

For activists and academics—and everyone in between

Who said this?

“In the name of equality, woman passively protested, and then rose from underneath the master’s crushing foot, and stood erect and resolute, all set in the face of life’s alleyways and endeavors”. (Ziade, M. (1923). *al-Musawat [Equality]*, In *al-Mua’lafat al-kamila*, Vol. I, compiled by Nawfal publishers in 1975).



May Ziade

Opportunities

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Muslim Women’s Struggle is as much Theological as Political:

Oslo Conference discussing the challenges facing Muslim Women in the Middle East and beyond

Page 4

Speaking to a Broader Public: Trends in Education and its Gendered Implications

Fida Adely*

As an academic, one feels as if she should say something new rather than repeat old mantras. However, as an activist, I am often called to repeat, repeat, repeat! Those of us writing and talking about “Middle Eastern women” in the United States must regularly address the low bar, which is public knowledge—or lack thereof—about the diverse experiences of women in the region. As a newly tenured associate professor, I am particularly concerned about the ways in which I engage with a broader public—beyond my students and colleagues—about women and their status in the region. This task is all the more critical as women continue to be viewed as symbolic markers for their societies’ “progress.”

My own research has been about women’s education. Although my field research has been focused on one particular community in Jordan, I have also been writing about and concerned with broader educational and demographic trends in the region. In this essay, I reflect on some broad trends in education in the region and link them to my own research and long-term engagement with a group of young women, and their families, in Jordan. Although much of the external narrative about the region paints a picture of gender inequality, violence, and stagnation, through a reading of regional trends, as well as my own ethnographic explorations, I highlight here the persistence of change and diversity of experiences – shaped by class, geography, history, and politics.

To claim that nothing stays the same seems a bit too obvious, but again, one must keep in mind the preponderance of reified images of Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern cultures that dominate in the public discourses in a place like the United States. Thus, one must continually make the case that the experience of women in the region is diverse, framed as it is by structures that shape and limit women’s opportunities everywhere.

Education and Gender Parity

Most countries in the Middle East have made remarkable progress in achieving gender parity in schools. Indeed for the large majority of countries in the region, there is near gender parity at the primary level of education, and increasingly at the

Speaking to a Broader Public: Trends in Education and its Gendered Implications

secondary level. This is all the more impressive as, for most countries in the region, access to education for males and females on a mass scale is relatively new.

Yemen is a major exception to this trend, with one of the most significant gender gaps in educational attainment in the world, albeit one that has steadily decreased over the past two decades.¹ In Yemen the gaps are particularly significant in rural areas where over 40 percent of girls ages 8-11 were not in school in 2002, as compared to only 9 percent of girls in urban areas.² Furthermore, these rural/urban differentials are not unique to Yemen and are not exclusively an issue of gender discrimination, but rather index significant intra-national inequalities. For example, in Morocco 21 percent of rural girls and 12 percent of boys ages 8-11 are not in school. In urban areas of Morocco, only 3 percent of girls and boys ages 8-11 are out of school. A look at statistics for a slightly older age cohort, displayed in the table below shows even larger disparities.

Percent of children ages 12-15 not in school.³

	Urban boys	Urban Girls	Rural Boys	Rural Girls
Morocco	15	16	41	61
Tunisia	7	4	19	24
Syria	32	28	29	40
Egypt	9	8	12	21

(Morocco, 2003 data; Tunisia 2001 data; Syria 2001 data; Egypt 2005 data)

In the Moroccan case, gender disparity is a significant issue for this older cohort; however, the urban/rural divide is of much greater magnitude for both males and females. Although the out of school rates are not as high for rural children in Tunisia as they are in Morocco, they are significantly higher than the rates for urban children. In both Egypt and Syria, Smits & Huisman's analysis of household data also reveals significant urban/rural disparities.⁴ Interestingly, in the Tunisian case, slightly more females than males are in school in urban areas. This pattern is also evidenced in Syria and in Egypt, and is most likely evidence of the pull of the labor market for boys in more economically developed regions.

This brief foray into these macro-statistics is meant to highlight broad trends that require looking beyond questions of girls' education and the need for serious attention to income inequality, inequality of educational opportunities and ways in which economic need and labor opportunities shape educational opportunities for boys and girls. In the Arab world, the primary discrepancies in educational attainment and performance are explained by geography and community context rather than gender, although gender consistently exacerbates these other factors.

These trends have significant research implications. The data behooves us to continually think about the structures, which shape the opportunities available to young women, but to go beyond an exclusive focus on females and ask about the situation of their siblings, their families and their communities. In other words we need to pay attention to a range of gendered effects and how they shape gender relations.

In Jordan, where I have conducted extensive research, data compiled by UNICEF showed that girls outnumbered boys at the secondary level in every category – rural, urban, rich and poor.⁵ Furthermore, more females are enrolled in higher education than males in every governate except for Amman and Zarqa the two most urban governates in the country. Although female attainment of higher education is higher in these smaller governates, income is the strongest determinant of higher education enrollment throughout the country.⁶ Finally, girls are increasingly outperforming boys, in high school completion exams and in international standardized tests in math, science and reading.⁷

These trends are in keeping with much of what I encountered in my own research when it came to gendered patterns for females and males in education. In the community in which I conducted research, parents regularly lamented the refusal of their male sons to study, attend school, or repeat high school completion exams. In part, this had to do with their inability to reign in adolescent males, who were exerting their autonomy, as they grew older. For boys, there were also many more diversions from school, while their sisters were typically restricted in their mobility and spent their time at home or in school. Furthermore, parents complained about the poor quality of boys' schools, the lack of discipline, and the prevalence of violence in boys' schools. Indeed, in the course of my research the sorry state of boys' public schools came up frequently in my discussions with

parents, educators and educational development workers. Some males, particularly outside of Amman (where I conducted my own research) leave school for jobs in the army and public security. In parts of Jordan, tourism may be a pull as well, and I have seen some data to indicate this. In the absence of accessible and culturally acceptable work alternatives, adolescent girls have much more at stake in staying in schools. All of this however is educated speculation; these trends need to be explored further.

I point to these trends not to indicate that those interested in education should shift their focus to boys. However, these gendered patterns have important implications for men and women, labor patterns, marriage, and the gendered division of labor more broadly. Indeed, since conducting ethnographic research in a girls high school and the surrounding community, I have been conducting research in two areas that highlight some of the gender transformations underway in Jordan, and in other parts of the region: marriage and female labor. This new research, still underway, has been particularly illuminating of the ways in which education, socio-economic pressures, and political developments are shaping gendered transformations in the region.

For the marriage research, I interviewed 50 single male and female university graduates residing in Amman. I spoke with them about the presumed "marriage crisis", their expectations for a partner, and courtships past and present. Although I cannot go into all the findings of this research here, I found some evidence of what I might call gender dissonance – a growing gap between male and female expectations for marriage and family. Some females conveyed frustration with the inability to find compatible partners. However, compatibility was not strictly about education levels, but rather about worldview, attitudes and ideas about gender roles.⁸ Similarly, some males complained about the material and consumption demands of potential spouses, arguing that the financial demands of females were not realistic given the current economic situation.

For both men and women, the increase in education, the high cost of living (alongside dramatically increased conspicuous consumption), and high rates of unemployment (especially among educated men) all work to complicate gendered expectations and views on marriage.

In the course of my marriage research, I also became acquainted with single women who had come to Amman to work and were living in chaperoned dormitories. I have only begun research on this latter topic, but it appears that an unprecedented number of young women are coming to the capital to live and work. These women, all with some post-secondary education (mostly university education), reported that they came to Amman because they wanted to "use their degrees" and their own communities lacked job opportunities. Initially I presumed that economic factors, has driven families to allow their daughters to come to the capital and work. However, at least a few of the women I interviewed did not make enough money to support themselves and were at least initially dependent on their families to cover living expenses. In this case then – internal migration of women for work – it seems education has led to some significant transformations; however more research is needed to better understand the push and pull factors, the implications for women, their marriage prospects and gendered inequality more broadly.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to come back to my initial thoughts about engaging a broader public and continuing to strive for conveying the complexity and nuance of women's lives in the region. Here I have discussed some trends in education, family and work, as well as some new research areas in my own work, to highlight some possible avenues for new research and for new ways of framing research on gender dynamics in the context of research on education.

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 Center for Contemporary Arab Studies

NGO Highlight

Baghdad Women's Association (BWA)

The **Baghdad Women's Association** seeks to combat violence against women and girls by providing support to survivors and by advocating for the amendment of laws and policies. It also works to increase women's political participation through building the capacity of women and by offering leadership skills.

[Click here](#) to know more about *Baghdad Women's Association*

References:

- ¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, <http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/tableviewer/document.aspx?ReportId=143>
- ² Smits, J., & Huisman, J. (2012). Determinants of educational participation and gender differences in education in six Arab countries. Nijmegen Center for Economics (NiCE): Radboud University Nijmegen, Netherlands. The data for Yemen is from 2003.
- ³ Data reported in Smits, J., & Huisman, J. (2012).
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ http://www.childinfo.org/files/MENA_Jordan.pdf
- ⁶ FAFO Institute for Applied International Studies, <http://www.fafon.org/ais/middeast/jordan/sss/>
- ⁷ Salehi-Isfahani, D., Belhaj Hassine, N., & Assaad, R. (2012). Equality of Opportunity in Education in the Middle East and North Africa. Available at SSRN 2178600.
- ⁸ A significant proportion of women in Jordan have more formal education than their spouses. Rashad, H., Osman, M., & Roudi-Fahimi, F. (2005). Marriage in the Arab world. Population Reference Bureau (PRB).

Muslim Women's Struggle is as much Theological as Political: Oslo Conference discussing the challenges facing Muslim women in the Middle East and beyond

Prominent researchers, activists, and academics from different Arab, European, and Asian countries came together on 25 and 26 October to discuss the challenges facing Muslim women in the Middle East and beyond. Organized by the University of Oslo, the conference was an opportunity to reflect on the latest developments with respect to Muslim women's rights in the Middle East and to compare and contrast their situation with that of Muslim women in other countries in order to better understand ways to move forward, especially with respect to national legislation and family laws. This was also a valuable opportunity to reflect on existing research in the field and to suggest areas for further research and inquiry. Papers covered a variety of topics related to the lived experience of Muslim women in various societal and national contexts, and many presentations focused on the effect of specific interpretations of Islam and *shari'a* on the laws that govern the lives of these women.

According to keynote speaker Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "the suppression of democracy starts with the suppression of sexuality". Moreover, asking where theology ends and politics starts, she stressed that women's struggle is as much a theological as a political one. Mir-Hosseini traced the evolution of legal codes and their relationship with classical *fiqh* and *sharia* in the 20th and 21st centuries, and the effects of this relationship on laws that governed women lives, particularly marriage. She also explored the related critical concept of *qawwama*, which jurists continue to use to justify the subjugation of women in marriage, despite the fact that the concept itself is a human construct. Both the terms *qawwama* and *wilaya*, Mir-Hosseini stresses, are purely juristic concepts and the result of interpretation. In her words, "they are fiction: a tool to keep unjust power relations". She asks: "How can we as women rethink these concepts to reflect our own notions of justice?" Hosseini explained how the Muslim women's rights movements have benefited from the work of scholars affiliated with *musawah*, which has allowed Muslim women to come up with a new definition of *qawwama*. As she maintained, Muslim women can now counter apologetic arguments based on ideology rather than the lived realities of Muslim women and families. She stressed the importance of inserting women voices in the process of legal reform. One of the main objectives in that respect is to bring insights from international human rights, gender and feminist theories into the debate on Muslim family laws, and to generate new understanding of the concepts of *qawwama* and *wilaya*. As she maintained, developments in the 20th century made gender equality part of human rights and the link between religion and politics transparent. This cannot be easily ignored now. The old rationale for patriarchy and patriarchal rules has lost its power to convince and cannot be defended by arguments from the Qu'ran.

In conclusion, she said, without challenging patriarchy from within the Muslim context and without efforts to unmask the power politics of those who speak in the name of Islam and *shari'a*, Muslim women will remain hostage to national politics and global agendas.

Dima Dabbous, Ph.D.
Editor-in-Chief, *Al-Raida*



From left to right: Lynn Welchman, Dima Dabbous, Mulki al-Sharmani and Ziba Mir-Hosseini

Key note speaker

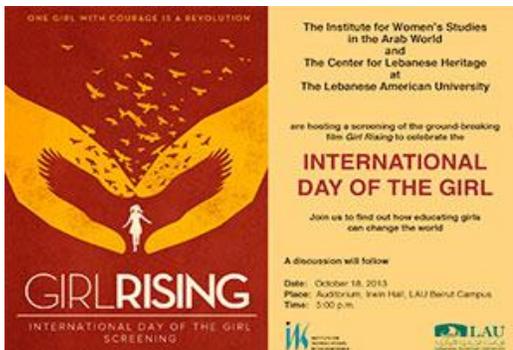
Ziba Mir-Hosseini (SOAS, London).

Main Speakers

Mulki al-Sharmani (University of Helsinki), Aicha al-Hajjami (Morocco), Batool al-Toma (UK), Lynn Welchman (SOAS, London), Rania Maktabi (Østfold University College), Monica Lindbekk (University of Oslo), Dalenda Lagueche (CREDIF, Tunisia), Maike Vorhoove (Netherlands), Mona Abdel-Fadil (Fafu, Oslo), Dima Dabbous (Editor-in-Chief, *Al-Raida* academic journal, Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University), Sadigheh Vasmaki (Uppsala/Iran), Maryam Borghée (Ecole pratique des hautes études, Paris), Kristina Großmann (Goethe University), Lanny Octavia (Yayasan Rumah Kita Bersama, Indonesia).

Moderators

Anne Hege Grung (Faculty of Theology at the University of Oslo), Ragnhild Zorgati (Institute for Cultural and Oriental Studies), Lena Larsen (Norwegian Centre for Human Rights).



To mark the International Day of the Girl, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) in partnership with the Center for Lebanese Heritage (CLH) at the Lebanese American University hosted a screening of the groundbreaking documentary *Girl Rising*.

This documentary, directed by Richard Robbins, poignantly recounts nine heart-wrenching stories from nine countries around the world (Sierra Leone, Haiti, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Peru, Egypt, Nepal, India, and Cambodia). The stories highlight the different human rights violations that the nine girl protagonists in the documentary are subjected to, be it the struggle to go to school, early-aged/arranged marriages, child slavery, rape, or homelessness.

The documentary, that serves as a consciousness-raising tool, stresses the importance of exposing the gender-based violations against girls and the culturally specific barriers that hinder them from acquiring an education. Despite the fact that stories portray harsh realities, the documentary has a positive message: Educate girls and you will change the world. By getting an education, girls will be able to break barriers, create change, and transform societies.

What is unique about this documentary is its contribution through a global movement to girls' education. Hence, every time the documentary is screened all the proceeds go to a fund for educating girls. Another unique element is that in seven of the nine stories recounted, the protagonists are the ones who act out their life stories which are written by writers from their country of origin and narrated by renowned Hollywood actresses.

Journalist Mona El-Tahawi, author of the story from Egypt about a 13-year-old girl named Yasmine who was raped, pens the story in a very constructive way. Despite the horrendous attack on her body, Yasmine, and thanks to her power of imagination, envisions herself as a super hero who fights her rapist and wins the battle by stabbing him, and in doing so she conquers her fears and refuses to allow the stigma associated with rape to control her life. By screening *Girl Rising*, IWSAW assisted in shedding light on what is happening to the girl child in underprivileged societies and contributed to the *Girl Rising Fund* to educate girls in third world countries.

** For more information about how you can contribute to the global movement visit: <https://www.facebook.com/10x10act>
<http://www.girlrising.com/>

Myriam Sfeir

WHO IS SHE? Profiling: May Ziade



May Ziade (1886-1941), Palestinian by birth, Syrian-Lebanese by upbringing and education and Egyptian by residence, was a woman of letters and a prominent intellectual figure in the early part of the twentieth century. A writer of prose and poetry, a sought after public speaker and hostess of a salon which gathered together many of the leading men of letters of the day (Taha Husain, 'Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, and others...). She was active in addressing women's issues during the women's awakening period in Egypt (*al-nahda al-nissa'iya fi Misr*). She wrote biographies of famous women of letters, Bahithat al-Badiya (1920), poet Aisha al-Taymuriya (1924) and a speech on the Lebanese poet Warda al-Yaziji (1924).

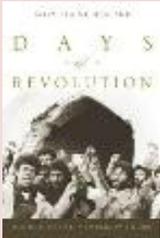
She corresponded with many men and women intellectuals of her times, including Jibran Khalil Jubran. She published extensively in the Cairo and Beirut presses, and most of her works were collected and published during her life time and republished in many editions by Nawfal, Beirut.

The unfortunate incident, planned by members of her family who put her in an asylum in Lebanon, was recorded by Salma al-Haffar Kuzbari in the *Tragedy of Genius (Ma'sat al-Nubugh)* Beirut, 1982.

Today, we read May Ziade's writings to understand the beginnings of Egyptian feminist awareness and activism. May Ziade mainly addressed the importance of work for woman and maintained that she must "depend on herself alone and on her serious effort to protect her dignity and personal freedom".

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Highlights



***Days of Revolution:
Political Unrest in an
Iranian Village***

Author: Mary Elaine Hegland

Publisher: Stanford University Press

Year of Publication: 2013

Outside of Shiraz in the Fars Province of southwestern Iran lies "Aliabad." Mary Hegland arrived in this then-small agricultural village of several thousand people in the summer of 1978, unaware of the momentous changes that would sweep this town and this country in the months ahead. She became the only American researcher to witness the Islamic Revolution firsthand over her eighteen-month stay. *Days of Revolution* offers an insider's view of how regular people were drawn into, experienced, and influenced the 1979 Revolution and its aftermath.

Conventional wisdom assumes Shi'a religious ideology fueled the revolutionary movement. But Hegland counters this notion maintaining that the Revolution spread through much more pragmatic concerns: growing inequality, lack of development and employment opportunities, government corruption. Local expectations of leaders and the political process—expectations developed from their experience with traditional kinship-based factions—guided local villagers' attitudes and decision-making, and only adopted religious justifications for Revolution after joining the uprising. Sharing stories of conflict and revolution alongside in-depth interviews, the book sheds new light on this critical historical moment.

Returning to Aliabad decades later, *Days of Revolution* closes with a view of the village and revolution thirty years on. Over the course of several visits between 2003 and 2008, Mary Hegland investigates the lasting effects of the Revolution on the local political factions and in individual lives.

Winners of the 2013 JMEWS Book Award and Graduate Student Paper Prize!

The winner of the 2013 *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* Book Award is **Fida J. Adely for *Gendered Paradoxes: Educating Jordanian Women in Nation, Faith, and Progress***, a timely and engaging discussion of women, education, and nation in Jordan. Presenting rich ethnographic material, this book focuses on a country that is rather understudied, addressing issues often taken for granted, such as education and its relationship to development discourse, work, marriage, and femininity. Its theoretical sophistication speaks to both education and youth culture and provides an impressive account of the contestations and processes involved in constructing gendered and national identities.

The honorable mention recipient of the 2013 *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* Book Award is **Mary Ann Fay for *Unveiling the Harem: Elite Women and the Paradox of Seclusion in Eighteenth-Century Cairo***, which unseats stereotypical views of Middle Eastern women as weak, uneducated, and secluded. With methodological rigor, Fay argues that elite women were able to achieve genuine economic, social, and political power and influence in Mamluk Egypt. Bringing space into the discussion, the book uses rich new material to ask innovative questions about women and power during this time.

The winner of the 2013 *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* Graduate Student Paper Prize is **Nazanin Shahrokni, a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the University of California-Berkeley, for her paper "‘The Mothers’ Paradise’: Women-Only Parks and the Dynamics of State Power in the Islamic Republic of Iran."** Shahrokni's paper is a beautifully constructed, thoroughly researched, and intellectually cutting-edge contribution to the study of women, gender, and sexuality in the Middle East. It analyzes the development of women-only parks as a major site of gender segregation in Iran. The paper will be published in Volume 10 of the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*.

***The JMEWS Book Award and the Graduate Student Paper Prize have been established by AMEWS to recognize and promote excellence in the fields of Middle East Women's or gender studies, broadly defined.**

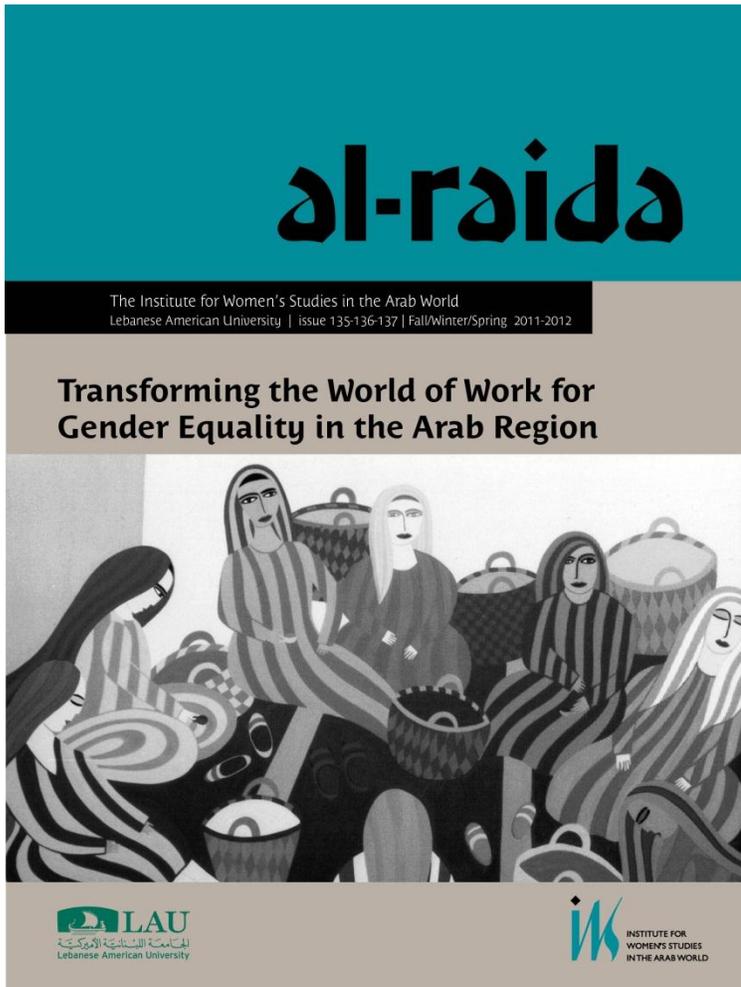
Submissions for the 2014 Book Award Prize and Graduate Student Paper Prize can be found on the following links:

-For the 2014 Book Award Prize click on the following link:

<http://www.jmews.org/programs/book-award/>

-For the 2014 Graduate Student Paper Prize click on the following link:

<http://www.jmews.org/programs/graduate-student-paper-prize/>



The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World
Lebanese American University

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Contents

01

02 **Editorial**
SIMEL ESIM

07 **File**

08 **Transforming the World of Work for Gender Equality in the Arab Region**

17 **MANSOUR OMEIRA**
Transforming the Economic Conversation in the Arab Region

31 **LINDSAY J. BENSTEAD**
Barrier or Opportunity? Political Islam and Support for Women's Political Participation in Morocco

39 **AMÉLIE LE RENARD**
Dress Practices in the Workplace: Power Relations, Gender Norms and Professional Saudi Women's Tactics

48 **NABIL ABDO**
Promoting Women's Entrepreneurship in Lebanon: Enhancing Empowerment or Vulnerability?

56 **ILO POLICY BRIEF**
Pay Equity in Jordan

63 **OMAR SAID AND CAROLE KERBAGE**
Stories from the Field

70 **FARAH KOBAISSY**
"Here are the Women"

78 **AZZA CHARARA BAYDOUN**
"Killing of Women in the Name of Honor": An Evolving Phenomenon in Lebanon

86 **Young Scholars**

86 **The Mary Turner Lane Award**
PATIL YESSAYAN, SAWSAN KHANAFER, AND MARIE MURRAY
Women in Lebanese Politics: Discourse and Action

86 **LEANNE ABOU HASSAN**
The Freedom she Never Had

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