

INTRODUCTION

EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY MIDDLE EASTERN FEMINISMS, NATIONALISMS, AND TRANSNATIONALISMS

MARY ANN FAY



The essays in this special issue of *JMEWS* deepen our understanding of the “woman question” in modern Middle East history and demonstrate the complexity of the struggles women faced as they organized locally, regionally, and internationally for reforms to improve women’s status in society. Camron Amin, Kathryn Libal, and Orit Bashkin focus on the movement for women’s rights in Iran, Turkey, and Iraq, respectively, while Charlotte Weber considers the aims of women organizing across national boundaries in the context of the Eastern Women’s Congresses at Damascus in 1930 and Tehran in 1932. Ellen Dubois and Haleh Emrani present a speech by the primary organizer of these two conferences, available in English translation for the first time.

The term “woman question” compresses into two words a complex social, cultural, and political phenomenon that had at its center the issue of women’s place in society. The woman question was central to debates over the form the nation-state should take after liberation from foreign occupation and the achievement of national independence. Issues such as how to modernize society without sacrificing indigenous culture or becoming un-Islamic were often debated in terms of women’s role in the new nation-states. Would they have the right to vote, to be educated, to

work outside the home? Some male reformers such as Qasim Amin of Egypt and Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi of Iraq equated women's liberation with an end to veiling, seclusion, and polygyny.

The women's groups that emerged in the early twentieth century were liberal reformist in their goals and strategies, that is, they were not revolutionary. They worked to reform the state, not overthrow it, and they were secular rather than Islamic in their orientation. Their arena of struggle was the nation-state, or the incipient nation in the case of Iraq. Their demands included full citizenship for women through suffrage and reforms such as abolishing polygyny, raising the minimum age of marriage for females and males, extending the guardianship period of women over their children, curbing men's easy access to divorce, and expanding women's opportunities for education and employment. Because these groups were composed of middle- and upper-class women who sought alliances with Western-dominated international feminist organizations, such as the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAW), Middle Eastern women faced internal critics who accused them of betraying and corrupting their culture, being elitist and culturally inauthentic, and harming the anti-imperialist struggle for national unity and independence. Some contemporary scholars have characterized reformers such as Qasim Amin and Huda Shaarawi as being overly influenced by Western ideas and internalizing the critique of Eastern/Muslim women propagated by orientalist who misrepresented Islam and degraded women.

One of the strengths of these papers collectively is that they challenge us to deconstruct the binaries that have been used to shape our understanding of Middle Eastern women's movements, e.g. indigenous/Western or culturally authentic/inauthentic. The authors move the academic discourse about liberal reformist women's organizations beyond the dichotomous, and illuminate the interplay of internal forces, by showing how and why various women activists sought to work internationally for rights in their own country, as they attempted to persuade male elites to undertake the reforms they deemed necessary to improve women's status and opportunities.

In "Globalizing Iranian Feminism," Amin shows that Iranian women activists campaigning for women's suffrage purposefully sought international legitimacy as part of a strategy to influence national male

elites who were unresponsive to their demand for the vote. By 1945, leaders of the Women's Party were holding Iran up to international standards of women's rights, citing the San Francisco Peace Conference declaration in favor of "complete equality between the sexes," the Vatican's support for women's suffrage, and the Allies' demand that occupied Japan grant women suffrage. In a communication to the Iranian parliamentary committee charged with reforming the electoral law, the Women's Party compared Iran and Japan, both occupied by Allied forces, and raised the specter of externally enforced female suffrage. Amin observes that Iran's leaders, from the Pahlavis to the Ayatollah Khomeini, were well aware of the global audience before which they asserted the country's ability to meet or exceed global standards for the equitable treatment of women.

These papers show that both male and female activists in the societies studied understood that there was a global dimension to the issue of women's rights and used it to advance their particular goals. While women were actively seeking the support of international and regional associations to move their local agendas forward, male elites were responding to the scrutiny of the West from which they sought reassurance that their society was part of the community of civilized nations, as measured in terms of the treatment of women. In "Staging Turkish Women's Emancipation," Libal notes that Atatürk precipitously granted women suffrage in advance of the 1935 IAW Congress in Istanbul, in order to promote Turkey's image as a "modern" and "progressive" country in world public opinion. At the same time that the state was supporting women's emancipation, however, it was opposing independent women's organizations. The Turkish press was vilifying Turkish feminists as "divisive" and "out of touch," and charging them with undermining the solidarity necessary for national security. Libal captures the tensions within a society undergoing dramatic social change.

Turkey was often held up as a model of women's emancipation around the Middle East and even in the United States, Europe, and Asia. Nour Hamada, who organized the First and Second Eastern Women's Congresses, ranked Middle Eastern countries in terms of their progress, putting Turkey first, followed by Egypt, Syria proper, and Greater Syria, with Iran "in the middle." She was speaking in Tehran where the recent Marriage Reform Law was being touted as the most progressive

legislation in any Eastern nation. As this example demonstrates, another strong point of this collection of papers is that they show the importance of the regional context within which women's organizations functioned.

In her article on "Representations of Women in the Writings of the Intelligentsia in Hashemite Iraq," Bashkin points out the Arab dimension of the struggle for women's rights, which linked it to the wider pan-Arab struggle for unity, freedom from the British, and independence. The position of women in Iraqi society was vigorously debated in the context of the *nahda* or Arab awakening. Pan-Arabism was particularly important because it encouraged collaboration among Arab women and led to the organization of conferences in 1930, 1932, and 1938.

Weber's paper on "The Eastern Women's Congresses of 1930 and 1932" emphasizes the importance of these conferences for Middle Eastern women as they attempted to create an autonomous movement allied with but independent from Western feminists and from local male nationalists who sought to control the agenda and timing of reforms for women. As Weber points out, the West stood as the dominant referent in conceiving a modern future, and Eastern women were inspired by and sought connection to the Western-dominated international women's movement. But Eastern women had to balance the competing obligations of feminist internationalism which emphasized women's solidarity based on their shared subordination to men, transcending national allegiances, and anticolonial nationalism which cast women as guardians of the national culture. Tensions that arose within international feminist conferences were less likely to be present in gatherings of Eastern feminists who shared similar experiences of colonialism and nationalism.

The terrain of struggle to create women's organizations and lead the fight for reforms was local, regional, and international, and as the summary above shows, the terrain was fraught with tensions and contradictions. Locally, male elites wanted recognition from the West that their countries were modern and progressive, as evidenced by reforms to improve women's position; at the same time, they were reluctant to give up the patriarchal power they wielded within the family and within their marriages. Iran and Turkey advertised to the world their modernity and their support for women's rights, yet Iran under Reza Shah refused

to endorse female suffrage, and neither state would allow women's organizations to operate autonomously. While finding some allies locally, such as the Iraqi Communist Party which saw the struggle for women's rights as part of the wider anticolonial struggle, women also worked within pan-Arab and global contexts. Middle Eastern women's organizations participated in the Western-dominated international feminist movement where they found allies as well as controversy and criticism. And while the West served as a template for modernization in many spheres of national life, in the arena of women's rights, Westernization was often equated with corruption, moral decay, and betrayal of the indigenous culture. Western feminists who dominated the international movement for equal rights were not receptive to calls for an end to European colonialism and independence for the peoples of the East. For their part, Middle Eastern women argued that issues like women's suffrage and global peace depended on their countries gaining independence from colonial domination.

These papers explore multiple dimensions of Middle Eastern women's movements and vividly describe some of the women activists who founded organizations, devised strategies, and made alliances to advance their agenda for women's rights. As the research shows, they did not take their organizations into the international movement because they were brainwashed by Western feminists or seduced by Western ideas about women and their place in society. While the West provided a compelling model of autonomous womanhood that they could emulate, Middle Eastern women were committed to constructing an indigenous movement that would be both modern and authentic. They found allies in Eastern women with whom they believed they shared a common experience of both colonialism and indigenous patriarchy. Consequently, the women presented here appear fully conscious of the tensions inherent in their struggle for voting rights and reforms to create more egalitarian societies and make women equal to men in citizenship.