doubts and refutations to start with. This does not mean waging war against a concept or a class or the people representing the state. We need to be rigorous in our attempt to deconstruct our reality and concepts that have been constructed in specific historical contexts. What gender analysis has been doing now and in the future is helping us to get out of the linearity of the relationship between

the state and society that has been established. If in the end we mention the emergence of civil society with all their groups, this is what is most important to us because if you remember when you follow the process and the whole policy that was linked to development as established by the nation-state and the international system, the question of the role of civil society was never posed. We should welcome the fact that we need to deconstruct, refute, and criticize in order to rebuild. We must destructure in order to restructure.

Sherifa Zuhur: We do not need to choose between focusing on gender and economic development, gender and political change, or gender and historical change. They all need to be taught and they are interrelated. The comparative and case study methods are important in understanding the change or lack of change for women in war, under occupation, within dislocation, within civil strife (Algeria, Lebanon and Palestine). We must try to see what has or has not changed for women. Deconstructing the composition of citizenship or rethinking citizenship is part of that process and part of the solution; part of explaining the crisis right now in Algeria. The problems concerning development are important also to the growth of women's studies programs. I was once involved in a debate about what the appropriate field work for women's studies should be. I had anticipated the kind of field work that constitutes research in the Middle East; to send students out who begin to collect data or learn to conduct oral histories or research on a particular period. I was startled that an existing program regularly sent students as interns in NGOs and community associations, for example, to a local shelter for battered women. We had a lengthy discussion concerning the validity of such field work; if students were interning then what would they learn theoretically? This is a natural point to be considered for a program here in Egypt.