

Although a majority of Lebanon's charitable organizations are constituted of female members, they do not have feminist goals

## The Women's Movement: The Second Wave

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On May 15 and 16, 1995, Foundation Rene Moawwad and Friedrich-Naumann Stiftung sponsored a workshop entitled "The Women's Movement: The Second Wave". The purpose of the meeting, as stated by the organizers, was to explain the absence of the younger generation from the scene of women's activism. The projected aim was to draw up a new agenda that rephrases the women's issue, using a different language and finding new meanings. The women who were invited to participate were mostly university-educated, but they came from various socio-cultural backgrounds, and thus had different experiences and viewpoints.

The meeting began with a re-evaluation of the women's movement in Lebanon during the past 25 years. Maitre Laure Moghaizel, who has been an activist since her student days in the late 1940s, embarked on this delicate task of discussing both the achievements and failures of the Lebanese women's movement. Maitre Moghaizel signaled a number of successful landmarks for Lebanese women: In 1952, they obtained the right to vote; in 1959, Christian women obtained the right for equal inheritance; in 1974, Lebanese women acquired the freedom to travel; and in 1983, all punishments relating to the use of contraceptive measures were annulled. Maitre Moghaizel also noted that, although a majority of Lebanon's charitable organizations are constituted of female members, they do not

have feminist goals. In addition, she criticized the successive Lebanese governments for their lack of initiative and cooperation, noting that "the authorities always give half-measures whenever they give anything." A discussion then followed between the speaker and the participants.

The workshop also included a presentation by Randa Al-Husseini (UNIFEM) and Randa Abul Husn (UNDP) on the kinds of programs and mandates that international women's organizations have provided for women. A summary of the draft of the platform of action that will be discussed at the World Conference in Beijing was presented. A few participants criticized the draft for being on the defensive in its phrasing and wording, reflecting a compromising position that women in the Arab

world cannot afford to adopt if they hope to improve their overall social, political and economic situation.

As for the workshop itself, the various groups were first asked to define what they understand by the expression "The Second Wave." Once each group reached a definition or a certain understanding, the members of the group had to formulate their intended goals. What seemed to be a straightforward task soon proved to be much more complicated in the presence of various levels of awareness and/or activism. Much time was spent on discussing various concepts and terms, agreeing on the basics, and trying to reach least common denominators in the various aspects and facets concerning fundamental issues. In retrospect, this preliminary and unplanned session was the most revealing and productive as it witnessed discussions of topics that are rarely, if ever, touched upon in Arab society, such as domestic violence against women and the nature of the relationship between men and women. The latter issue monopolized a relatively large amount of time, especially when the question arose of whether men should be included in any potential group that may come out of the meeting.

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The various groups then presented their definitions and suggested goals for the Second Wave. These ranged from traditional propositions concerning education and the labor market to more radical suggestions concerning the necessity of confrontation. The majority of the voices, however, belonged to the former end of the spectrum and the conclusions were to a large extent traditional.

The meetings failed to draw up a new agenda for the women's movement. However, in some respects, much more was achieved. The success of this event was evident at the end of the workshop, and was expressed through the individual assessments of each of the participants: "it is impressive," said one participant, "that after seventeen years of war, we are able to meet and discuss issues in such an open and free way." Another

admitted that it was a timid effort, but stressed its novelty and usefulness: "For the first time, we sit with our sisters for more than twenty-four hours, discussing and interacting, with no restraints." One of the most important aspects remarked upon was the democratic procedure that was followed throughout the meeting. For most and perhaps all, this was the most democratic gathering that they had ever attended. If only for that, the meeting was a unique and worthy experience.

Another positive aspect was the frank discussion of very delicate issues among complete strangers. The participants talked about certain sensitive issues in public for the first time, thus succeeding, if only for a short while, in putting aside the main social constraint in our Arab culture: shame. For some, the workshop marked the first time that

they were ever involved in discussions pertaining to physical and psychological violence against women and complete personal and sexual equality. Not everyone agreed, but everyone was heard and everyone's opinions and feelings were genuinely respected. In a patriarchal social structure that discourages self-expression on both the political and personal planes, this was indeed quite an achievement.

Although the meeting clearly reflected the ongoing conservatism of our society, it also highlighted something else: that in a non-oppressive atmosphere, women are very willing to be accepting of each other. Indeed, the open-mindedness and intellectual maturity of all those present was the most rewarding aspect of all. Whether deeply religious, very conservative or feminist "western style," the acceptance of the other was most remarkable. No one tried to recapture the meeting and steer it in certain directions, making it something which it was not. The meeting reflected the pluralism of our society, of any society, once everyone's opinion is taken into consideration.

Even though the workshop did not result in straight-forward plans and organizational structures, the farewell reflected the strength of the bonds already formed, in such a short time, due to the prevailing mutual respect and appreciation. These bonds will have the chance to be tested in the near future and it is hoped that they will prove resilient. In any case, "The Second Wave" was and will remain a memorable and enriching experience.



*Lebanese Attorney Laure Moghaizal discusses the legal status of women in Lebanon during a panel of the conference on "The Second Wave." Seated to her right is Dr. Nadia Cheikh, Professor of History at American University of Beirut; to Moghaizal's left is Member of Parliament Naila Mouawwad.*

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