

For activists and academics—and everyone in between

## Who sang this?

Lebanon, how beautiful and pristine  
 Ever mounting, ever green,  
 Of your soil I miss a grain,  
 Towards your peaks, (and greater of any  
 built thing),  
 I happily lean,  
 My life in Lebanon, I miss, I dream!!

Lubnan al-akhdar Lubnan<sup>1</sup>

**Fairuz**



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***UC Davis Arab Studies Conference unites scholars around gender, decolonization; celebrates career of Dr. Suad Joseph***

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## **Violence Against Women: We Need a Transnational Analytic of Care** **Elora Halim Chowdhury**

**W**hen gender-based violence occurs in the Global South, how should feminists in the Global North respond? Sometimes feminists in Europe and the United States say nothing, fearful that their attempts to speak out about gender violence in South Asia, Africa, Latin America, or other formerly colonized regions will reproduce colonial dynamics. At other times they do speak, and their language echoes imperial

narratives about needing to “rescue” downtrodden women from “backward” cultural traditions. To move to a more constructive place, we need to foster a transnational analytic of care: one that is not defensive, reactionary, or silencing. We need an analytic of care that is cognizant of the local *and* global processes that create conditions of vulnerability for women and form the asymmetrical planes in which cross-cultural alliances and solidarity practices must happen.

The urgency of our need for more constructive forms of transnational feminist solidarity became particularly apparent in December 2012, when feminists across the globe took to the pen and the streets in response to the gruesome gang rape of a young woman in New Delhi, the capital of India. The twenty-three-year-old woman was returning home after watching the film *The Life of Pi* with a male friend in a shopping mall in South Delhi. She and her companion that night



***Protesters in Kolkata, India, decry violence against women following the death of a twenty three-year-old woman who was gang-raped and beaten on a bus in New Delhi. Activists in India later criticized U.S. feminists for reproducing colonial discourse in their responses to the attack.***

tried to hail public buses and auto-rickshaws to no avail. Eventually, a private chartered bus stopped to pick them up. There were six men on the bus, including the driver, his younger brother (who posed as the conductor), and four others who worked in various low-skilled jobs in the city and were economic migrants from neighboring states. The bus did not have a permit to be on the roads after-hours; investigations later revealed that the traffic police had been bribed in order for it to pass through security checkpoints. The men on the bus, apparently on a “joyride,” beat the young woman and her friend. When the woman and her friend resisted, they dragged her to the back of the bus and took turns raping her. The assault lasted several hours as the bus plowed through the city

streets, and involved the insertion of a metal rod into the woman’s body, which caused her intestines to spill out. Afterward, the couple was stripped naked and thrown off the bus. The driver tried to run over the woman, but her friend managed to pull her out of the way.

The young woman’s ordeal did not stop there: for nearly half an hour, passersby ignored the pair’s cries for help. When the police finally arrived, instead of transporting the woman and her friend immediately to the nearest hospital, they argued over jurisdiction. The woman fought for her life for two weeks and finally succumbed to her injuries in a hospital in Singapore. Even though the government ostensibly flew her to Singapore for better care, many in India were critical of the move as her

condition was too fragile—they saw the move as a gesture by the government to dampen the public outrage and massive protests in Delhi and all over India. The men accused of this brutal crime are currently standing trial in a fast-track court.

In the face of mounting civil protests, the government set up a committee that brought representatives from diverse constituencies in India to put forth a set of legal and social recommendations to deal with violence and discrimination against women. Even though feminist groups found these recommendations inadequate, indeed a “mockery”, some believe that the changes underway in legal and social policy may set the stage for

transforming structures and attitudes around women's rights, access, and citizenship.

### **Feminist Responses**

Amid the avalanche of feminist responses to this particular event, a debate ensued around the question of the appropriate terms of engagement with women's oppression in the Global South. Crudely speaking, many feminists in the West were either called out for not being critical enough of patriarchal social structures in India that contribute to violence against women or blamed for casting Indian men and culture within a colonial mindset that sees misogyny as an inherently Eastern phenomenon. By extension this mindset obscures a long history of using the status of women in a society as the measure of its progress, which aids colonial and imperial missions. At the same time, while many responses in the Indian media were powerful in pointing out apathy and misogyny in India's state machinery and public attitudes toward women's roles in society, some of these narratives also engaged in problematic class-based assumptions about the "natural link" between poverty and violent masculinity. These responses fell short of shining light on globalization and the structural

inequalities that play a role in producing both victims and perpetrators of violence. Focusing on poverty in a narrow sense, they failed to discuss the global economic conditions that make poor women and men especially vulnerable to extreme violence and suffering.

This kind of skewed narrative supports the continuation of an imperialist feminism that seeks to "rescue" downtrodden women from backward cultural traditions and misogynist states and men. At the same time, it can obscure the fact that violence is not confined to any particular group in society but rather cuts across class, religion, ethnicity, and region. The imperialist baggage in feminist perceptions about women in the Global South is further reflected in a policy task force entitled "Beyond Gender Equality," which was set up at Harvard University following the New Delhi gang rape and is preparing to offer recommendations to India (and other South Asian countries). In response to this initiative, a group of prominent Indian feminists published a sardonic piece in the online publication *Kafila* detailing the decades-long, painstaking work of feminists in India advocating for justice for victims of

## **NGO Highlight**

### **Helem**

Helem is a non-governmental and non-profit organization. It was established in 2004. Helem leads a peaceful struggle for the liberation of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgendered (LGBT), and other persons with non-conforming sexuality or gender identity in Lebanon from all sorts of violations against civil, political, economic, social, or cultural rights.

Click [here](#) to learn more about Helem.

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sexual violence. These feminists, infuriated by the task force at Harvard, wrote, “Perhaps you will allow us to repay the favour, and next time President Obama wants to put in place legislation to do with abortion, or the Equal Rights Amendment, we can step in and help and, from our small bit of experience in these fields, recommend what the United States can do.”

Such patronizing U.S. attempts to offer guidance to women in India appear hollow when we consider that the United States is one of the few nations that have not ratified the UN Convention for Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (placing it in the company of states like Sudan, Somalia, and Iran—countries that the United States does not hesitate to condemn as part of an “axis of evil”). It is astonishing that UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon issued a statement calling on Indian government leaders “to do everything in their power to take up radical reforms, ensure justice and reach out with robust public services to make women’s lives more safe and secure” when no such statement has been directed toward the U.S. government, despite the fact that there is a reported rape in the United States

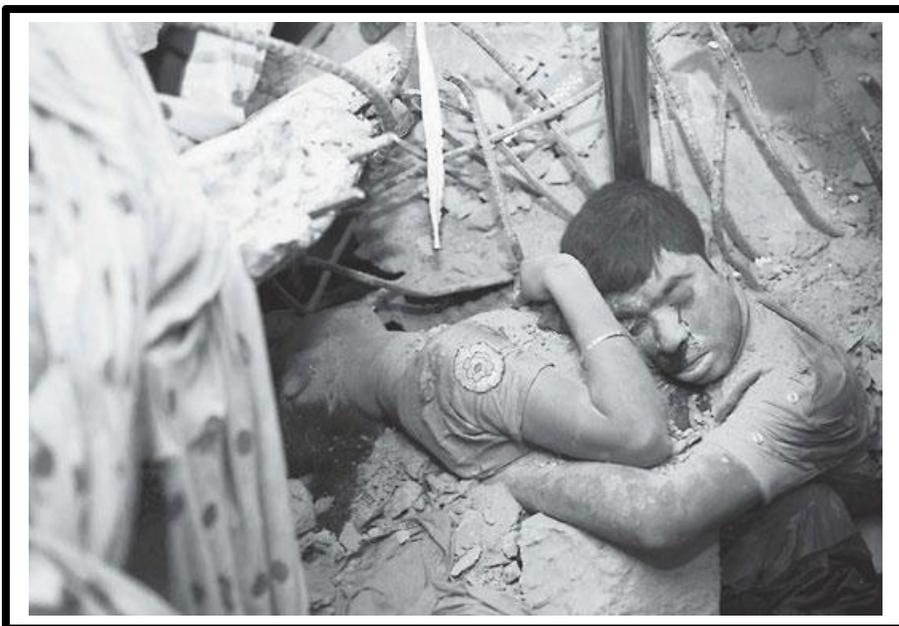
every 6.2 minutes, and one in five U.S. women will be raped in her lifetime. Ultimately such posturing over moral ground also overlooks how first world neoliberal policies contribute to a climate of insecurity and vulnerability for women (and men) in the Global South.

Overlooking the consequences of neo-liberal policies is, of course, not strictly a Western phenomenon. Speaking to this point, social activist Vandana Shiva was critical of the Indian prime minister’s suggestion that “loose-footed migrants” are contributing to the problem of violence against women. Because the Delhi rape involved migrants on both sides (both the victims and the perpetrators were migrants), Shiva points out:

*The rapists were all living in slums in hugely brutalized conditions, thinking that brutalization is the norm. The [young woman’s] father had sold his land because farmers aren’t being allowed to make a living. Two hundred and seventy thousand Indian farmers have committed suicide in recent decades. The rest are hanging on the margins of existence. He [the young woman’s father] moved to Delhi to load luggage at the airport to be able to survive and send his children to school....Mr. Prime Minister, they are a product of your policies. They are refugees of your economic policies.*

In another strand of the debate, political activist and author Arundhati Roy observed that there was nothing inherently exceptional about this case—it was made exceptional by the unprecedented nature of the citizens’ uprisings that it sparked. She criticized the response to the event as highly selective and drawing in mostly the middle and upper-middle classes because they could relate to the “victim,” to whom Roy mistakenly assigned a middle-class identity. Even though the young woman herself came from a family that had migrated to Delhi for better opportunities, and she worked at a call center at night to help finance her education as a physiotherapist, these facts were overshadowed in many readers’ minds by the choice of the movie she and her friend had seen, the location of the mall they had visited, and the initial reports about her career aspirations—all likely signifiers of a middle-class identity. Roy’s larger point perhaps was that rape is not exceptional but routine in most parts of India. Also her point that similar protests have not been sparked by routine, everyday violence against minorities in India—for example, the rape of Dalit women by upper-caste men or the systematic rape of women in conflict zones by the Indian Army—is a point well taken. Roy was right to raise concern about selective

*A narrow focus on sexual assault can obscure how the structural violence of the global economy is also a central source of women's suffering in the Global South. This photo, *Death of Thousand Dreams* by [Taslima Akhter](#), captures the final embrace of two workers killed by the April 2013 factory collapse in Bangladesh.*



empathy and the selective exercise of responsibility and care across borders.

### **Factory Collapse: Another Form of Violence**

Western feminists often move from describing women's suffering in the Global South as a consequence of patriarchal oppression to suggesting that women in the Global South can be empowered through neoliberal economic ventures that create opportunities for self-reliance. But the April 2013 collapse of the Rana Plaza factory building in Bangladesh came as a powerful blow to the image of the "self-reliant" third world woman worker—the backbone of the national economy and the transnational supply chain. The factory collapse killed upward of 1,100 workers in the ready-made garments industry.

In the last three decades Bangladesh has become the second-largest supplier (trailing China) in the global apparel industry, employing nearly 4 million workers, most of whom are young women. Eighty percent of exports in Bangladesh are in this sector, constituting a \$19-billion-per-year industry. Despite being the "golden goose" of the economy, the workers in this sector face dismal working conditions and compensation. The flagrant disregard for their humanity could not be more apparent than when the owner of the Rana Plaza building and the supervisors of its factories forced the workers back into the premises the day after it was declared an unsafe construction. They were not going to be paid their monthly salary, the managers informed the workers,

unless they went to work. In sharp contrast, the employees of the bank and shops also housed on the premises were asked by their employers not to report to work.

The flagrant disregard for the worth of workers' lives was further apparent in the government's decision not to accept external assistance in the recovery efforts, in order to project to the global community an image of "self-reliance." Equally shocking were the bizarre statements of government representatives who minimized the seriousness of the situation and many Western retailers' refusal to sign on to the building and fire-safety contracts. In the end it was ordinary civilians from all corners of Bangladesh who rushed to coordinate and carry out the monumental task of pulling out

bodies of dead and injured workers, facing great risk to their own well-being in the process. The stories of Shahina Akhter, who remained buried alive for five days before finally succumbing to her injuries just as rescue workers were drilling to get her out, Kaikobad, a construction worker who toiled to pull twenty-six workers out of the rubble before dying from severe burns from trying to operate a drill machine, and Reshma Begum, the miracle survivor who was pulled out alive after seventeen days, will be forever etched in the minds of those who followed this entirely avoidable catastrophe.

No other image, however, has captured the gravity of the disaster as powerfully as Taslima Akhter's photograph *Death of Thousand Dreams* (see page 5), which was named the most haunting depiction of the tragedy by the photo editors of *TIME*. The photograph shows a man and a woman in a loving embrace in the last moment of their lives. We know neither who they are, nor whether the couple shared a relationship outside of their death embrace. Perhaps they sought comfort, feeling a profound connection to each other, humanity, and the divine, as the plaster, steel, and concrete came

crashing down on them like a deck of cards.

The image defies a number of social and cultural norms in depicting physical contact between a young man and a woman in an ostensibly "public" embrace. The enormity of what was about to happen perhaps made those considerations for modesty, shame, and honor immaterial. The man is seen to be covering the woman's torso in a protective embrace even as his own trauma is signified by blood—resembling a tear—trickling down from the corner of his closed left eye. While not minimizing the reality of male violence against women, I'd like to propose that this photo poses a visual challenge to Western feminist narratives of the "downtrodden third world female" and her "violent and oppressive" male counterpart. It expands our understanding of women's oppression beyond the lens of "male violence" to one of structural violence and encourages an analytic of connectivity as the root of deep solidarity.

*Death of Thousand Dreams* also draws our attention to the structural inequality of globalization, colonial relations between supplier and buyer nations, corporate greed, corrupt state machinery, and

disregard for the poor workers—male *and* female—in each tier. All of these structures of power contribute to the exposure of certain populations in the Global South to extreme violence and suffering. And the image also illuminates the kin, community, and human connection that is at the base of all of our existence. At the very least it should urge us to rethink some of the outdated, tired, and prejudicial paradigms that continue to limit the scope of our understanding and inspiration to practice more egalitarian, just, dignified, and humane interactions with one another.

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\*\* Elora Halim Chowdhury, "Violence Against Women: We Need a Transnational Analytic of Care," in *Tikkun*, Volume 29, no. 1, pp. 9-10-55-56. Copyright, 2014, Tikkun Magazine. All rights reserved. Republished by permission of the copyright holder, and the present publisher, Duke University Press. [www.dukeupress.edu](http://www.dukeupress.edu)

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## **Documentary Review**

### ***Making Waves: Expressions of Gender Equality in the Sacred Texts and Islamic Tradition***

**Release Year: 2014, 26 Minutes**

*Making Waves* is a documentary that chronicles lived realities, experiences, and strategies of Muslim activists, scholars, and community leaders who engage in interpretations of sources of Islamic traditions from feminist and justice oriented lenses to advocate for transformation in legal and social realms. From Southeast Asia to Africa these voices of change are encouraging renewed interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith and reinvigorating the rights of citizens to exercise their religious and political rights in their respective communities and nation-states.

This documentary is directed, produced, and edited by Alice McDowell, a freelance filmmaker from Brisbane, Australia. It was commissioned by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and produced by 180 Studios. As part of IDEA's Democracy and Diversity Program, *Making Waves* is intended to be utilized as "a tool to generate discussion and dialogue among religious groups and other civil society members, political actors and policy makers on the role of women in Muslim political, social and religious structures and ways of overcoming their exclusion from decision making and access to other rights."<sup>1</sup> IDEA plans on distributing this documentary to its international partners such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments, and various advocacy-oriented organizations interested in issues related to Muslim women.<sup>2</sup>

*Making Waves* highlights the growing movement of contemporary Muslims (and their allies) who are reclaiming their faith by stressing that the traditional *ulama*<sup>3</sup> class does not have monopoly over interpretations of Islam and that Islam is a religion capable of renewal (*islah*) and reform (*tajdid*) depending on the contextual needs and challenges of its adherents. More specifically, those subscribing to this movement stress that justice and equality are fundamental concepts of Qur'anic revelation and that Muslims need to realize the extent to which politicization of Islam has led to hegemony and control through fossilized understandings of gender roles and men's rights within the family. They urge believing Muslims to take responsibility in condemning harmful practices instituted and legitimized in the name of Islam. They are choosing to live Islam according to their understanding of its doctrines adaptability to its adherent's experiences and lived realities.

Among those featured in the documentary are Farid Esack, a South African scholar of Islam and political activist, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, an Iranian anthropologist who has written extensively on gender and Islam, and Mohammad Hashim Kamali, who specializes in Islamic jurisprudence and legal theory. Activists such as Zainah Anwar, the former director of Sisters in Islam (SIS), a non-governmental organization in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and Isatou Touray, the Founder and Executive Director of the Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (GAMCOTRAP) are also featured. SIS has over twenty years experience in protecting and promoting the rights of Muslim women through legal and public policy advocacy. SIS has been instrumental in crafting a public space for open debates on Islam and the ways it has been used as a source of laws and public policies. **More on p. 12**

***UC Davis Arab Studies Conference unites scholars around gender, decolonization; celebrates career of Dr. Suad Joseph***

**A**nthropologists, historians, and scholars of gender gathered at the University of California - Davis May 2-3 to discuss subjectivity and decolonization in the Arab world, as well as the career of Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Women's Studies Suad Joseph. The conference, organized by the UC Davis Middle East/South Asia (ME/SA) program, came as Professor Joseph announced her retirement from teaching.

The theme of the first day, Subjectivity and its Discontents, saw gender and sexuality take center stage. Islah Jad, Zeina Zaatari, Sherine Hafez, and Marcia Inhorn explored gendered tensions and expectations in the spheres of politics and citizenship. Islah Jad discussed the politics and economics of group weddings in Palestine. Zeina Zaatari's talk interrogated the exclusionary aspects of heteronormativity in Lebanon.

Sherine Hafez's discussion of the "Virginal Trials" in Alexandria showcased the ways in which political projects in revolutionary Egypt today are written on women's bodies. Marcia Inhorn presented her ongoing work on the relationship between the medicalization of infertility and emergent masculinities in the Middle East.

Other works presented that day investigated struggles to forge coherence in subjectivity and activism in the context of the U.S. imperial project in the Arab world. Madeline Otis Campbell explored subject formation for former Iraqi translators in the US military now resident in the United States. Nadine Naber discussed her experiences with women in the San Francisco-based leftist Arab movement during the 1990s.

Day Two of the conference, Decolonization and its Discontents, attempted to revisit decolonization without reinstating Europe as the central theoretical core of all histories. Much of this work involved the intellectual formations around colonialism and decolonization. Ussama Makdisi complicated our understanding of sectarianism as simply a product of

colonial policies, situating sectarianism within the Ottoman Empire as part of a nineteenth-century global change in ideas of subjecthood. Sara Pursley used the writings of Iraqi thinker Ali al-Wardi to demonstrate how concepts of selfhood changed and fractured around World War II and decolonization. Nancy Reynolds revealed the construction of the Aswan High Dam as the site for the re-creation of Egypt in images evoked by artists and thinkers of the time. Samera Esmeir traced Palestine's encounter with the "international" as a juridical and Marxist concept, and the confluence of the two threads in the Geneva Convention governing anti-colonial war and self-determination. Yoav Di-Capua examined the resonance of Arab existentialist thought and tensions around the question of Palestine in Sartre's and other Western existentialists' third-world intellectual projects.

Other works dealt with postcolonial and revolutionary struggles in the present. Paul Silverstein explored Berber masculinities in relation to the co-production of colonial violence and postcolonial gender enactment in Morocco.

Ilana Feldman explored Palestinian projects to move beyond the "cruel optimism" of the aid-industrial complex. Elliott Colla explored the literary genre of revolutionary narratives in Egypt in the aftermath of Tahrir.

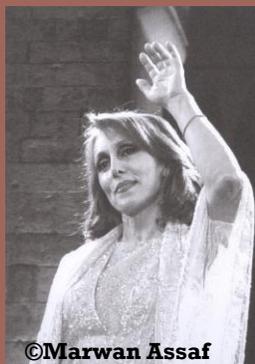
The conference inevitably returned again and again to the work of Suad Joseph, whose academic institution-building and theoretical innovation has left an indelible mark on the fields of gender studies, Arab Studies, and anthropology. Professor Emeritus Sondra Hale of UCLA said, "It's hard to know where to jump into a career" like Joseph's, whose intellectual "flourish"

demonstrated her command of the field. Professor Joseph's academic and organizational acumen were essential to the foundation of the Association for Middle East Women's Studies; she was founding director of UC Davis's Middle East/South Asia program; general editor of the *Encyclopedia of Women in Islamic Cultures*, and founder of the Arab Families Working Group.

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**Stephen Cox**  
**Graduate Student**  
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## WHO IS SHE? Profiling: Fairuz



Fairuz (Nuhad Haddad), born on November 21, 1935 is one of the most popular singers in Lebanon and throughout the Arab world. She is commonly known as "Ambassador of the Stars" and the "Jewel of Lebanon". Her singing is aired daily – in the early morning on Lebanese and Arab radio stations – right after Qur'an recitation. Fairuz sings for the love of Lebanon, its mountains "*Ya jabal Sannin*", cities "*li-Beirut*", and villages "*Ya Qamar Mashchghara*". Her voice, which is saturated with the poetry of the Rahbani brothers, resonates with love of Lebanon.

The Rahbanis and Fairuz also composed and sang for historic Arab cities such as Jerusalem "*Zahrat al-Mada'in*", Mecca "*Ghannaytu Maccata ahlaha-ttiba*" and Damascus "*Ya Shamu*".<sup>2</sup>

In Salim Sahab's words, the trio Assi, Mansur and Fairuz founded a Lebanese music "establishment", which soon became one of the leading Arab music establishments sustained by the voice of Fairuz, the poetry of the Rahbanis, their composition, distribution, execution and leadership.<sup>3</sup> Assi and Mansur authored anthems, odes, melodies, theatrical sketches, monologues and operettas.

Fairuz also sang the words of the Lebanese poet al-Akhtal al-Saghir "*Ya 'aqida al-hajibayni*", the American expatriate Jubran Khalil Jubran "*A'tini-l naya wa-ghanni*" composed by Najib Hankash and "*Ya bani Ummi*" composed by Zakki Nassif, the Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani "*Dimashq*", the classical and colloquial poet Joseph Harb "*Isswarat al-'aruss*" and Sa'id 'Aql "*Ruddani ila biladi*".

Fairuz began her career by singing the tunes of a prominent musician in his own right Halim al-Rumi "*yes'ad sabahak*", who is credited with discovering Fairuz, introducing her to the Rahbani brothers and giving her the soubriquet Fairuz. Fairuz sang folk songs composed by Ilyas Rahbani "*Hanna al-sikran*", Zakki Nassif "*'adrub al-hawa*", and Philemon Wehbe "*min 'izz al-nawm*". She also sang celebrated tunes by classical composers such as the famous Egyptian Sayyed Darwish "*zuruni kulli sana marra*", "*ya mahla nurha*" and "*Bint al-Shalabiya*". Muhammad Abdul Wahab composed especially for her "*sehar*" and "*Sakana al-Layl*".

With her son, Ziyad Rahbani, a talented musician and composer, Fairuz successfully sang from his tunes, including national and expressive songs "*fi yawm alli-t kawwan*", and songs such as "*Safinati bi-ntithari*", considered to be among the greatest Lebanese musical work given its philosophical treatment of music composition. (Sahab, 1295).

**More on page 13**

## ***Feminist and Islamic perspectives: New horizons of knowledge and reform***

On May 10, 2014 at Misr Public Library in Cairo, a seminar was held by Women and Memory Forum (WMF) to launch the book, *Feminist and Islamic Perspectives: New Horizons of Knowledge and Reform*, edited by Dr. Omaima Abou-Bakr, Professor of Comparative Literature at Cairo University and co-founder of WMF. The book was published by WMF in conjunction with the Danish-Egyptian Dialogue Institute (DEDI) and the Danish Center for Research on Women and Gender (KVINFO). In this seminar, the Arabic version of the book was launched, while the English version was launched in Denmark in November 2013.

Dr. Abou-Bakr opened the seminar with introductory words on the history of the book and its goals. The chapters were based on papers (some written in Arabic and some in English) that were presented in a conference organized by WMF in collaboration with DEDI and KVINFO in March 2012. Interestingly, the time span through which this book was produced coincided with momentous changes in Egypt. The idea of the conference

was first conceived in late 2010, few months before the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution. The conference, which brought together scholars and activists from the Arab Region and Europe, took place in 2012 after Egypt had its first post-revolutionary parliamentary and presidential elections, resulting in a Muslim Brotherhood President and party coming to power. And when the book was published in 2013, Egypt was witnessing yet more political changes with the June 30<sup>th</sup> mass demonstrations against President Morsy and his administration, and his subsequent ousting on July 3. The seminar then was an opportune time, as correctly noted by Dr. Abou-Bakr, to reflect on the future of Islamic feminism in a context of tumultuous changes.

The aims of the conference and the book were two-fold: to produce new knowledge through critical engagement with Islamic epistemological tradition in order to problematize interpretations and discourses that discriminate against women and contravene with the ethical principles of Islam, and to provide alternative readings that promote egalitarian gender relations and rights from an Islamic perspective. The second aim was to build a bridge between scholars

and activists in Arab societies and Europe working on this new area.

The first presenter in the seminar was Dr. Amany Saleh, Associate Professor of Political Science at Misr International University. Dr. Saleh, the keynote speaker in the conference, noted that the first goal of Islamic feminism is to produce new theories of knowledge and hermeneutical methodologies in Islamic tradition. And the production of this knowledge, according to Dr. Saleh, should precede the goal of building a movement and advocating for legal reform and social change. For without new knowledge as a foundation, Dr. Saleh does not see Islamic feminism as having much significance. Dr. Saleh then outlined the main features of Islamic feminism as a knowledge project. Among these were: taking the Qur'an and the Sunnah as the main framework of reference, adopting a critical interpretive approach in rereading Islamic religious sciences and discourses; producing new ways of understanding the tradition (what Dr. Saleh calls intellectual *ijtihad*); and openness to other discourses and knowledge projects concerned with the question of gender justice and production of feminist

religious knowledge.

Then Dr. Marwa Sharafeldin, Executive Director of *Musawah* (Egypt), presented a synopsis of her chapter which examined the interplay between Islamic law and international human rights in the advocacy work undertaken by Egyptian women's rights activist groups (from 2005 and onwards) to reform the personal status laws in the country. Dr. Sharafeldin shed light on the challenges and opportunities entailed in the processes in which these activists re-interpret and draw on Islamic jurisprudence, the Qur'an, international human rights discourse and conventions such as CEDAW. She pointed to some of the contradictions in the strategies used by the activists and explained them in light of the activists' attempts to arrive at legal solutions that are capable of dealing with complexities of the lived realities of Egyptian women. Notwithstanding these contradictions, Dr. Sharafeldin noted the significance of these interpretive/advocacy processes for the democratization of the production of knowledge and discourse on religion and gender.

The discussant, Dr. Hania Solkamy, Associate Professor of Anthropology, commented that all the chapters shared the understanding that

feminism was a discourse seeking justice and truth.

She noted the book's contribution in presenting insightful hermeneutical studies on Islamic exegesis, Islamic jurisprudence, as well as sociological analyses of modern Muslim family laws, Muslim gender norms, and Muslim feminist activism in Muslim-majority societies and European contexts. But Dr. Sholkamy also pinpointed three gaps that she saw in the book, namely: the divergence among the chapters in regard to the goals and the extent to which they presented new readings; the lack of historical studies; and the re-enforcement of 'false' binaries (in some of the chapters) between 'feminism' and 'Islamic feminism,' and the 'authentic' and the 'intruder.'

The presentations were followed by a lively discussion with the audience. Some women's rights activists in the audience shared their thoughts on the usefulness and limits of Islamic feminism to their advocacy work. Some female participants noted the significance of this new knowledge as a source of empowerment and inspiration for women. Other participants pondered on whether or not Islamic feminism, despite its concern with gender justice, would re-enforce an

essentialist (and perhaps exclusionary) religious discourse. The road towards the production and acceptance of feminist interpretations of Islamic texts remains long and arduous. Dr. Salem Abdel Geleel an Azhar-educated religious scholar and former deputy of the Ministry of Endowment, who was scheduled to be the first discussant, informed Dr. Abou-Bakr that he would not attend just a day before the event because he was opposed to the ideas presented in the book, and did not want to be associated with the publishers or contributors.

Despite these contestations, this book presents a new and important area of knowledge that is just beginning to resonate epistemologically and politically. The trajectory of its development and its political impact are still unfolding and are yet to be adequately studied and assessed.

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**From page 7****Documentary Review*****Making Waves: Expressions of Gender Equality in the Sacred Texts and Islamic Tradition***

Anwar, in collaboration with Mir-Hosseini and many other scholars and activists have established *Musawah* (musawah.org), a global movement advocating for equality and justice in reforming Muslim family laws.

GAMCOTRAP focuses on raising awareness of the damaging effects of female genital cutting on women's social, sexual, and reproductive health.

A particularly salient strategy of engaging the pervasive misunderstanding of "Islamic practices" is demonstrated by GAMCOTRAP with the "Dropping the Knife" program to end female genital cutting. This program is based on a collaborative effort between women activists and male religious leaders in villages in Gambia. Women activists challenged religious leaders to find justification for female genital cutting in the Qur'an, and weeks later the leaders conceded defeat, unable to find anything in the Qur'an to justify the practice. What followed was a campaign sanctioned by religious leaders to debate the topic and educate villagers against the practice. Despite the many challenges the program faces, this success story is an indication that change is possible.

Similar to feminist movements that have taken place in Judaism and Christianity, in the past two decades or so, there has been an explosion of feminist scholarship in Islam calling for a reevaluation of scriptural interpretations (e.g., Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Omaima Abou-Bakr, Kecia Ali). This scholarship centers on gender justice and equality initiatives that highlight women's (and men's) capabilities to interpret and produce religious meanings within a historical context. It includes debates on women's rights and roles, deconstruction of classical Islamic jurisprudence, women's religious authority, and revisiting patriarchal language about God. *Making Waves*, which addresses these issues and more, is a noteworthy and timely production.

**Works cited:**

<sup>1</sup> <http://alicemcdowell.com/documentary/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

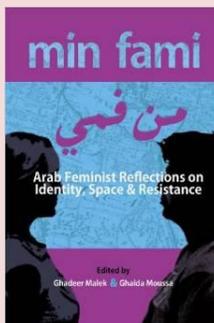
<sup>3</sup> Scholars with training and expertise in Islamic knowledge and legal theory

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## Highlights



**Min Fami: Arab Feminist Reflections on Identity, Space & Resistance**

**Edited by:** Ghadeer Malek and Ghaida Moussa  
**Year of publication:** 2014  
**Publisher:** Inanna Publications

**Min Fami: Arab Feminist Reflections on Identity, Space & Resistance** is an anthology that cradles the thoughts of Arab feminists, articulated through personal critical narratives, academic essays, poetry, short stories, and visual art. It is a meeting space where discussions on home (land), exile, feminism, borders, gender and sexual identity, solidarity, language, creative resistance, and (de)colonization are shared, confronted, and subverted. In a world that has increasingly found monolithic and one-dimensional ways of representing Arab women, this anthology comes as an alternate space in which we connect on the basis of our shared identities, despite physical, theoretical, and metaphorical distances, to celebrate our multiple voices, honour our ancestry, and build community on our own terms, and in our own voices.

## WHO IS SHE? Profiling: Fairuz

Fairuz's voice, as Salim Sahab contends, is one of the most important contemporary Arab voices; it belongs to the category of voices called "microphonic voices" with a scale of maestro-suprano. Her character, full of perseverance and modesty, as well as her faith in her artistic potentials and in her work, contributed to the success and the renewal of Arabic and Lebanese music and theatre.

In her family life, and despite the difficulty of being married to one of the Rahbani brothers (Assi), Fairuz managed to live equally as an artist and a mother. Her art, in the opinion of Ilham Kallab, "gave her the paradise (*ferdawss*) she yearns for and in return she gave this ferdaws to us."<sup>4</sup> Fairuz sings Lebanon from her heart, responding to its villages, beautiful mountains, sunshine and moon, water wells and the lives of the ordinary people, from the child "*Yalla tnam Rima*" to the grandmother "*Sitti ya sitti*". In all this, there is a serious calling for the protection of the feminine and the maternal aspect of life, making Fairuz an exemplar to Arab women in general and to artists in particular who strive for their dignity and success.

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<sup>1</sup> Authors of song and composition are Rahbani Brothers, 1974. Translated by Ihab Sawan.

<sup>2</sup> See Rima Najm, *Fairuz wa-'ala al-ardi-s slalam* [*Feyrouz, Peace on Earth*], (Beirut: Chamas Printing & Publishing, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Salim Sahab, "al-China": Massahat al-sawtwa-maharat al-ada', in Ed. Abd al-ilahbiliqziz, *al-Thaqafaal-arabiya fi-l qarn al-'ishrin: Hasilaawaliya*, (Beirut: Markaz al-wihda al-arabiya, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> From a personal interview with a friend of Fairuz Ilham Kallab, on Monday July 30, 2014.

\*\* The picture has been selected from *Al-Raida Journal, Women in the performing arts*, No. 122-123, Summer-Fall 2008.

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