

For activists and academics—and everyone in between

Who said this?

“The truth is that I love my country, and I want to see it free, and for this sole reason you will sentence me to death...and you will kill me after you have tortured me, but do not forget that you are killing freedom and castigating your own country’s self-respect and putting your own future under threat.

And do not forget, you will not stop Algeria from becoming independent.”¹

Djamila Bouhired

Crisis Response, Advocacy, and Political Activist Work within Academic Organizations

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Opportunities

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The deadline to apply for the Research Fellowship program, including all letters of recommendation is September 15, 2014.

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The Continuing Importance of “Secular” Women’s Associations **Amy Young Evrard**

This is an exciting and productive moment in the scholarship on women’s agency and organizing among Muslim communities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, as scholars increasingly address these topics among various categories commonly referred to as “Islamists”, “Islamic feminists”, and “Islamist feminists”. Seminal works and important recent conferences in the MENA region,

Europe, and the U.S., have produced a great deal of quality work on women who were previously too easily dismissed as oppressed, having no agency, or prioritizing religious belief and family life over a concern with women’s rights, human rights, empowerment, and so on. These latter concerns were assumed to be the purview of so-called secular women and women’s organizations, the topic of study in a previous wave of scholarship looking, again, for women’s agency

and organizing in the region. Both waves have enlarged our understanding of the lives, perspectives, and actions of groups of women, both formally and informally organized. Unfortunately, this second wave has been accompanied by a tendency to compare and contrast “Islamist” and “secular” women’s associations in ways that suggest the former are more authentic, autonomous, democratic, or ready to critique modernity, the neoliberal economic

model, or U.S. imperialism than are the latter.

My recently-published book, *The Moroccan Women's Rights Movement* (Syracuse University Press, 2014), concerns itself with associations that would fall into the "secular" camp within this binary. In other words, members of these associations primarily seek justification for women's rights outside of Islamic texts and traditions (although they are quick to point to how Islamic texts and traditions are complementary to or underline women's rights and equality). Based on my research and experience among these associations, I would like to make two points in defense not only of "secular" women's associations but of the need to continue studying them and their important role in the political, legal, social, cultural, and associational landscape of the MENA region.

First, we need to explore more fully the various categories, agendas, and methods of "secular" women's associations. In *The Moroccan Women's Rights Movement*, I make the case for conceiving of a certain portion of Moroccan women's associations, for example, as women's *rights* mobilization rather than general women's mobilization,

according to a rights-first orientation that calls for legal and political reform above all else. This can be differentiated from development-first orientations among other organizations. Among the broad spectrum of associations in Morocco, we could also study those that are urban versus those that are rural, those performing grassroots organizing and education versus those that primarily concern themselves with lobbying, sponsoring conferences, and publishing works on women's rights. There are well-funded, well-established organizations, and there are young or short-lived organizations that represent the work of a group of friends or colleagues in a very localized setting. There are also associations working on human rights, Amazigh (Berber) culture and rights, youth empowerment, labor issues, and other concerns that include a heavy emphasis on women's rights, in part due to the public conversation begun by women's rights associations about legal change and education of women dating back to the 1980s. In many cases, the lines between categories are blurred. For example, there are associations working on specific issues, such as violence against women, that I include as important players in the women's

rights movement because their counseling and education efforts about violence have been primarily in service of legal reform, providing fuel for the fire of public concern about the need to reform laws and ensure women's awareness of their changing legal rights.

Moreover, we need to explore and problematize the category of "secular". Are there really only two sources for women's rights, and can they be lumped into the religious realm and the secular realm? And are these realms absolutely distinct from each other? There are notions, such as that of equality, that exist in both realms. If someone in the camp of "Islamic feminism" invokes equality, can we be sure that her notion of equality is derived solely from Islamic texts, untouched by the notion of equality espoused by the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and touted in the press by "secular" women's associations? Or if a women's rights activist who disavows any Islamic influence at all invokes the notion of equality, can we be sure that her understanding of equality was not influenced by the religious traditions in which she was raised? These questions become even

more complicated when we remember that Christian and Jewish women in the region struggle with many of the same tensions between “religious” and “secular” orientations as do Muslim women, whether in their personal lives or activism in service of legal and political change. In other words, there is such an intertwining of religious and secular principles, beliefs, and cultural norms, that may be overlooked as we separate these categories to opposite ends of the binary. For example, many “secular” activists in Morocco insisted to me that they are not personally secular; they are practicing Muslims, many of them quite devout. Their approach to women’s rights is also not wholly secular; although they rely on CEDAW and other human rights documents, and have gained much of their framing of women’s rights and equality from transnational feminism, they are also working to justify women’s rights in religious language and through religious texts and traditions.

Second, we should be careful about simplistic contrasts such as those described above, for example equating “Islamist” with authentic and “secular” with foreign. As many scholars have pointed out, those whom we refer to as “Islamist” are as much a product of events and trends

in the modern history of the region as anyone else. Just because political parties or political or social organizations claim piety does not necessarily mean that that group is more authentically Muslim than another. Likewise, because a particular notion of rights can be located in Islamic texts and traditions does not necessarily mean that looking to other sources of rights is inauthentic or Western in orientation. Another tendency is to dismiss “secular” women’s activists as disconnected elites, a problematic blanket description for the complexity of individuals and associations described above, without applying the same level of critique to those on the other side of the binary. What do we mean by “elite”, and why does some definition of elite status disqualify individuals or associations from being authentic, or espousing locally- derived or relevant principles? This style of categorization also suggests that “Islamist” women’s associations are less elite, more closely embedded to grassroots organizing, and more democratic than are the elitist “secular” ones. If such comparisons and contrasts are to be made, they must be based on carefully compiled and interpreted empirical data. Again, continuing to study all kinds of women’s associations, and

NGO Highlight

The Association of Tunisian Women for Research on Development (AFTURD)

The association was established in 1989. It brings together women researchers to study and evaluate the status of women in Tunisia to promote effective participation of women in development in different fields: cultural, social, economic and political.

Click [here](#) to learn more about AFTURD

seeking out rich understandings of them, is key.

“Secular” can be such a dismissive word, and it is a dangerous word given today’s political climate across the MENA region and the increasing polarization of religious and secular worlds and discourses. As scholars, we should problematize this polarization rather than sharpening it through our own research and discussion of data.

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Crisis Response, Advocacy, and Political Activist Work Within Academic Organizations

In July, the AMEWS Human Rights Task Force (formerly the Human Rights Committee) issued a brief Open Letter about the crisis in Gaza, ultimately calling not only for a cease-fire, but for an end to the embargo and occupation.

Considering that at the time the Israeli military was violently devastating Gaza and its civilians, the decision to issue the letter (which has had wide distribution) might have seemed an obvious one. However, just as the issue of calling for AMEWS or MESA to support the BDS movement (especially the academic and cultural component of the movement) is deemed highly controversial, how much to condemn Israeli government policy always has to be carefully and thoroughly deliberated and oftentimes tepidly expressed. For me, this extreme circumspection called to mind the difficulties, in general, of doing activist work within academic and professional organizations, but also it reminds me of the nature of MESA and many of its affiliate organizations, with the exception of its Committee on Academic Freedom.

One of the arguments often used in the U.S. against taking such political stands as the support of BDS is based on a faulty assumption that in the U.S. non-profit organizations, or ones partially funded through taxes, cannot partake in political activities. However, this refers to election and candidate advocacy only. Still, the argument is a hammer that is held over our heads. There exist, also, ideas about how taking a stand such as the academic boycott of Israeli institutions (even though it excludes individuals) may violate the academic freedom or put a chilling effect on some members. Under the circumstances of the destruction of schools in Gaza, one is compelled to ask whose academic freedom is being violated.

Yet, what should an organization with the title “Association for Middle East Women’s Studies” stand for? What should be our intellectual mission? Can we so easily disaggregate the political and the intellectual? Yet, academic institutions with their established disciplines have their “received wisdom” and “canons” that call for “objectivity,” “impartiality,” “balancing” one’s approach to a subject, revealing “all sides” of a problem, etc. These received rules often immobilize us by threatening our political careers and the well-

being of our departments and institutions. Nonetheless, despite the hammer and heavy-handed lobbying, we have had some recent, dramatic success stories in the U.S. with regard to the passing of boycott resolutions within academic institutions such as the American Studies Association and others. Ideas are changing, not only about our right, but our responsibility, to speak out at times like these. Ideas are changing about our responsibility to be a part of the solution, not be part of the problem, unlike Israeli universities which, with their July silence, are even more complicit than they have been all along. When one weighs whether or not one would be violating the academic freedom of Israeli educational institutions through the implementation of an academic boycott, it is not hard to reason that it is most of the children in Gaza who are having their right to education and academic freedom violated when they cannot even go to school right now. Silence is a crime. Inaction is complicity.

Sondra Hale, Ph.D.
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AMEWS***

When Women Speak CEDAW

Recognizing that the majority of Lebanese women are not aware of their rights, the Partnership Center for Development and Democracy (PCDD) found it crucial to spread awareness on the existence of the CEDAW international convention to which Lebanon is a signatory party as a legal tool that protects women's rights. Accordingly, PCDD initiated "When Women Speak CEDAW", a two-year project (from April 2012 until April 2014) funded by the Norwegian Embassy. The project aimed to raise Lebanese women's awareness of their rights under the CEDAW convention as well as to generate a wider and more concrete understanding of the Convention within the Lebanese society, by familiarizing and popularizing CEDAW.

The project started by translating CEDAW's sometimes rigid and technical content into colloquial Arabic to ensure the understanding of its content by all men and women in Lebanon. It also offered a Training of Trainers (ToT) for female partner NGO representatives to enable them to disseminate CEDAW content

افتحي عينيك
واكتشفي حقوقك
الموجودة باتفاقية
"سيداو"

سيداو

Open your eyes and
discover your rights in the
CEDAW convention

through open discussions in their local communities and schools and thus become agents of change. PCDD partnered with 25 local NGOs from the South, the North, the Bekaa and Mount Lebanon.

By equipping 50 female leaders from 25 partner organizations with the knowledge of CEDAW's content and the skills needed to transfer this information, PCDD was able to create a pool of women eager and able to affect change in their local community. By the end of the project, these newly trained women were able to target more than 950 men and women in more than 22 regions in all governorates in Lebanon.

Click [here](#) to learn more about the Partnership Center for Development and Democracy.

سيداتي = سادتي
حقوقك محفوظة باتفاقية
"سيداو"

سيداو

Ladies = Gentlemen
Your right is reserved in
the CEDAW convention

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We are interested in articles, announcements, conference reports, workshop updates, film-screenings, and social initiatives related to women and gender issues in the Middle East, North Africa and beyond.

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A Sexual Harassment Policy at Cairo University

Sexual harassment is a universal phenomenon and constitutes a violation of the sense of security and safety of individuals. Most universities all over the world have formulated policies to address this issue in order to protect their students and their staff. Until very recently, sexual harassment in Egypt was considered a taboo issue and victims of harassment hesitated to report incidents for fear of being stigmatized or blamed. Since 2011, the silence around harassment as a social problem was broken and sexual harassment became a subject of wide debate, as more women felt empowered to step up and report incidents. In early 2014, and in response to non-governmental organizations working on combating sexual harassment in society, the government issued a law that criminalized sexual harassment. This encouraged a group of academics in the Department of English Language and Literature at Cairo University to initiate the formulation of a sexual harassment policy that would define the problem and outline ways for prevention as well as holding perpetrators accountable. The ultimate goal is to render universities safe spaces for all

students and to create an environment conducive to equal opportunity and mutual respect.

A working group was formed in March 2014 and included staff members in the Faculty of Arts, student representatives who worked on relevant issues, and several civil society organizations active in the field of combating sexual harassment such as Harass Map, Nazra and Basma. The group formulated an anti-harassment policy draft which was then presented to the President of Cairo University. The President welcomed the policy and declared his commitment to facilitating its implementation.

A number of measures were put in place. An anti-harassment task force was established and consisted of a higher committee chaired by the President of the University and entrusted with issuing anti-harassment policies and monitoring their implementation, and an executive committee that implements the policies. This rendered Cairo University the first national university to endorse an anti-harassment policy that commits to raising awareness about the problem and spells out disciplinary measures against offenders.

In order to facilitate access to the task force, the executive committee appointed representatives at the 24 faculties who will act as liaisons

with the central unit. These representatives will receive specialized training on the policy and procedures plus handling complains and providing support to victims.

The task force fine-tuned the draft policy in accordance with Cairo University rules and complaints procedures. The policy outlines mechanisms and procedures for reporting sexual harassment according to specific guidelines based on the Supreme Council of Universities Laws. There is also a particular focus on prevention through training and awareness campaigns, plus a referral system for psychological support to the psychological support unit at the Faculty of Arts, Cairo University. Since the policy will be launched at the beginning of the academic year, plans for the dissemination of the policy, the organization of awareness campaigns and several specialized trainings are underway.

Though the anti-sexual harassment task force is still in its early stage, it is a significant step towards making Cairo University a safe space for students and staff alike.

Maha El-Said, Ph.D.
Chair of the Executive Committee for Combating Sexual Harassment

WHO IS SHE? Profiling: Djamila Bouhired



Photo taken by [désintéret](#) at flickr.com [changes were made to the original photo]

Djamila Bouhired (1935-) is a nationalist and freedom fighter, an Arab icon, a symbol of the Revolution and women's struggles for independence from a long history of French colonization of Algeria (1800-1962). She was one of many freedom fighters (Djamila Bu-Azza, Djamila Bu-Basha, Zohra Drif, Samia Lakhdari and others) who were active in the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) (*jabhat al-tahrir al-watani al-Jaza'iri*), from 1956 until independence.

Djamila was twenty years old when she joined the FLN to resist French colonization of Algerian land and people. She joined Yacef Saadi, the leader of the freedom fighters network of the city of Algeria and was involved in the transmission of messages, guns and bombs, on the roads and in public places. On January 26, 1957, a bomb exploded in a nightclub where young Frenchmen, doing their military service in Algeria, were killed. On April 9, 1957, Djamila was arrested after being shot in the breast. Soon her journey with physical and psychological

torture began. Bouhired was continuously tortured, and burned with electricity all over her body.² She was sentenced to death on March 7th, 1958 but thanks to the world's sympathy with her, the sentence was not executed. She was released from prison after five years and later married the leading FLN defense French lawyer Jacque Vergès. Vergès knew how to develop a strategy that used the courtroom as a political space for the condemnation of French military violence. In court he was able to expose the inhuman treatment and rape of FLN women.³

The Algerian revolution, just like its predecessor, the French revolution, inspired many poets, film makers and women political activists. The Palestinian poet Samih al-Qasim, Syrian poets Nizar Qabbani and Adonis, famous Iraqi poets Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Abd al-Wahab al-Bayati, and Bahrani poet Ali Shariha composed odes celebrating the courage of freedom fighter Djamila Bouhired. Youssef Chahine, the famous Egyptian film producer, produced a film entitled *Djamila Bouhired* (1958), and popular singers across North Africa, like Warda al-Gaza'iriya and Sou'ad Muhammad in Egypt and Hajjah Hamdawiya in Morocco sang for Djamila Bouhired. Djamila and the young women freedom-fighters of the Algerian revolution came to symbolize the Algerian aspirations for social justice, liberalism, and a sovereign nation throughout the world and particularly in Palestine and the Arab world. On December 5, 2014, Djamila Bouhired was honored by TV channel al-Mayadeen, at UNESCO in Beirut. On this occasion, Djamila Bouhired was acclaimed particularly that her struggle came at extremely difficult times in Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Libya where the meaning of revolution was compounded with chaos, freedom blended with destruction, and hope merged with desperation. On the occasion of the Syrian revolution of 1925, the poet Ahmad Shawqi sang the heavy price of freedom the people have to pay:

The blood soaked hands knock at the door of red-rimmed freedom.

Djamila Bouhired is not a nationalist Algerian who produced great literature, sang beautiful melodies or played enchanting roles in the cinema; she is a woman of pride and confidence in her own history and culture, a symbol of the Algerian revolution, an Arab icon who contributed to the freedom and independence of her country. Since that time and until today, freedom and emancipation of Arab women has been an integral part of the freedom and emancipation of the people and society.⁴

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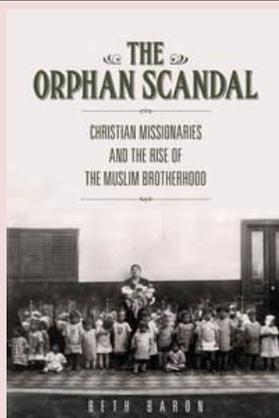
¹ Quoted from Muhammad al-Mili, *Djamila Bouhired*, 1st edit. Juwayliya, 1958, pp.130.

² Read the report of Dr. Janin BelKhoja on the torture of Djamila Bouhired in Bassam al-Assayli, *al-Mujahida al-Gaza'iriya*, Dar al-Nafa's, 2nd.ed. 1986, pp. 138-141

³ Neil MacMaster, *Burning the Veil: The Algerian war and the 'emancipation' of Muslim women, 1954-1962*, Manchester University Press, 2009.

⁴ See Margot Badran, *Feminist, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Princeton University Press, 1995.

Highlights



The Orphan Scandal
Christian Missionaries and the Rise of The Muslim Brotherhood

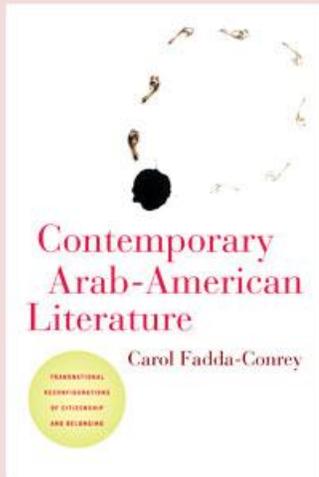
Author: Beth Baron
Year of publication: 2014
Publisher: Stanford University Press

On a sweltering June morning in 1933 a fifteen-year-old Muslim orphan girl refused to rise in a show of respect for her elders at her Christian missionary school in Port Said. Her intransigence led to a beating—and to the end of most foreign missions in Egypt—and contributed to the rise of Islamist organizations.

Turkiyya Hasan left the Swedish Salaam Mission with scratches on her legs and a suitcase of evidence of missionary misdeeds. Her story hit a nerve among Egyptians, and news of the beating quickly spread through the country. Suspicion of missionary schools, hospitals, and homes increased, and a vehement anti-missionary movement swept the country. That missionaries had won few converts was immaterial to Egyptian observers: stories such as Turkiyya's showed that the threat to Muslims and Islam was real. This is a great story of unintended consequences: Christian missionaries came to Egypt to convert and provide social services for children. Their actions ultimately inspired the development of the Muslim Brotherhood and similar Islamist groups.

In *The Orphan Scandal*, Beth Baron provides a new lens through which to view the rise of Islamic groups in Egypt. This fresh perspective offers a starting point to uncover hidden links between Islamic activists and a broad cadre of Protestant evangelicals. Exploring the historical aims of the Christian missions and the early efforts of the Muslim Brotherhood, Baron shows how the Muslim Brotherhood and like-minded Islamist associations developed alongside and in reaction to the influx of missionaries. Patterning their organization and social welfare projects on the early success of the Christian missions, the Brotherhood launched their own efforts to "save" children and provide for the orphaned, abandoned, and poor. In battling for Egypt's children, Islamic activists created a network of social welfare institutions and a template for social action across the country—the effects of which, we now know, would only gain power and influence across the country in the decades to come.

Highlights



***Contemporary Arab-American Literature
Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and
Belonging***

Author: Carol Fadda-Conrey
Year of publication: 2014
Publisher: NYU Press

The last couple of decades have witnessed a flourishing of Arab-American literature across multiple genres. Yet, increased interest in this literature is ironically paralleled by a prevalent bias against Arabs and Muslims that portrays their long presence in the US as a recent and unwelcome phenomenon. Spanning the 1990s to the present, Carol Fadda-Conrey takes in the sweep of literary and cultural texts by Arab-American writers in order to understand the ways in which their depictions of Arab homelands, whether actual or imagined, play a crucial role in shaping cultural articulations of US citizenship and belonging. By asserting themselves within a US framework while maintaining connections to their homelands, Arab-Americans contest the blanket representations of themselves as dictated by the US nation-state.

Deploying a multidisciplinary framework at the intersection of Middle-Eastern studies, US ethnic studies, and diaspora studies, Fadda-Conrey argues for a transnational discourse that overturns the often rigid affiliations embedded in ethnic labels. Tracing the shifts in transnational perspectives, from the founders of Arab-American literature, like Gibran Kahlil Gibran and Ameen Rihani, to modern writers such as Naomi Shihab Nye, Joseph Geha, Randa Jarrar, and Suheir Hammad, Fadda-Conrey finds that contemporary Arab-American writers depict strong yet complex attachments to the US landscape. She explores how the idea of home is negotiated between immigrant parents and subsequent generations, alongside analyses of texts that work toward fostering more nuanced understandings of Arab and Muslim identities in the wake of post-9/11 anti-Arab sentiments.

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