

AL-RAIDA

About Al-Raida...

AL-RAIDA is published quarterly by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World of the Lebanese American University (LAU), formerly Beirut University College, P. O. Box 13-5053/59, Beirut, Lebanon; Telephone: (01) 867 618, ext. 288; Fax: (01) 867 098. The American address of LAU is 475 Riverside Drive, Room 1846, New York, NY 10115, USA; Telephone: (212) 870-2592, Fax: (212) 870-2762.

Purpose and Content: *Al-Raida's* mission is to enhance networking between Arab women and women all over the world; to promote objective research on the conditions of women in the Arab world, especially conditions related to social change and development; and to report on the activities of the IWSAW and the Lebanese American University. Each issue of *Al-Raida* features a File which focuses on a particular theme, in addition to articles, conference reports, interviews, book reviews and art news.

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Submission of Articles: We seek contributions from anyone engaged in research, analysis, and study on Arab women. Contributions should not exceed ten double-spaced pages. Please send a diskette and a hard copy. We reserve the right to edit in accordance with our space limitations and editorial guidelines. Submissions will not be published if they have been previously published elsewhere.

Subscription: The annual subscription fee for *Al-Raida* is US \$25. Subscriptions begin in January and end December.

1985 to 1995:

A Decade of Power and Progress for Women?

As we prepare this issue of *Al-Raida* for publication, thousands of women throughout the world are busily preparing for the Fourth International Women's Conference, to be held in Beijing in September. The conference participants, representing half of the world's population, face daunting challenges -- logistical, political, and philosophical -- as they draft agendas and set priorities for this once-in-a-decade event. After reviewing literature and publications emanating from the last International Women's Conference, which was held in Nairobi, Kenya, in July of 1985, one cannot help but notice how much more ambitious, optimistic and proactive was the tone of the statements and agendas of the mid-1980s compared to the tone of Conference-related publications in 1995. The world has changed dramatically since 1985, and where women's and children's issues are concerned, not enough developments during the past decade have been for the better. In spite of rising levels of education world-wide, and despite the global reach of the communications revolution, women in 1995 express more feelings of frustration, pessimism and disempowerment than did their sisters in 1985.

Women representing many active non-governmental organizations, which have become increasingly crucial to the survival of women and children throughout the developing world, are justifiably angry that the Chinese Government plans to house the NGO participants in a location considerably distant from the site of the inter-governmental representatives' meetings. This will hinder the NGO community's efforts to participate in the shaping of international policies and programs which will have a significant and long-reaching impact on the lives of women and children in the next decade and beyond. Individuals and institutions throughout the world have voiced dissatisfaction with the equivocal language of the Conference document, The Platform for Action, which many feel does not go far enough in effectively addressing the real and pressing problems facing women throughout the world.

Ten years ago, when the Third International Women's Conference convened in Kenya, the world's political and economic structure was such that two heavily-armed superpowers set the pace and determined the possibilities for the rest of humanity. Academically, politically, and programatically, the world was neatly divided into those supporting various shades of capitalism versus those supporting various shades of communism. With the break-up of the communist countries, the abrupt disruption of a familiar world order, and the ensuing political confusion and ideological uncertainty throughout the world, wars, injustice and suffering on a scale not seen since World War II have again been unleashed. Without doubt, women and children have paid the highest price for the "New World Order." According to a recent Amnesty International report, women and children comprise 80 percent of the world's current refugee population. As nationalist and fascist ideologies spawn political conflict and military confrontations in the countries of Eastern Europe, Africa, Central Asia and the former Soviet Union, women and children have swelled the ranks of distraught refugees who are herded, day after day, into school gymnasiums and squalid camps. There they wait, frightened, powerless and frustrated, entirely dependent on the inadequate services and ineffective protection of the United Nations, whose forces and leaders have been incapable of halting heinous violations of human rights, such as ethnic cleansing and the systematic use of rape as a method of warfare.

In other regions, such as the Middle East, politicized religious ideologies pursued to the point of fanaticism have transformed women into one-dimensional symbols of cultural purity and religious rectitude in the ongoing confrontation with the West. Ten years ago, the idea of an Algerian high school girl, Katia Bengana, being shot dead before her horrified classmates and teachers for the crime of not wearing a *hijab* would have been unthinkable. Today, it is just another newspaper headline.

Meanwhile, in the West, "feminism" became a dirty word sometime during the last decade. A ground-breaking book on the state of the women's movement in the United States (*Backlash*, by Susan Faludi, 1992), revealed that a feminist, according to American popular opinion, is a mean, bitter and aggressive woman who hates men, strives to destroy the traditional family, and who is probably also a lesbian. Faludi attributes the erosion of the gains of the women's movement in the United States to the rise of the religious right as a political force calling for a return to "traditional values." Although unopposed to most rich cultural traditions, many feminists perceive "traditional values" as a code word for keeping women

confined to the private realm of the home, far removed from public centers of political, economic and intellectual power.

And it is power which is the fundamental issue underlying all other women's issues throughout the world, whether in the United States, Algeria, Bosnia, or China. Women need power to achieve their aims and to secure safety, health and education for themselves and their children. Women must access power to participate in fora of decision-making at the local, national and international levels which will so crucially influence their lives and their children's lives in this tumultuous period of change and uncertainty. Women need psychological power to stand up to socially sanctioned injustices; they need economic power to achieve independence and better lives for themselves and their children; they need political power to influence legislation and the distribution of key resources. As activists, NGO representatives, researchers and concerned citizens of the world, we must ask a new set of questions as we enter the new millennium: How do women understand and access power in their specific cultural and social contexts? What methods and models do they employ for exercising power? Do women define and use power in different ways than men? Are women's conceptions of power more constructive in and appropriate to the world's rapidly changing economic and political environments? Do existing governmental and non-governmental aid agencies and development projects focus on empowering women and encouraging their active and creative participation in forging their own lives, societies and polities? The status of women and children -- and perhaps humanity itself -- hinges upon the answers to these questions.

The File section of this issue of *Al-Raida* examines a specific conjunction of women and power in the Arab world: Arab Women and Management (pp. 9-24). The articles presented in the File, which were originally presented at a May, 1995 conference in Beirut entitled "The Arab Woman and Business Management," reiterate an important point: women are not attaining positions in the decision-making ranks of the private and public sectors in the Arab world commensurate with their education, efforts, capabilities and experience. Professional women in the Arab world have discovered the "glass ceiling," and are trying to find ways to break through it. According to several of the conference presenters, one of the greatest obstacles confronting the professional women is her own deeply ingrained and socially-given negative self-conceptions as a woman. The first step on the road to empowerment and success, then, is the psychological step of questioning the voices of traditional gender socialization which tell women that they cannot and should not exercise decisive power. Research on Arab women who have achieved considerable success in the field of management indicates that the most salient common denominator shared by these women is not their economic class, social background or religious heritage; rather, it is their strong belief in themselves and their dreams, their ability to work hard, their educational achievements, and their willingness to persevere through difficulties and set-backs. In other words, women who succeed are women who are willing to take into their own hands the power to make or break their own lives.

The psychological dimensions of Arab women's empowerment features prominently in another article in this issue of *Al-Raida*. Hania Osseiran reports on a compelling event which took place in Beirut in late June, "The Women's Tribunal," which included the live and very moving testimonies of women throughout the Arab world who have suffered violence and humiliation at the hands of their husbands, fathers, brothers, governments and societies. The "accused" was not a specific individual, but rather, the dysfunctional cultural beliefs, attitudes, values and institutions that facilitate and legitimize the brutalization of Arab women. The fact that an event dealing with such a sensitive and controversial issue could be held publicly in a major city of the contemporary Arab world speaks volumes about the incremental, yet dramatic, psychological and cultural changes which have occurred in the Middle East during the last decade. Women are beginning seriously to question authority, and that, in itself, is a revolutionary act of empowerment.

This issue of *Al-Raida* marks the first issue in nearly five years that was not overseen by the caring and conscientious eyes of my predecessor, Randa Abul Husn, who instituted many innovations and improvements in this publication. We wish Randa luck in her new position at the United Nations Development Program office in Beirut. Her new employer is fortunate to have such an intelligent and dedicated woman of integrity as an employee.

The next issue of *Al-Raida* will be a special double issue devoted to the multi-faceted topic of "Women in Post-War Lebanon." If you want to learn more about how Lebanese women survived seventeen harrowing years of civil war, and how they are faring in the post-war political, social and economic environment, be sure to renew your subscription.

— Laurie King-Irani
Guest Editor

About IWSAW..

IWSAW - The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World was established in 1973 at the Lebanese American University, formerly BUC. It began with a grant from the Ford Foundation with Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr as its Director.

Objectives: To serve as a data bank and resource center and to advance a better understanding of Arab women and children; to promote communication among individuals, groups and institutions concerned with women and children in the Arab world; to improve the quality of life of Arab women and children through educational and development projects; and to enhance the educational and outreach efforts of the Lebanese American University.

Projects: IWSAW activities include local, regional and international conferences; seminars, lectures and films; and educational projects which improve the lives of women and children from all sectors of Lebanese society. The Institute houses the Women's Documentation Center in the Stoltzfus Library at LAU. The Center holds books and periodicals. The Institute also publishes a variety of books and pamphlets on the status, development and conditions of Arab women, in addition to *Al-Raida*. Eight children's books with illustrations, and two guides, one of which specifies how to set up children's libraries, and the other which contains information about producing children's books, have also been published by IWSAW. In addition, the Institute has also created income-generating projects which provide employment training and assistance to women from war-stricken families in Lebanon. The Institute has also devised a "Basic Living Skills Project" which provides a non-formal, integrated educational program for semi-literate women involved in development projects. Additional IWSAW projects include the Rehabilitation Program for Children's Mental Health; Teaching for Peace; and the Portable Library Project. The latter project was awarded the Asahi Reading Promotion Award in 1994. For more information about these or any other projects, write to the Institute at the address provided above.