

80 | editorial

issue 69

the realm of the possible: middle eastern women in political and social spaces

This issue is intended as an intervention into Western feminist thinking and understanding of Arab women. This has long been an area of contention, filled with pre-conceptions, prejudices and to a limited extent romanticization from Western feminists on the one side, as well as resentment and disappointment from Arab women and feminists on the other.

It is an intervention in two ways. First, the articles document some aspects of Arab women's lives. We want to stress that these articles in no way reflect the full reality of women's lives, yet they are intended to give a picture of some of the challenges faced, the possible similarities as well as the differences in the Region. Second, they can illustrate to some extent how, despite the diverse geo-political realities in each case, women (as well as men) position themselves in relation to external centres of power, either identifying with them or defining themselves against them. In this issue, we wish to engage in a rigorous, dialogue between Western and Arab feminist thinking in the full knowledge that neither is a homogeneous entity, for there are splits and fractures in-both groups. Although the focus of this editorial is to open out a space for reflection on feminist thinking and Arab women, we do not wish to smooth away the internal differences within Western and Arab feminisms. Our endeavour, in part, is to make a difference – to both Arab and Western women.

We recognize the crudeness of using these terms – Arab and Western – and we do so for the sake of simplicity rather than from a belief in the homogeneity or the accuracy of the categorizations. Part of the difficulty emerges in this issue itself, as we include two articles about Iran although this is neither an Arab country nor in the Middle East. So in referring continually as we do to 'Arab women' as a homogenous term, we take away the complexity and specificity of the historical and social contexts of Iranian women.

We take the position that identity – self and other – is formed and remade in a complex inter-relationship, which embodies not only the personal self, but our discourses, representations and dominant ways of thinking. Baldly, we do not live in isolated worlds, for even in the remotest village both women and men are invaded, at the most intimate levels, by power relations that exist at once both externally and internally. Monetary aid from the United States, the World Bank, McDonald's, female genital mutilation, early marriages, honour killings, unemployment, all intermix to create a particular culture and context of power. This context is further woven from the myriad existing power relations,

both past and present, at different axes of class, gender and ethnicity, to name but a few. These axes and factors move and intertwine and invade us at different points of their realization. Our existence as subjects in subordinate and dominant groups is shaped by the ways in which we identify with one, reject, challenge and resist another. Our identity is a selective process where we are both actors and acted upon.

Our contention is that both Arab and Western feminists and women are dependent on one another for a sense of self. A self that is formed through our identification of similarities and differences with other human beings, in an ultimately conscious choice, where we attempt to maintain or construct the concept of our identity from our position within dominant or subordinate groups. According to this viewpoint, the nature and identity of the other shift, and are fluid. Once this awareness and this link are severed, recognition of, and relatedness between, self and other cannot occur.

A first issue centres on recognizing that the other cannot be romanticized through idealization and/or denigration. For the other is a living, breathing, feeling and thinking human being who cannot be easily compartmentalized as other – either with a capital O or without. A common response is to romanticize and gloss over the complexity of living, the repression(s) that can and do exist, and to invest the women who are ‘other’ as innocent and passive beings. Another response is to turn to cultural relativism to wipe out the difficulties involved. For example, Raymond Verdier (a prominent French academic) argued that clitoridectomy is a relative notion determined by cultural conditioning and is an affirmative act of social incorporation. The argument runs that as African women approach clitoridectomy as a positive act, they joyfully accept the custom, and therefore do not suffer physically as much as a white woman would (quoted in Moghissi, 1999). A second matter relates to recognizing our similarities and differences – what does it mean to share the same gendered body but in different social and political circumstances? What shared history/histories we women inherit?

We are concerned that both Western and Arab feminists when listening to one another, hear other meanings and are challenged in various ways. Frequently, our perception and experience is that Western feminists become engaged with Arab women when the issues are different from their own – for example female genital mutilation or poverty. In this way, difference is maintained and so are fantasies of superiority. Similarity becomes in actual fact a threat that needs to be wiped out while representations play a role in consolidating differences and transposing the ‘other’ to a safe place, thereby helping to maintain and reinforce our own sense of a ‘different’ self. Nadia Wassef’s article ‘On Selective Consumerism: Egyptian Women and Ethnographic Representations’ explores the internalization of these representations. In exploring these issues, she challenges Western and Arab women to reflect on their responses to, and representations of, women who are deemed as

other. She urges women, whatever their cultural location, to analyse more critically the representations and fantasy relationships that we consume.

Alongside the issue of the body there exists differential access to power, status and material opportunities. This of course does not apply to all women in the West, just as opportunities for education, professional employment and material comfort are variable for many women in the Arab world. However, as Deniz Kandiyoti has argued, we must bear in mind that the articulation of Islam and patriarchy is grounded in distinct material arrangements between genders and this articulation leads to distinct material realities such as access to employment, education and political participation (Kandiyoti, 1991: 24). There is perhaps a difference in Western and Arab feminists' preoccupations and this can lead to Western feminists not taking on political matters fully. A dominant aspect of some Western feminist contemporary interests tends to rest on questions of identity while political and public concerns are by-passed. This is not the same for Arab feminists where the emphasis is on matters political – for example, democratic elections, or the necessary conditions for health and welfare. Of course this is more nuanced than the description we offer here Western women are also engaged with political and public matters, while Arab women, in analysing and engaging with the public, discover that the boundary frequently slides into personal matters.

Two examples illustrate the permeability of the public and the personal in the Arab Region. Anita Fabos's 'Embodying Transition: FGC, Displacement, and Gender-Making for Sudanese in Cairo' explores the Sudanese community in Cairo and illustrates the inextricable link between the public and the private. The displacement experienced by the Sudanese peoples, and the changed circumstances in their material conditions, challenge aspects of Sudanese identity and a fundamental belief in the importance of gender complementarity between men and women.

Similarly, Arab feminists and women (not from a community in exile) struggling to forge a space outside of the private sphere have to continually reinforce the importance of the family, constantly asserting that their family is not suffering due to their activities. Arab society demands affirmation that the traditional role for women as wives and mothers will not be jettisoned. Women negotiate this injunction by asserting their roles as wives and mothers to legitimize their claims. During the 1970s, women were blamed for the deterioration of the family as well as for rising unemployment, and the social injunctions were for women to return to the home. This entailed both guilt and responsibility in fighting for the right to take up public space and to inhabit a place in the public world of employment and activism. Increasingly, work was seen not as liberation but as a double burden as women had to hold both private and public responsibilities. The social pressure on women not to work or challenge men impacts profoundly on their sense of self and their feelings of shame and responsibility. For example, women can and do collude with the representation of their husbands as employed or as the provider when in

fact he is unemployed or earning a pittance. Two important areas of women's lives – their relationships to the family and to masculinity – cannot be challenged explicitly. In short, women can work and inhabit the public arena, as long as it does not conflict with the social concepts of masculinity or femininity. To challenge publicly such essential notions is to disturb the social order, a situation deemed threatening to the concept or fantasy of a nation. This is particularly so for the Arab region, as many of the nations involved are in perpetual fear of losing their boundaries, of being taken over and engulfed economically by either a Western nation or the United States. Resistance, therefore, takes a multitude of forms, where both patriarchy and the state are perceived as forces to fear and to confront them openly can only be at a heavy price.

We are, in this issue, and through this editorial, wishing to reclaim the language of ideology and, perhaps more continuously, of reality. We are arguing that ideology, representations and material conditions have profound effects on lived realities and the circumstances that women inhabit. There is further a continual problem with the continual drawing upon discourse as an all-embracing analytic category. For, as Nederveen Pieterse and Parek argue, discourse cannot be taken as an all-embracing reality with politics shoved aside as mere background (Nederveen Pieterse and Parek, 1995). We are also arguing that reality is multi-layered and cannot be reduced to either one aspect of women's reality or one facet of identity. In the Arab Region the effects of global capitalism, and the consequent divisions between rich and poor, are overwhelming. This split between the exceptionally wealthy and the extremely poor is increasing yearly. This material reality, alongside the political interests of some Western governments in the Arab Region, the interventions by the International Monetary Fund, the economic exploitation of the poor and of the Arab Region, and the consumerism that is available to some and not to others, creates a complex and troublesome situation. Loubna Skalli's 'Women and Poverty in Morocco: The Many Faces of Social Exclusion' explores the impact of the feminization of poverty and documents the impact of penury on women.

In pointing to these material conditions we do not wish to reinforce the representations and perceptions of the Arab Region as inhabiting a culture of misery and continual deprivation. This perception is internalized by the Arab Region and creates a further culture of inferiority and deprivation. This is a difficult tension – as we do not want to deny the real material and oppressive conditions of many Arab women's lives and we want to acknowledge that many Arab women are resilient, strong, humorous, disappointed, frustrated, politically active and also apathetic. In short, we/they inhabit the full range, contradictions and complexity of human feelings, fantasies and thoughts.

Contained in this issue are articles from Egypt, Iran, Morocco, Palestine and the Sudanese community in Cairo. Sadly, there are no articles from Algeria, the Gulf States, Jordan or Syria to name but a few absences. This is despite our best

efforts. Similarly, the issue does not contain the voice of Christian or Jewish Arab women. A further problem, facing not just this issue but feminist debates more widely, is a lack of information on possible political activity and theoretical understandings in Algeria or the Gulf States. We cannot assume that this absence means a lack of resistance, activity or analysis in those regions. This absence raises two further matters. The first rests on how resistance is acknowledged if it takes forms that other feminists and activists do not recognize. Interlinked with this issue is the question of how these oppositions are validated. Second, we need to be aware that conditions under which resistance can take place vary enormously. For example, in Saudi Arabia in 2000 a group of middle-class women drove cars into the centre of town and this is against the law. The following day their husbands were arrested and the women involved were not given the respect of being detained. This act by the state effectively erodes their agency.

Nawla Darwiche's review of recent research on the status, role and impact of women in public life in six Arab countries provides an overview of some of the issues. While the report examines the historical beginnings of feminist movements in the Region, it focuses in the present on women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their role in the Arab Region. This role has gained increasing importance in the 1980s and 1990s, in networking, educating and organizing activities in the Arab region. While NGOs exist in the whole of the Arab Region, their role varies according to the country involved. It is important to note here that in most countries these organizations are heavily scrutinized by governments to ensure that they remain apolitical and do not pose a challenge to state policies. This presents a factor of similarity that exists across the Region. On the other hand, NGOs are less prevalent and active in the Gulf States partly due to different historical conditions and partly due to the fact that donor organizations do not perceive the Gulf States as requiring aid. Ironically, the material richness of the Gulf States militates against the opportunities to develop more public spaces for women. This is also made more complicated by the way that the Gulf States can be organized along tribal affiliations. These affiliations govern the Gulf States and this can lead to a lack of opposition. But as always there are variations, and in Bahrain for example social conditions allow more freedom of expression.

However, for the rest of the Arab Region the NGOs both contest and oppose the state and carry out many of the functions of the state. For example, NGOs organize seminars to raise awareness of health issues, offer training programmes for the urban and rural poor and provide spaces for advice and help for women. It has to be recognized, however, that NGOs arise from a number of different factions and are not necessarily of the left. Many are orientated towards charity work, and some arise from the government itself as part of a social programme. Since 1964 in Egypt, following the banning of all independent organizations, NGOs have been under scrutiny, and their accounts, membership and minutes of meetings have to be submitted to the Ministry of Social Affairs for approval. The Government has the

right to confiscate money, to take over boards and to appoint its own personnel. Despite variations in the political systems in the Region prior to many countries gaining 'independence', in the 1950s and 1960s, such differences have gradually been erased in favour of greater political homogeneity, where governments mutually exercise control to ensure political stability in neighbouring countries.

The weight and importance of NGOs has increased since the 1970s, with the dissipation of broad social movements that held governments accountable on the one hand, and the withdrawal of the state from assuming social responsibilities on the other. This was made visible during the International Conference for Population and Development held in Egypt in 1994. Feminists recognized that while governments had made important headway in legislation ensuring equal employment as well as increased educational opportunities for women, this in no way solved or effectively tackled crucial issues pertaining to women's rights in the domestic realm. Issues like divorce, polygamy, inheritance and domestic violence remained hidden in the private sphere, where religious law still ruled. Elaheh Povey's 'Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran' documents and explores the work of women activists in contemporary Iran and their successful attempts and moves to improve the conditions of women's lives in different arenas.

The historical roots of feminism in the Arab region are complex and have involved, and continue to entail, a relationship to political activism. Elaheh Povey's and Shahrzad Mojab's articles in this issue are two detailed examples and explorations of feminism in Iran. In this editorial we take Egypt as another case example to illustrate some of the processes and negotiations involved. Its relation to the government and other oppositional movements and discourses like the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as its relationship to the nationalist movement, is complex and frequently in a process of negotiation. It is not possible to locate or understand Arab feminism without registering the impact of these positionings and various discourses. Feminism arose in the Arab Region, the area as a whole in direct contact with the nationalist movements. During this historical period up until the late 1960s many countries in the Region were fighting for independence from French, Italian and British occupation and rule. Arab nationalism was a broad political movement and was active in many Arab countries. The nationalist movement, across the Arab Region as a whole, was powerful in the 19th century and in contemporary life, mobilized women and opened up a different space for women in public life. It brought with it a political project that included women as mothers in building up the nation and providing a linchpin for the imagined slip across and between nation, country and the mother state.

It was through the nationalist struggles in 1919 that feminism arose in Egypt specifically and we concentrate on this in order to provide an in-depth and specific example. Women led and attended huge demonstrations against the British occupation, and alongside this political activity women began to make their

own demands for more democratic space and opportunities. Women's voices began to be raised through newspapers, newsletters, poetry and women's writings generally. Women's presence in public life remained a feature of many Arab societies. During the 1950s, women's presence was prevalent in the demonstrations to get the vote and for a new Egyptian constitution. In the 1950s however, under Nasser, the Government retreated from women's challenges for equal opportunities, especially in all that pertains to the family, and referred them to the religious institution (the Sheiks and *Shari'a* law – civil law based on the Qur'an and interpreted by religious leaders). Under Nasser's rule, religion was part of the state structure, governed and regulated by the state, while under Al-Sadat it grew into an opposition movement and part of the governing processes.

In the 1970s the extremely active student movement in Egypt was vocal and committed in its belief that democracy is essential for liberation. Their demands centred on the principle that the exclusion of any from democracy and political participation weakened all members of society. Women active in this movement held on to the idea that the liberation of women is realized through political involvement, education and work, for example self-realization through the public sphere. An essential mobilizing factor in this movement was the inability of Arab governments to reclaim the lands occupied in 1967 by Israel. This radical activism in Egypt has been taken over, in pan, by a new oppositional force, the Islamist movements. This shift in political emphasis was given credibility by Al-Sadat (then President of Egypt until he was killed, ironically, by a devout Islamist) who declared Egypt to be an Islamic and not an Arab country. This act of gaining political legitimacy excluded all those who are not Muslims – approximately 16–20 per cent of the population – and those who are Muslims but would not agree with this political move. The issue of the 'nation' is central historically and in contemporary political discourses throughout the Arab Region. Egyptian women activists especially have been rooted in nationalism and 'the struggle against colonial powers' and therefore, when they articulate demands for women, they 'inevitably run the risk of being stigmatized as anti-nationalist and anti-religious' (Al-Ali, 2000: 1). Women can be activists within the accepted realm of a common struggle but as soon as attempts are made to bring power differentials into the analysis and the struggle, it becomes problematic.

Feminism's relationship with the nationalist movement or discourses still holds in two ways. Nationalism and anti-Western feelings and thinking are a robust mobilizing factor in the new Islamist movements and in the strengthening of what is now popularly termed 'Islamic feminism' by Western feminists. More generally, it also operates in feminist activism and thinking in the Arab Region. The burden on women to be both nationalists and activists for women's rights remains a dilemma. Penny Johnson and Eileen Kuttab in 'Where Have all the Women (and Men) Gone? Reflections on Gender and the Second Palestinian Intifada' unpick the positioning of Palestinian women as political activists, believers in the Palestinian State and

mothers. Palestinian women may also be represented and responded to in contradictory ways – they are applauded when they fight the imperialist and colonial powers, but are dismissed when they struggle for their own demands. Palestinian women can and do challenge existing structures for women's rights but they cannot challenge the basic political structures, in the fear that the movement against occupation will thereby fragment. It is a difficult issue to resolve. The article also traces how the fates of men and women are inextricably linked. In the struggle against occupation, the crisis affects all, where barbaric and brutal killings of men, women and children occur. The struggle between Palestinians and Israel illustrates that 'imagined nations' are literally fought over and blood is shed. We cannot retreat to a position in which nationalism is seen as a masculinist discourse. It is not as Enloe has argued, springing from 'masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope' (Enloe, 1989: 44). Women too are necessarily implicated in a fight to live in material comfort, dignity and freedom.

Nationalism and the Islamic political discourses are separate and intertwined as both centre on a two-fold rhetoric of building the nation and its identity. Islamic discourses gained strength in opposition to the nationalist discourses and were forged strongly in the face of the defeat of the nationalist movement in the Arab region with its overall aim of placing the Region firmly on the map. The Islamist movement tends to be exclusionist as it resets the boundary of the nation through religion. Many groups are excluded from this new nationhood; women do not have an equal space and are forced to conform within the tightly bounded discourses of the Islamic nation. The *Shari'a* is used as one of the main tools and has become a sacred political authority with little opposition as it defines and gives certainty to the everyday. The *Shari'a* and a particular use of Islam have penetrated into the very fabric of lives and identities. Simultaneously as it has been taken up and popularized, there is subversion and new spaces of thought and negotiation are being forged. In Iran, Morocco and Egypt a different discourse is occurring which deconstructs the text in order to challenge the continual return to the word of the Qur'an or the Hadith. Taking up postmodern insights into texts, the word and the relationship with history, the contemporary law of the Muslim leaders is challenged and cast in a new light.

Owing to different historical and political juxtapositions, Islamic movements have arisen in part as responses to the exploitation and denigration by the West of the Arab Region. It is also a necessary affirmation of differences, imagined or not, from and to the West. The 'First World' is seen as having blighted the Arab World and brought little but grief in the way it has wiped out the uniqueness of Arab society. Further, the West itself is seen as individualistic and immoral, and as denigrating the values of the community and family life. But women who are not part of the Islamist movement are the double other – other from Western representations and fantasies, and excluded from the Islamist notion of 'feminism', which frames women's lights, or lack thereof, within a religious

discourse. Islamic feminism, however, confronts Western feminism head on and is an expression of the disappointments and frustrations felt by many activists who have turned towards Islamic discourses. The politics of this situation are highly complex and vexed, and Shahrzad Mojab's 'Theorizing the Politics of "Islamic Feminism"' explores and passionately argues the issues.

There is much concern about globalization and its inevitable forces of inclusion and exclusion, and its new forms of domination and exploitation. This concern is from the Left along with the Islamic movements broadly defined. Globalization is perceived as a threat to identity, diversity and true freedom of choice, and as another form of colonization and imperialism through consumption. Tourists can, literally, now see the temple of McDonald's at the temples of Karnac in Luxor.

Pain – the internalization of inferiority – along with different forms of resistance occur alongside each other, while different realities create new fractures and gaps between communities, nations and regions. The gulf between rich and poor widens while globalization gives new meaning to the process of inclusion and exclusion. However, even amidst this struggle, new opportunities arise, and the excluded continue to squeeze themselves into the cracks that open up, while new modes of resistance continue to evolve from new collectivities.

Neither at the individual nor at the collective level can people live day to day under repression, extreme or otherwise. People test the boundaries and push them to find new forms of resistance, reflecting a deep and abiding wish to live and celebrate life. Informal levels of resistance continue until they find the formal and public means of expression, space and energy to bring them to the surface. Arab women are a testimony to the complexity and possibility of struggle at different and extreme points of oppression, where their existence, position and identity continue to be central to that struggle. A project in Egypt – Creative Women in the Shadow – is currently exploring with women their creative possibilities and is opening up a space for different means of expression. The focus on the translation of lived experience into creative forms of art is a testimony to the many ways that Arab Women, like others, find imaginative opportunities for expression and to inhabit the realm of the possible.

acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to Nadia Wassef and Nawla Darwiche for their contribution in helping to make this issue happen. Their energy, commitment and work made all the difference.

author biography

Amal Treacher is lecturer in Psychology, Birkbeck College and a member of the editorial collective of *Feminist Review*. She has written on issues of ethnicity, adoption and children's narratives of family life.

Hala Shukrallah is a Development Consultant and Director of Development Support Centre, which works with non-governmental organizations. She has a special interest in issues of Islamic Fundamentalism on Women, and issues of resistance and coping strategies amongst the poor.

Amal Treacher and Hala Shukrallah

references

- Al-Ali, N.** (2000) *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East*, Cambridge University Press.
- Enloë, C.** (1989) *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of Interational Politics*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Kandiyoti, D.** (1991) 'Islam and patriarchy: comparative perspective' in Keddie N and Baron B (1991) editors, *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting tin Sex and Gender*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Moghissi, H.** (1999) *Feminism and Islamic fundamentalism*, London: Zed Books.
- Nederveen Pieterse, J. and Parek, B.** (1995) editors, *The Colonization of imagination: culture, Knowledge, Power*, London: Zed Book.

doi:10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400218