

We Have No Choice but to Win

An Interview with Lina Abirafeh

ABSTRACT Lina Abirafeh discusses her work as director of the Arab Institute for Women, an academic/activist institute at Lebanese American University. Abirafeh describes the work of the Institute, the first women's institute in the region (covering 22 Arab states)—and one of the first globally. She explains how she engages in gender-based violence prevention and response, and how individuals, academic institutions, and governments can participate in creating justice for women globally. Abirafeh offers her vision for creating feminist Arab states. **KEYWORDS** Arab Institute for Women, Arab women, violence, women's rights, youth

Lina Abirafeh spent over 20 years in development and humanitarian contexts in countries such as Afghanistan, Haiti, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Nepal. She is an expert in gender-based violence prevention and response. Abirafeh completed her doctoral work from the London School of Economics, which served as the basis for her book *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan: The Politics and Effects of Intervention* (Abirafeh 2009). She speaks and writes on a range of gender issues, most recently on the need for a feminist response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Abirafeh 2020b) and its impact on Arab women and girls (Abirafeh 2020a). Abirafeh argues that women's leadership is the strongest vehicle for peace and sustainable development (Abirafeh 2021). She was named as one of "Top 100 Most Influential People in Global Policy" around Gender Equality in 2018 and 2019 by the nonprofit advocacy platform Apolitical. In 2021, she was awarded a Vital Voices fellowship for outstanding women leaders.

Measure Everything Through the Lens of Women's Safety

RON SCAPP (RS): Before becoming the director of the Arab Institute for Women you had a life dedicated to doing relief work. How did you get involved with that work and how did you find your way to the Institute?

LINA ABIRAFEH (LA): I am a feminist, activist, aid worker, academic—but most of all a woman committed to doing whatever I can to end violence against women in my lifetime. My 2015 TEDx talk provides a good summary of my underlying philosophy: "Start where you stand" (Abirafeh 2015). That means that we all have a responsibility to do something, starting in the small spaces that we occupy. I believe in the power of anger to fuel the necessary fight for equality, safety, and dignity for all women everywhere.

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Since 2015, I have been the Executive Director of the Arab Institute for Women, the first of its kind in the Middle East. Since 1973, the Institute has worked at the intersection of academia and activism to advance women's rights and gender equality in the region and around the world. There are connections between this work and my previous humanitarian role. Firstly, the region has enough humanitarian crises (or is perpetually on the brink of crisis) to warrant emergency approaches—so the urgency of my work is the same. I always feel like the work I do is urgent—even if I feel like I'm getting nowhere most of the time! It's not just a job, anyway. How can it be?!

I didn't actually set out to do relief work, *per se*. I started doing this work because I was angry, angry at the injustice that women face everywhere, all the time. I don't even recall when I started to notice that the world we live in is unequal, that it treats women as less-than, as second class—but I was very young. It might have been my mixed origins. I'm Lebanese and Palestinian, raised first in Saudi Arabia and then in Northern Virginia. That's a pretty confusing background to have to contend with, and lots of layers of gender issues and conflict and so on.

I first gave voice to my views when I was 14, in a class called Comparative Women's History, where the "history" we studied was the history of violence against women all around the world. I never forgot the images I saw and the stories I heard in that class. I've done nothing else since. Over 30 years later, I remain a self-titled "one-trick pony," committed to ending violence against women, or at least to making gains in my lifetime.

But, I haven't really made many gains! No country in the world has achieved equality for women. We still hear every day of women's rights, bodies, and lives violated, simply because they are women. That was enough to get me started. It's been enough to keep me going, from country to country—in places like Afghanistan, Haiti, Mali, Papua New Guinea, and on and on. I started my career in 1997 in Bangladesh and have covered more than 20 countries.

While I worked in humanitarian settings, my focus was always on ending violence against women. In the field, I measured everything I did through the lens of women's safety. If women are not safe, no one is safe.

I am also implicated in this reality. As a woman in the field, I am not immune to violence—even as I come to help other women. So, I had to deal with my own feelings of not being safe as well.

And in an emergency setting, everything gets worse. Particularly violence against women.

In an era where violations of women's rights are at the forefront of media and international agendas—from #MeToo to Bring Back Our Girls—it is impossible not to stand up, to take note, to care, to get really angry. It can't just be my "job" to do so. I said in my TEDx talk that there's something wrong with the world if ending violence is a career, rather than common sense (Abirafeh 2015). I've also said that "common sense" is unfortunately not all that common. So, we've got a lot of work to do. The only way we'll get anywhere is if we see this as our collective problem in need of a shared solution.

Ending violence against women is a fight we have no choice but to win because, literally, our lives are at stake.



FIGURE 1. Lina Abirafeh speaking about her work at Lebanese American University in 2019. Photo courtesy of author.

Creating Community-Based Efforts

RS: You became the Executive Director six years ago. What were your goals when you took the position? Have you achieved them? What remains to be done?

LA: When I took over leadership of the Institute, I knew the region would be a challenge. I was aware of all the protracted crises—Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and now Yemen—and the refugee and displaced populations as a result. I was also aware of the patriarchal structure of the region, and the challenges in making gains in women’s rights and freedoms. My goals were to turn the Institute into a regional hub and “one stop shop” for all things women and gender for the region. We are the first in the region, surely, but it is hard to grow when there are so many setbacks, and the region has faced one setback after another since I started!

Ultimately, I wanted to continue to advance women’s rights and gender equality in the region and globally, leveraging our role at the intersection of academia and activism. I had three overarching goals for the Institute: to ensure that it is a bridge, a hub, and a voice.

It is a bridge in that it represents women and gender issues in the region and brings the issues we care about into international dialogues, ensuring that our perspectives are represented. As a hub, we share knowledge on and by Arab women with the world and support the creation of new knowledge from and for the region. The Arab Institute for Women also connects people and partners to Arab women and gender issues in the region by channeling funding and support to our work and by using our vast network. And, we use our voice to amplify Arab voices in global discourses on gender and to promote gender equality and human rights in the Arab region. That is our mission and we continue to build in line with our values.

Still, since 2015, I've reorganized the Institute under a strategic plan with five key pillars: education, research, community development, outreach, and youth engagement. We established high-quality programs of study on gender issues at the undergraduate, graduate, and mid-career levels, such as a master's degree in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies and our unique Gender in Development and Humanitarian Assistance for practitioners. We strengthen research on and by Arab women in order to build a body of knowledge to further social and policy change, such as our biannual journal *Al-Raida* (The Female Pioneer), in publication since 1976. We produce "Country Gender Profiles" for the 22 Arab countries, providing snapshots of different gender issues in each Arab country and serve as a starting point for further analyses and engagement. The Institute's sustainable development projects are community-based efforts to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Examples include *Qudwa* (Role Model), the Institute's signature program, which provides life-skills training for vulnerable women. In terms of outreach, the Arab Institute for Women promotes gender equality, human rights, and social justice through events such as an annual international conference and activism that promotes social change and policy change.

We have an awesome animated song on gender equality—"In My Hand," *Bi Ideh* in Arabic—that engages youth as champions using a lighthearted approach that sets a precedent for the region. Every year, the Institute and partners organize a student art and video competition in honor of the 16 Days of Activism to End Violence Against Women. Some of the winners include *Haqqik* (2018), *Misplaced Guilt* (2017), and *Covering Up* (2016). And we engage youth, particularly our students in the university, in our campaigns, activism, events, and a monthly speaking series *Food 4 Thought*.

At times it feels like we're just trying to survive—making it impossible to truly sustain and scale. But our work now is more important than ever. This is not the time to let structures like this fall.

What is the Lebanon We Want Now?

RS: The warehouse explosion on the Beirut waterfront in August 2020 was devastating. It also became a symbol and material evidence of different forms of corruption, negligence, and the legacy of a broken government. What was the impact of the explosion and its aftermath on the Arab Institute for Women? Are there any immediate or long-term consequences to the struggle for advancing social justice for the people of Lebanon and specifically the women of Lebanon?

LA: In a piece on our website, I wrote that Lebanon was already debilitated by layers of disaster, with weakened systems of social protection, reduced access to safe services and support, and displaced communities (Abirafeh 2020c). In such a setting, increased vulnerabilities will only be magnified. August 2020 was the final ingredient in the perfect storm, bringing Lebanon to its knees in a matter of minutes.

There's no quick fix or speedy solution. The impact of this will be felt for decades to come. A country that never was food-insecure now speaks the language of poverty. Those who were hungry before, now will risk starvation. Those who could hardly pay for their homes before, now will lose them.

When lives are lost, when livelihoods are destroyed, when economies collapse, when people are struggling for survival: they turn on women.

One might think that it makes no sense—or even perhaps is selfish—to speak only of women and girls now. But we speak about women and girls because women and girls are so often forgotten—especially now. In these settings, women's rights and freedoms are the first to be stripped and the hardest to revive. Conflicts and insecurities magnify pre-existing vulnerabilities, and women are the first to suffer, the last to recover, and the hardest hit by these insecurities.

Before Beirut's latest tragedy, increased levels of poverty were driving women to resort to risky measures for survival. Economic insecurity brings shortages of food, fuel, medicines, and creates new dependencies. Sex for food, sex for rent, sex for supplies. All of these things were taking place even before the explosion, and even in “quarantine centers,” security checkpoints, health facilities, places where women should be safe.

New homelessness will drive people to makeshift housing or temporary shelter without lighting, water, toilets. These spaces will be over-crowded, putting women and girls next to men they do not know. All of this increases risk for women.

Even before the disaster, resources were stretched and many basic services were lost. Traffickers prey on these vulnerabilities, taking advantage of those who have no other means. Women who were employed before, will not likely be able to re-enter the workforce, unless it is the informal economy, with its own risks and lack of protections. Women without family now have no economic support. Women's burden of unpaid care will be beyond measure.

Education for children—particularly girls—will be compromised. Child marriage will increase as an effort to reduce the economic burden on the family by “offloading” girls. And finally, violence against women will increase. I have seen this in every single emergency I have been in. Intimate partner violence is the world's most common—and best hidden—form of violence against women. In Lebanon, this was already exacerbated as a result of the economic crisis and the COVID pandemic. And now, what will happen?

The Lebanon that we knew is gone. What is the Lebanon we want now?

We need to rebuild a Lebanon that treats all equally. Let us start with women (see Abirafeh and Dore-Weeks 2020). We can build a country that prioritizes the lives and well-being of women. We can do more—and do better—to make sure women and girls everywhere feel safe. If women are not safe, then no one is safe.

As we try to reconstruct our lives from the rubble, we can provide funding and support to women's groups, to give them a voice in the new Lebanon. We can ensure that they have the tools and resources they need to advocate and act on behalf of women and girls. Women must be engaged at all levels of leadership and decision-making for this response and beyond.

Women are the face, and the force, of our recovery and our resilience. I do not need to tell you what male leadership has done for Lebanon. Perhaps it is time for women to rise from the ashes.

Young Arab Women Rising Up

RS: Can you speculate a little bit on what the political landscape might look like in the next few years in Lebanon and throughout the Middle East? Do you have a sense of hope for the emergence of a new political dynamic in which women are central?

LA: I would like to be optimistic. Cautiously optimistic. The challenges are great, and certain conditions need to be met before we are really able to participate in all aspects of public and political life in the way that we should. I have to be optimistic, or I wouldn't be able to do this every day!

The Arab region needs some serious reform. There's no hope for peace, prosperity, progress, as long as half of the population is deliberately held back. The region has some of the world's worst social indicators. We need 153 years to close the gender gap. We've got the world's lowest rate of women's labor force participation. We've got high rates of violence against women. We've got a range of humanitarian crises that show no signs of abating. Women's rights and gender equality is sidelined for continuous patriarchal projects and repeated resurgence of a fundamentalist order. Too many pushes for women's rights bring backlash, resulting in major regress.

We need to reform all the discriminatory laws in the region that hold women back—personal status codes that dictate what women can and can NOT do with their bodies and their lives. We need women at all levels of leadership and decision-making. We need women in parliament—feminist women who will act in favor of women's interests. We need to teach consent and respect in schools—at every level. We need to embed concepts of bodily autonomy and integrity in us all if we are to end all forms of violence against women. Without women's safety in public and private space, all the other rights are rendered meaningless.

All of this is made much worse in conflict. And made much worse for those who already exist on the margins—queer women, migrants, refugee women, women living with disabilities, and many others. Everything is made much worse in the context of this global pandemic. Pre-existing gender inequalities are now magnified with these layered insecurities. Yet, we **MUST** focus on women and girls, especially in these settings.

Women's employment opportunities need to be prioritized—in the formal labor market. Women's unpaid care needs to be recognized, and reduced. We must provide specialized support, training, resources for women in the economy. We must invest in women's health, especially in their sexual and reproductive health. Education for girls at

all levels needs to be guaranteed and normalized. Girl child marriage must be banned, along with all other harmful practices to which girls are subjected.

Those who want to support the region should be focusing on fully funding frontline women's groups, give them the tools and resources they need to do the work they have always been doing. We need to foster feminist leadership at all levels, from the highest positions of government. This entails challenging and changing existing power structures so we can build a better world for women and for EVERYONE.

Here's my hope: It's in the decentralized organic youth-led movements across the region. I see young Arab women rising up for a range of issues, from the so-called Arab spring and beyond. They are an intersectional movement and a model of nonformal organizing for a range of social causes—for the environment, against corruption, for equality, etc. They differ refreshingly from the older generation and its more formal ways of “doing” feminism, for instance the “NGO feminism” that remains hierarchal, and can often be elitist.

At the risk of sounding overly optimistic, I'd like to see some Arab countries implement a feminist foreign policy aligning values with leadership, driven by feminist politicians and backed by a feminist population. This means centering on human rights, dignity, equality with women's rights as a guiding principle. This means we need a new understanding of power in a region that has historically abused it. This new power needs to be transformative and inclusive, focusing on peace and security—and development and progress—for EVERYONE. I do not know if any country in the region is courageous enough to dismantle the old structures that have held us back—racism, sexism, misogyny, patriarchy. Most countries in the world are not yet ready to do this!

We need to bring people back into government—people's lives and people's agency in determining their own future. We need to ensure that peace means more than just the absence of war. The region will only advance if it is built BY all of us, FOR all of us.

A Call for Collaboration: We Invite People to Find Us

RS: Do you see any possibilities for collaboration and partnership with any academic institutions in the United States or Europe? If so, what sort of interaction and or engagement might occur? Might the Arab Institute for Women be a center for research and teaching for scholars outside the Middle East?

LA: Absolutely! I think this is essential. We already collaborate with many institutions on a range of things—research, conferences, events.

Concretely, in terms of our education programming, we welcome students outside of Lebanon and the Arab region to come study at Lebanon American University (LAU). Learning about gender issues while also being immersed in this context is a rare experience. Lebanon is a beautiful place. The opportunities are endless. We'd love to host and support students as interns or doing research—all are welcome to connect and discuss their work with us. Plus, they can submit their research for publication in our journal, *Al-Raida*, or our occasional paper series. We'd love to show case new voices!

We would also welcome international experts and speakers who might want to share their experiences with LAU students. All of this can be done online now, in our new Zoom era! There are opportunities to collaborate on research projects, plan joint conferences and events, and even for eventual joint degrees between universities.

Simply knowing about our Institute and the work we do is already a great start! We invite people to find and follow us on social media, check out our journal (all available online—for free!) and amplify our work.

My priorities at present are twofold: (1) securing the future of the Institute in the long-term through an endowment for the naming of the Institute—via a prime donor interested in leaving a lasting legacy; and (2) attracting resources in order to celebrate the Institute’s 50th anniversary in 2023. This is a big deal and we won’t be quiet about it! It is an opportunity to recognize and honor the region’s FIRST Institute for women—and one of the first in the world. This is something to celebrate. We would love global attention, energy, and support in making this as big as it deserves to be! ■

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