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How I came to Write Sarah and Her Sisters: American Missionary Pioneers in Arab Female Education, 1834-1937²

Robert D. Stoddard, Jr.

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Sarah and her Sisters: American Missionary Pioneers in Arab Female Education, 1834-1937¹

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How does one begin to chronicle the story of a pioneer in women's education in the Arab region – a story that is, at present, 186 years old, and still enduring? Robert D. Stoddard, Jr. set out to accomplish precisely this.

Sarah and her Sisters is a detailed account of the lesser-known role of American female missionaries in establishing a system of education for Arab girls and women – the first of its kind in the region. This story begins with Sarah Huntington Smith in 1834 and proceeds through each of Sarah's "sisters" (sisters in Christ, as Protestant missionary women were known) until 1937.

This is a story that continues to live in what today is known as the Lebanese American University, the embodiment of Sarah's work. And her legacy, her emphasis on and commitment to female education, empowerment, and equality was the impetus behind the creation of The Arab Institute for Women at the university in 1973.

Also the first of its kind, The Arab Institute for Women continues to preserve and honor this legacy through its work on women's rights and gender equality on, for, and by women in the Arab region. In that sense, we are all Sarah's "sisters".

Stoddard dedicated years to the research and preservation of these stories, ensuring that they will forever be recognized in history as they deserve. Additionally, female students at the Lebanese American University are the "latest chapters in the history of female education in the region". As such, they too owe a debt to Sarah, for giving them voice, choice and a space within which they can learn, grow, and thrive.

In some ways, we take education for granted. We assume that both males and females can—and do—access educational opportunities as a right. And yet, in many parts of the region and around the world, female education remains highly contested terrain.

The reality in every single country is one of gender inequality. The global gender gap needs over 100 years to close. Women and girls are the majority of the world's poor. Women hold hardly a quarter of parliamentary seats, and an even smaller fraction are heads of state. Women are still

not paid the same as men for the same work. And in many countries, women's work is relegated to traditionally feminized sectors, or the informal economy. And care work, also considered "women's work", is not recognized or remunerated.

Women and girls all over the world are still not safe from violence. One in three will experience some form of gender-based violence in their lifetime – including sexual violence or intimate partner violence. Early marriage, also a form of violence, affects 33,000 girls a day – or one girl every two seconds. And, in terms of education, 15 million girls will never get the chance to read or write.

The Arab region is no different. In fact, it is worse. Arab women remain shackled to patriarchal codes and restrictions that limit their opportunities at every turn.

In Sarah's day, these restrictions were even stronger. Imagine a young American woman in an Arab country in 1834, fighting social norms and an established order that simply did not agree with female education. Stoddard explains that many literally gave their lives to ensure that Arab girls and women could have this opportunity.

Like Sarah, The Arab Institute for Women continues to serve as education advocates and equality pioneers, honoring our founding feminist foremothers and recognizing the sacrifices they made for us to be where we are. Sarah and her sisters, both past and present, were activists who courageously defied convention in order to secure women's human rights. These women persevered through prejudice and resistance, including from religious authorities who fought against education for girls.

Sarah and Her Sisters is the product of Stoddard's great admiration for these women, combined with detailed and vivid descriptions of life in the region during that day. It is of interest both to academics and activists, those interested in our past, and those looking to our future.

Sarah was remarkable in her defiance of gender roles. She intrinsically recognized the value of an educated woman and what education means not only for her, but for her family, her community, her country. There is no doubt that education is the single most effective way to achieve equality. It is both tool and weapon.

"Could the females of Syria be educated and regenerated," Sarah wrote in a letter to her parents, "the whole face of the country would change". She was ahead of her time. In fact, Sarah herself was taught by a woman who instilled in her the belief that education brings much-needed independence for women. And because of this, Sarah planted the seed that would become a full-fledged university.

With enough conviction, one person can indeed change the world.

Just like Sarah, Julinda Abu Nasr, to whom this book is partly dedicated, had a vision that few could understand. Julinda was the founder and first director for The Arab Institute for Women. She laid the foundation for us to advance women's rights and gender equality in the region and globally, operating at the intersection of academia and activism.

I, too, follow in Julinda's footsteps. My story begins the year after Stoddard's account ends—in 1938.

I am the third generation of women in my family to work at the university. My late Palestinian grandmother, Salma Balat (Rafidi), was a graduate of the American Junior College for Women in 1938. Her diploma, signed by William A. Stoltzfus, hangs on my wall today. She then went on to work at the university's Development Office for twenty years.

Salma's eldest daughter, my aunt Samira Rafidi (Meghdessian) worked at the LAU Library. During her ten years there, she undertook a large project in collaboration with Julinda on behalf of the Institute to catalogue all work on Arab women. She published *The Status of the Arab Woman: A Select Biography* in 1980 on behalf of the Institute. The library collection curated by my aunt and Julinda was renamed in 2017 in honor of our founder and first director and is now the Julinda Abu Nasr Women and Gender Collection of the LAU Libraries. In so doing, we recognize Julinda's contributions to our work and also preserve resources on women and gender for all to enjoy.

Even as a child, I benefitted from Julinda's vision. I spent a few months in the preschool that she established at the university. After all, how else can women access work if their children are not cared for? Sarah, Julinda, Salma, Samira – I preserve the legacy of a long line of women who fought for equality and espouse the principles that I now hold so dear.

As we say, we stand on the shoulders of giants.

Sarah and Her Sisters recognizes and acknowledges each woman by name, telling their stories and ensuring their immortality. Each woman left her mark on the institution, adding another layer to the foundation on which we now stand. On which we now build.

Stoddard's account of these remarkable women should serve to inspire us all, to show what is possible, and to remind us of what is worth doing. Sarah was, and still remains, a woman who reached an incredible summit. This is both figurative and literal, given that she was an avid hiker who also climbed mountains! Sarah was what we might call an accidental activist, responding where she saw a need. She did not need to be told to do it. And she could not have been stopped. Her convictions even extended to Native American education, including saving Mohegan tribal lands. There her name is celebrated to this day. She never wavered in her commitment to women and girls.

While this book rightly chronicles the generations of women, inspired by Sarah, who continued her work, it is still remarkable to read how much she herself was able to accomplish in only three years in the region. Sarah lit a torch, as Stoddard says, for female education. One that still burns today.

Sarah's revolutionary project is not yet complete. No Arab country has achieved equality, and in fact the region lags behind all others in terms of women's rights and equality. The Arab region has the widest gender gap, according to the 2020 Global Gender Gap Report. And over half of the world's worst countries for women are Arab! It will take 150 years to close this gap and to address the inequalities women face in politics, education, health, and the economy.

And yet, Arab women endure. And continue to fight. And Lebanon itself survives crisis after crisis. Sarah and all those who came after her persevered, even through many periods of conflict, insecurity, illness, and civil strife – much of which endures today.

And LAU perseveres, because its foundation, laid by Sarah, remains strong. Without exception, every time we speak of the origins of the university, it begins with Sarah's story. She knew even then what she was creating. In 1836, she wrote: "We feel that a broad foundation is laid, upon which, at some future day... a glorious superstructure will be raised".

The greatest honor we can pay to Sarah, her sisters, and her superstructure is to continue what they so bravely started—the quest for rights and equality for all women and girls in the Arab region.

We owe her at least this much.

¹This piece was previously published by the Lebanese American University.

How I came to Write Sarah and Her Sisters: American Missionary Pioneers in Arab Female Education, 1834-1937²

Robert D. Stoddard, Jr.

Former Vice President of the Lebanese American University in Beirut, Lebanon.

How can a university celebrate a milestone anniversary without knowing its history?

That was my dilemma in 1999 when, as the Lebanese American University vice president responsible for commemorating our seventy-fifth anniversary as a college, I could uncover precious little of the Presbyterian-related school's history. Upon my retirement in 2005, I sought to verify the belief that LAU could trace its origin to a school for girls founded by a missionary in Beirut in 1835. I was elated to discover online the whole story of that little school for girls in a digitized Memoir of Sarah L. Huntington Smith: Late of the American Mission in Syria. Thus began a fourteen-year quest to document the university's first century of pioneering in Arab female education.

Adventurous, dramatic, inspiring, and tragic, Sarah Smith's posthumous Memoir, compiled by her brother-in-law from her letters home, had all the elements of a modern screenplay. No wonder it was an 1840s best seller! As a pious and privileged native of Norwich, Connecticut, Sarah Huntington founded her first school for local Mohegan Indians. Her spinsterhood ended abruptly when the Rev. Eli Smith took her to Ottoman Syria to help him run the mission press in "Beyroot." Appalled at how native males treated their women and girls and desiring to be more than a mere "helpmate," Sarah studied Arabic and organized a school for girls that would revolutionize female education in the Near East and begin bending the arch of the culture toward female equality. But if this story was the first chapter of LAU's history, what were the others?

The challenge then became filling in the gaps and connecting Sarah Smith's school for forty girls to today's coed university of 8,000 students. Who were Sarah's successors and what were their schools? With further research and reading, their stories emerged one after another until they could be linked together in *Sarah and Her Sisters: American Missionary Pioneers in Arab Female Education, 1834-1937*. While these missionary women started schools and taught in what became modern Lebanon, all were Americans—Congregationalists from New England and Presbyterians from Mid-Atlantic and Midwestern states. Notable among them besides Sarah were Matilda Whiting of Newark, NJ, founder of a girls' school in Jerusalem; Eliza Everett of Painesville, OH, a pioneer in female secondary education; and Frances Irwin of Minneapolis, who, together with Winifred Shannon of Iola, KS, started the first college for Arab women. Living in Wilmington, Delaware, it was convenient for me to do most of my in-person research at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia. There I found a trove of primary source materials on Sarah's forgotten successors: their school reports, letters, articles in church women's journals, diary entries, and related items all carefully housed and cataloged, mostly in the Syria Mission Collection. I enjoyed riding the train to Center City and walking back in time through Independence National Historical Park to a quiet welcome at 425 Lombard Street. Equipped with a pad (PHS pencils provided), laptop, and backrest, I would peruse Record Groups and request files that were exhumed by Senior Reference Archivist Lisa Jacobson or her colleagues from hidden recesses and cheerfully delivered to my table in the reference room. There I would glean interesting and often exciting findings during six-hour days, punctuated by lunches in diverse restaurants on colorful South Street. At day's end, I could order and take with me photocopies of select documents for further study and reference at home. This targeted research, plus related missionary memoirs and area histories, gradually filled in the gaps in LAU's first century of history. Having to meld the research, writing and editing in between other retirement projects stretched out the project. Finally, with the encouragement and backing of President Joseph Jabbra and the university, a publication contract was signed with Hachette-Antoine in Beirut in 2018. But unimaginable hurdles to getting the book in print still lay ahead.

Reminiscent of the political upheavals, epidemics, famine, starvation, world war, economic depression, and pandemic faced by Sarah and her missionary sisters in Ottoman Syria and World War I Lebanon were the cascading crises that hit Lebanon in 2019-2020. While working with my Beirut editor via email and Skype, demonstrators were manning barricades and marching in the streets. The “October 2019 Revolution” led to the collapse of the Lebanese government and subsequently the economy when the pound lost eighty percent of its value. Then came the COVID-19 lockdown. Most recently the horrendous Beirut port explosion killed 204 people, injured another 7,000, left 300,000 homeless, and brought the Lebanese to their knees. Nevertheless, through it all, my editor and H-A’s staff persevered and somehow managed to bring these inspiring missionary stories back to life within a handsome volume. Finally, at 407 pages and fully illustrated in black-and-white and color, *Sarah and Her Sisters: American Missionary Pioneers in Arab Female Education, 1834-1937* is now available in hard back from the Book Depository. Kindle and iBook e-versions can also be found at Amazon, Kindle, and the Apple Store.

In bringing these stories to light, my first aim is to recognize these forgotten missionary heroines for their personal sacrifices and extraordinary achievements against great odds in educating Arab females. Second, I hope their beneficiaries throughout the Middle East will recognize their indebtedness to them and, along with other readers--Presbyterian church women especially--be inspired by their stories. And I very much hope that LAU’s coeds, female teachers and staff, and alumna will be inspired and, like their historic mentors, wholeheartedly join in the rebuilding of Lebanon and advancement of girls and women throughout the Arab world.

²This piece was originally published in the Presbyterian Historical Society Blog in March, 2021