

Seminar of Arab Women Journalists: An effort to stimulate and promote feminine journalism in the Arab World

The Seminar of Arab Women Journalists held in Beirut, February 3-8, 1981 at the Riviera Hotel, grouped about 40 participants from Lebanon and other Arab countries. Besides women delegates representing the Arab press in Lebanon, Tunis, Morocco, Iraq, Egypt and Syria, it included delegates from UNESCO and from the French Press. Also present were the general director of the Moroccan Agency, Mr. A. Fanjeero; Mr. Hanna Muqbel, General Secretary of the Union of Arab journalists, Dr. Fareed Ayyar, General Secretary of the Federation of Arab News Agencies, the last two being the chief organizers of the Seminar. Among the participants were the Lebanese Ministers of Information and Tourism, Mr. Michel Edde and Mr Marwan Hamadeh, and the Acting General Director of the Ministry of Information.

The aim of the seminar, as stated by Dr. F. Ayyar, was to discuss and seek the ways by which women journalists in the Arab world could receive further recognition and obtain proper promotion in the social, economic and cultural fields.

Several lectures were given about Arab women pioneers in journalism in the early part of this century. One of the lecturers was the late Mr. Wafeeq Teebi, director of the National Institute of Journalism in Lebanon. Another lecturer on the same topic was Mrs. Ghandour Qaddoura, director of the Department of Information and Documentation at the Lebanese University, who gave a long list of feminine magazines founded by women in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria between 1898 and 1940. Feminine journalism, said Mrs. Qaddoura, contributed to the awakening of feminine cultural consciousness, gave women a chance for self-expression, helped the development of talented feminine pens and tried to influence public opinion in favor of woman's liberation.

Several women journalists spoke of their experience and pointed out the obstacles they met because of the hostile attitude of their men colleagues toward them. Fatima Na'oura Sardouk (Lebanon), said that during the sixties, she was advised to use a male pseudonym in order to avoid possible difficulties. «To the other sex, journalism and specifically political journalism is not a woman's field. Her salary is generally lower even when the quality of her work is equal or superior to that of her men colleagues. She is deprived of the opportunity of occupying leadership positions and the number of women who take journalism as a career is thus highly restricted».

Some speakers argued that women themselves are responsible for their unfavorable positions because they do not persist in the profession. Other delegates pointed out the efforts displayed by Palesti-

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nian women journalists in the field of national struggle. The Iraqi delegate paid tribute to the liberation movement led by the Iraqi Women's Federation and stressed the impetus given women journalists by the present Regime. Rashida Naifer, the Tunisian delegate who, in view of her seven years of successful journalistic work, has been recently elected president of the Journalists' Syndicate in her country, spoke about the problems of the Arab woman journalist, resulting from the strictly patriarchal and static condition of Arab society. As a result, she is continuously torn between her work as an active member in public life and the traditional role of housekeeper which requires her confinement within the home.

The UNESCO delegate, Margaret Calahan, introduced the General Women's Studies Program initiated by the UNESCO and the Arab Studies program which will be integrated with it. She said that women's concerns and problems are poorly covered in all information media. In Lebanon, for example, information on women during the last forty years did not exceed 4% of

the total. International news agencies do not give women more than 1-1.5% of their news areas. According to her, a new information system should be adopted, using other sources of information than the present one.

The Seminar closed with a number of recommendations including: 1) Creation of a committee of Arab women journalists whose function would be to further discuss and give a complete picture of their problems and demands; 2) Asking the General Information Directorate in the Arab League to call for a conference grouping men and women journalists with representatives of the Union of Arab Journalists and the Federation of Arab News Agencies, for the purpose of discussing the common problems of journalistic work; 3) Asking women journalists of the Arab countries to support the Offices of Information Service on Women, which are being organized by the Federation of Arab News Agencies; 4) The UNESCO should be asked to share in the financial support of the said Offices; 5) The Journalists' Syndicate and the information media in the Arab world are also expected to contribute to and support the project.