

# Young Women Speak Out, East and West

**Alia Moubayed**

Assistant Researcher, IWSAW

*In the context of the Euro-Arab Dialogue begun in Malta last year, a Euro-Arab Women's Seminar was held in Beirut between July 26 and 30, 1995. Jointly organized by the Progressive Youth Organization, representing the Arab Youth League, and the Youth Forum of the European Union, the seminar gathered young European and Arab Women, each representative of youth or women's association in their respective countries. The women were eager to voice their opinions and discuss their concerns forty days before the Beijing Conference, the outcome of which will set the framework for women's activities and struggles for the next decade. The dialogue covered an exhaustive list of women-related topics, such as the participation of young women in education and their situation in the labor market; sexuality and health; women in civil society (participation of women in politics, legal rights); and the influence of religion on women's roles in society.*

The main objective of the seminar was to encourage the participants to discuss frankly the problems facing young women and to formulate plausible solutions and tangible actions to encompass common problems in Europe and in the Middle East. The goal was not only to describe the status of young women, but more importantly, to establish a basis for a continuous exchange of experiences, methodologies and strategies aimed at enhancing young women's position in every aspect. A major socio-

cultural challenge, however, quickly arose: that of overcoming the traditional stereotypes and prejudices that each held about the other, whether Arab or European, and transcending the obstacles to understanding the other's views within their socio-economic and cultural contexts without passing any moral judgment or making self-serving comparative analyses. This ideal, though noble, was not actually attained because politics entered the picture. Some participants were blamed for their governments'

policies by those who had assumed (and here comes the stereotype) that individuals always agree with their governments' policies. Especially salient challenges appeared in those sessions related to religion and sexual education.

Overall, the dialogue reflected the inherent differences among the participants. Differences were remarkable, not only between Arabs and Europeans, but also among Europeans and Arabs themselves. Yet, the dialogue proved that differences are not and should not be regarded as obstacles to effective communication and cooperation, but rather, can be viewed as sources of diverse experiences from which both parties to the dialogue can benefit.

Indeed, despite these cultural differences, recommendations were unanimously agreed upon. Resolutions emphasized the condemnation of every type of violence against women, whether domestic violence, genital mutilation, sexism in the media, at work and in public places; or terrorism against women, as was recently witnessed in Algeria. Also, participants demanded the empowerment of women through education and called for programs to provide women with access to resources; to release immediately all women "prisoners of conscience" and guaran-

Especially  
salient  
challenges  
appeared in  
those  
sessions  
related to  
religion  
and sexual  
education.

tee them fair trials. Participants were unanimous in calling for solidarity with women who have been unjustly denied self-determination and independence, as in South Lebanon, Bosnia, the Golan Heights and Palestine. An extensive list of discussion topics was also suggested including the development of a culture of dialogue among women and between genders; the key role of women in identifying and overcoming prejudices (as evidenced during this seminar); and the role of the media in creating an appropriate image of women. As to the proposed actions to be taken, they included: consciousness-raising campaigns; newsletters; confidence-building and training for women; drop-in centers for women; clearing-houses for the dissemination of crucial information, and the exchange of documents, statistics and work methodologies; language courses; and organizing a follow-up seminar on the Beijing Conference. The participants also insisted on presenting an advocacy paper to the Barcelona meeting in November 1995 in the context of the economic cooperation effort between the European Union and the Arab Mediterranean countries.

In the wake of the dialogue, we must ask: What's in it for us as

young Arab women? Undoubtedly, the seminar was a very important opportunity for Arab women to speak out openly and to divulge the secrets of their suffering as a result of violence and discrimination, i.e., the arbitrary terror inflicted upon Algerian and Palestinian women and girls; and to talk exhaustively about cultural taboos; e.g., religion, the patriarchal system, circumcision and honor killings. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the dialogue gave young Arab women an opportunity to rectify many of the prejudices the Europeans held about them.

The dialogue also provided important insights into the problems of our own region. Dr. Fahmia Sharafeddine, a professor at the Lebanese University, discussed the glaring differences between the Arab governmental plans of action and the NGOs' documents prepared for the Beijing Conference in respect to their divergent priorities for enhancing women's status in the Arab world. According to Sharafeddine, governmental reports, unlike those of the NGO community, understate the importance of fostering democracy and protecting human rights; they also fail to reveal the long-term implications of gender discrimination, technology transfer, indebtedness and conflicts,

and thus propound insubstantial and vague strategies for the integration of women in overall development efforts. The NGOs, however, forcefully call for the ratification of conventions for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, and affirm women's right to development by linking the atrocious conditions of women to the structural underdevelopment of their societies.

Another pitfall evident in Arab governmental reports is that issues specific to young women were not addressed in these documents at all. As usual, no young women attend their governments' preparatory meetings, so their concerns were neither voiced nor recorded. Does this mean that young Arab women should carry, in addition to the first burden of debt, a second burden, that of being subject to decisions we never participated in making? Should we unquestioningly accept to be doubly marginalized, first as women, and secondly as young people? Or should we instead think of ourselves as winds of change, and thus get organized to lobby for our opinions to be heard and adopted? I conclude this report with an invitation to every young Arab woman to look deeply inside herself, and to look beyond her social and political walls, and to decide whether she wants to make a change or not.

The  
dialogue  
gave young  
Arab  
women an  
opportunity  
to rectify  
many of the  
prejudices  
the  
Europeans  
held about  
them.

## AL-RAIDA

*Future topics in Al-Raida include Women in Post-War Lebanon; Arab women in agriculture; Arab women in creative design; and Arab women's in the media, in addition to a look at Arab women's appraisals of the World Summit in Beijing. We invite you to submit articles and share information if you feel you can contribute.*

**Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, Lebanese American University (Formerly BUC)  
P. O. Box 13-5053/59,  
Beirut, Lebanon.  
Fax: (01) 867098.**