

Word from the Editor-in-Chief

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Once again, I have the great pleasure of introducing a major, new qualitative leap taken by *al-raida*. Exactly seven years ago, issue no. 118-119 (“Arab Women Writing in English”) came out, marking a new phase in the evolution of *al-raida* – an evolution which was then reflected in both content and form. The present issue, though similar in form, is a watershed in the steady, qualitative evolution of this publication, whose beginnings were closely connected with the establishment of the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) in the early 1970s. From a humble, thin newsletter consisting of a dozen stenciled pages, with the modest and limited purpose of reporting on the activities of the Institute, *al-raida* has steadily developed into a double-blind, peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary journal whose objective is to spearhead quality scholarship on women rights and women issues in the Arab world.

When it was first introduced, *al-raida* consisted of profiles of women, conference reports, and summaries of studies related to women and children, in addition to news reports on the activities of IWSAW. By the mid-1980s it had developed into a magazine that included research-based articles on women. In 1994 it reached a new level of maturity with the addition of the specialized section or “file” which often included controversial issues and contributed to the much needed academic and human rights-based debate on women living in the Arab world. In 2002, benefiting from technological advances in the publishing field, *al-raida* became more widely accessible, when it was made available online, for free, in both English and Arabic. This also meant that *al-raida* has since been able to serve as a valuable resource for researchers and activists who had no access to it prior to that date, due to language and distribution barriers.

The successive cosmetic and substantive changes that *al-raida* underwent since it first appeared in May 1976 are indeed testament to its sustainability, major role, and added value in a regional context still characterized by a dearth of quality scholarship on women’s rights. Academic writing on women in the region is still characterized by paucity, both in terms of volume and range of topics covered. Benefiting from the university setting in which it is housed, and the academic freedom that comes with it, *al-raida* has been at the forefront of the effort to research, document, and enrich the debate on women’s lives and women’s issues in the Arab world. Needless to add, such issues are often taboo and absent from dominant discourses in the Arab world, especially with respect to human rights. Topics that *al-raida* was truly a pioneer in

covering from an academic, human-rights based perspective have included, among others, masculinity and homosexuality, and the role of religion (both Christianity and Islam) in defining the role and life of women in the Arab world.

As probably the only English language journal of its kind in the Arab world, *al-raida* is well placed to play an increasingly significant role with respect to bridging cultures and increasing the flow and exchange of ideas about women in the Arab world. As an interdisciplinary academic journal, it can contribute to the reflection on the relationship (and tension) between theory and practice, while exploring the meaning and role of gender in women's and men's lives – in a region where the very word “gender” is still rejected as an analytical tool for understanding the multiple types of discrimination that affect the lives of women in the region.

In closing, I would like to emphasize that this much-awaited, major qualitative leap taken by *al-raida* will not take place at the expense of another function that *al-raida* has faithfully fulfilled since it first appeared in 1976. While making room for thoroughly researched, written, and argued academic pieces that will fill a gap with respect to quality scholarship on women, it will continue to fiercely protect and project the (often unheard) voices coming from the margins – whether individual or collective: these are the voices that we hear in formats and genres of writing that do not adhere to the rigid, exclusive format of the conventional, academically acceptable “journal article”. *Al-raida* will thus continue to invite submissions that enrich the debate on women in the Arab world, whether in the form of interviews, opinion pieces, testimonials, short stories, poems, or essays. Nearly four decades after having first appeared, *al-raida* remains committed, first and foremost, to the cause of advancing women rights in the region.

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