

# Arab Women and

# Civil

How have women in the Arab world fared in the development and promotion of civil society in the region? The following contributions to this issue of *Al-Raida* will give us a glimpse into the world of women activists in Arab civil society and whether they have made any achievements. One will conclude that the road is still long and arduous, yet important steps have been taken by men and women activists working to promote the role of Arab women in civil society organizations.

First *Al-Raida* presents an overall global review of issues in the Arab world pertaining to Arab women's participation in civil society. Valentine Moghadam presents an insightful paper entitled: "Citizenship, Civil Society and Women in the Arab Region" where she addresses the issues of citizenship, civil society and democratization, an increasingly important dimension that has gained prominence in the current debates. There are a number of civil society organizations around the region that are coalescing together to advocate for women's right to citizenship and the right to pass it on to her children. For women, citizenship concerns social standing, political participation, and national membership, writes Moghadam. Empirically, women's citizenship is reflected in their legal status, in access to employment and income, in the extent of their participation in formal politics, and in the formation of women's organizations. Moghadam argues that women in many countries in the Arab world are at the center of the struggles to define and extend democracy, citizenship, and civil society. She concludes with women's struggles – whether around the modernization of family laws, or in the fight against fundamentalism, or around the demands for greater employment opportunities, political participation, or nationality rights – that remain the central drive for the struggle for citizenship and for a civil society.

Laila Al-Hamad gives us an overview of Arab women's organizations' achievements despite their fragility and the tremendous challenges that they face. Arab women's organizations are helping to compensate for women's absence from the political sphere and guaranteeing their presence in the public sphere. Through their increasingly public presence, their efforts at advocacy, raising awareness, network-

ing, and grassroots activism, these organizations are helping to mainstream women's issues, formalize vehicles for change, create transnational alliances, and contribute, to a limited extent, to their countries' overall development.

Through Mary Kawar's work we gain insight into women's participation in employers and workers organizations in the Arab world. Kawar writes, "Despite the visible improvements in the representation of women in employers' and workers' organizations, challenges still exist. For example, the improvements in representation has not translated into decision making positions."

*Al-Raida* magazine presents a new concept of training, learning and leadership through a report on a meeting of "learning partnerships" of women in the Arab world and elsewhere sponsored by the Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, and Development and Peace (WLP). The gathering highlighted, among many other issues, the effectiveness of coalitions where in Morocco they were able to put the reform of personal status laws on the Moroccan national agenda. This event is a major achievement in the world of using advocacy and coalitions to influence public opinion and public policy decision-making process. Karen Stone reviews the "Leading to Choices – A Leadership Training Handbook for Women" by Mahnaz Afkhami, Ann Eisenberg and Haleh Vaziri published by Women's Learning Partnership (WLP). Stone asserts that, "Leading to Choices is a timely and significant contribution to training resources designed to enable women to effectively contribute to important public and private decision making

processes. The handbook is different from other resources in that it guides the participant not just through personal development and confidence building exercises, but also through activities that help women to build upon community resources and act as effective facilitators and motivators of individuals and groups.”

Following the above articles that set the overall regional ‘stage’, we will present country examples,

# Society

experiences and case studies where women have made a difference through organizing themselves and affecting some changes in their communities. Amani Kandil presents a thorough overview and study of women in Egyptian civil society. This article is valuable since as Kandil writes, “An understanding of women’s participation in Egypt’s civil society is important in light of several developing trends. Egypt is currently witnessing some movement in the direction of democratic transformation. Since women constitute half of the population, it is essential to understand the extent of their participation in the organizations of civil society. This is especially true since indicators on women’s political participation in Egypt over the last two decades (both as voters and candidates) indicate a decrease in female candidates and voters.” In this article, Kandil identifies and explores the ways in which women interact with the emerging civil society organizations.

Amira Osman deals with Sudanese women’s involvement in civil society and their roles as participants in public life especially in conflict resolution and peace reconstruction. Although Sudanese women face many obstacles, they have managed to find a role in promoting peace and reconstruction which could be their road map to playing a larger role in Sudanese civil society.

The next report is presented by the AWAL Women’s Society (AWS) in Bahrain which is especially pertinent due to the current events and changes occurring in Bahrain today. The AWS is an excellent example of women actively participating in civil and political life in their country to bring about positive changes

and promote development through active participation despite traditional constraints.

Finally, in this country-specific section, there is an interesting interview with an activist and founder of Darna (our home in Arabic), Mounira El-Alami. In 1995, a group of people in the city of Tangier decided to create a center for citizen’s initiatives called Darna, destined to become a center that would welcome debates about pressing social issues for the purpose of trying to bring public support to those in need and come up with alternative methods. This effort was based on consultation with citizens and the support of the civil society organizations.

Following the general overview and the country-specific case studies, we find it appropriate to introduce two young female

activists who effectively direct two influential and active civil society organizations in Lebanon. *Al-Raida* has conducted interviews with Lina Dannaoui and Nisrine Mansour, both young activists who are managing and directing civil society advocacy organizations in Lebanon and facing difficult challenges, yet with great success and zeal.

The report by Rania Al-Abiad on the role of the United Nations in women’s developing issues in Lebanon deals with the experiences of some UN agencies in advancing the status of Lebanese women in their particular fields of competence. It seeks to determine the scope of activity of these agencies and to ascertain their contribution to the development of the status of Lebanese women in civil society.

Azza Beydoun examines the performance of two Lebanese non-governmental organizations in combating violence against women. Azza Basarudin, on the other hand, deals with the manner Western and Arab feminists are able to envision solidarity and empower women across local and national boundaries through (1) connecting local and global gender issues and (2) reconciling Western feminist scholarships and Arab women’s culturally specific positions in international and cross-cultural frameworks. Last but not least, Rana Husseini recounts the story of Toujan Al-Faisal and the events that led to her arrest and release.

We hope you will find this issue insightful, educational and enjoyable! With warm wishes from the editorial board,

*Heba El-Shazli*