

Voice of Women
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21st Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women

The sixteen articles of this convention (CEDAW) spell out the rights of women to total equality with men in all aspects of life. It was ratified by the United Nations on September 3, 1981, to affirm equal treatment of women in social, political and public spheres. Articles 6 and 7 in particular state that governments should promote full participation of women in internal politics and in international representation of their country. CEDAW has received the endorsement of 94 countries already, including some Arab countries. But for women in most Arab countries these articles of equality are still not applicable.

The situation of Palestinian women, in comparison, is quite favorable. As a result of the uniqueness of Palestine's situation, women have been able to achieve more rights than other Arab women. For example, women make up 5.7% of the legislative branch of government, higher than percentages in Egypt and Jordan. It is hardly a percentage that fulfills the aspirations of Palestinians, but it is a promising beginning.

According to Nadia Abu Nahleh, an activist from Gaza, the Palestinian National Authority has been somewhat lax in implementing some of the CEDAW articles, especially Article 4 concerning the sharing of responsibilities traditionally allocated to the mother. Ms Abu Nahleh also considers that the activation of tribal councils diminishes the role of women in dealing with social problems. She also cites some remaining disparities in legal decisions about adultery and other personal issues, as well as insufficient progress in women's participation in government work (13.4%). Ms Abu Nahleh compliments the efforts of women's groups who have been able to obtain many changes in Palestinian law and to form lobby groups to achieve process in all arenas.

Amal Hamad, Director of Women's Affairs at the Palestinian Legislative Council, states that CEDAW represents one major reference in the legislative process and that the PLC is committed to implementing its articles and all relevant international conventions. She concedes that current legislation is still insufficient in at least two areas: work in agriculture and work at home. On the subject of political representation, Ms Hamad suggests that a transitional quota system should be adopted, and she thinks that at least

30% mandatory representation would be necessary at this stage. She adds that, although the achievements of Palestinian women are relatively limited they still exceed by far what has been reached in many Arab and other countries.

One woman's story

Intisar 'Ajouri, 34, was an ordinary woman from 'Askar refugee camp, working to support and take care of her parents – until last June 4th. On that night the Israeli army broke into the family house and led her away in her nightgown to prison.

Intisar was interrogated for two days, during which time she was deprived of sleep and kept blindfolded, her hands and feet tied. Then she was transferred to a jail in Ramla and kept in solitary confinement for a month. She was also subjected to another period of interrogation.

Finally she was told by the prosecutor that she is charged with helping her brother 'Ali in carrying out "terrorist" activities. Among the charges is that she sewed special clothes for "suicide bombers." On August 6, she learned from the radio that the Israelis had succeeded in assassinating her brother.

On September 3, the Israeli court issued an order of expulsion from the West Bank to Gaza against her and her second brother, Kifah. The next day, Israeli soldiers enforced the order but left them just across the Gaza border in an area where their lives were at risk because of the proximity to an Israeli colony.

From her new refugee location she has taken a bold step. Intisar decided to pitch a tent in the garden of the Red Cross in Gaza. "This is to protest the international silence in the face of all the crimes and arbitrary legal decisions by Israel. The Israelis not only executed my brother without due process but they also accused me and my second brother without cause and then simply got rid of us and separated us from our parents who need our help. The international community is aiding and abetting these injustices. My experience in the prisons was horrible. They humiliated me and made me suffer; I witnessed the mass punishment and the poor conditions under which they keep all Palestinian women prisoners."

It will not be comfortable or easy for Intisar and her brother to stay in their new tent outside the Red Cross offices. She worries every minute about her parents in 'Askar refugee camp. She tells two American Red Cross workers: "Tell your government to stop supporting the injustice committed by Israel. The U.S. will only stand to lose if it continues to give Israel the weapons and financial support that enables it to commit its crimes."

A tool for marginalizing women: the rape of language
Book review by Waleed ash-Sharfa

What role does language play in the formation of self? How does it absorb ideological systems of control and marginalization? How are its symbols loaded with associations and imaginings? A collection of essays entitled *jamaliyat es sura fi el ibda'a en nisai el arabi* deals with the aesthetics of women's representation in Arabic language and literature. In it, a number of critics and scholars, both female and male, analyze the stylistic and thematic implications of ancient and modern literary texts. One thesis that runs through these essays is that some images of women are both changing and constant: they show contradictory impulses in the culture, ranging from blind awe to uncontrolled desire, and are dominated by forms of control and ownership that silence the woman's voice and obfuscate her identity.

The first essay, by Dr. Mohammad Lutfi El Yousefi from Tunis, investigates the mythic dimensions in language and the process of distancing that began with the absolving of Eve-Woman from the language realm. Men have controlled language and monopolized it socially and culturally, while the woman was placed in a symbolic prison, socially sidelined. Woman was assigned a state of eternal punishment, as paradise and hell together, under the conception of her being the temptress. She was both paradise and the reason for its loss, a metaphysical source of doubt, though in body a target of desire and an object for possession.

This is the old mythic image that has persisted in Arab and Muslim creative works for centuries. And it finds expression in modern literature. Even an icon of Arab modernism, poet Nizar el Qabbani, reflects some of the old conceptions about women: "Give me a bit of silence / you ignorant one / for more beautiful than all this talk / is the speech of your hands." By dismissing any words that the woman utters, Qabbani reverses the cultural and creative movement to point zero. The woman is the delicious paradise of joy, a source of physical ecstasy for the man. This view, strangely, coincides with strict theological interpretations.

Another critic from Tunis, Salwa Bakr, probes the problem in memory and history, showing how women have been marginalized even when they excel. She cites examples from the past: Tarifa of the Saba' tribe whose prediction about the collapse of the Ma'rib dam was ignored; Zarka' el Yamama whose intelligence proved to be her bane. Such stories are symptomatic of the trend that has diminished the role of women gradually and limited it increasingly to biological reproduction.

Other essays in this volume deal with the symbolic and social roles of women in literary texts. The characters in Hanna Mineh's trilogy illustrate the characteristic tensions and contradictory impulses of lust and taboo, openness and stricture.

Iraqi novelist and critic Latifa El Delimi presents a fresh response to the question of women's literary response. She rejects the notion that women should react to a male-dominated world by employing a special female rhetoric, since such a response would defeat the essence of creativity as a genderless phenomenon. Rather than a feminization of texts, Delimi advocates the need to face and deconstruct the prevalent culture. Women can offer the best reply in the form of the excellence of creative language they themselves

generate. She finds the precedence for this option in the ancient world when the language of the goddess Ishtar prevailed in society and literature, and women were equal partners in the public sphere.

This collection of essays explores a central problem that prevails in the Arab mind and its milieu. It is expressed in many contradictions, such as a rhetoric advocating equality along with discriminatory signs in creative language. Such contradictions indicate that the Arab-Muslim subconscious often overwhelms progressive trends in the educated mentality.