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Session III:

Empowerment of Women in Sociocultural Context

The Role of the Lebanese American University in the Empowerment of Women

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Writer

Allow me to start with a word of thanks to the Dubai and Northern Emirates Chapter of the Lebanese American University's Alumni Association. Chapter President Adalat Nakash and Vice President Saad El-Zein kindly invited me and gave me the opportunity to be present among you to participate in this conference on the empowerment of Arab women in various fields, such as politics, economics, and socio-cultural activities; and the role of a university in general, and LAU in particular.

Since its establishment, LAU, our university, has taken a leading and avant-garde role in Lebanon and the Arab world. In its time as the American Junior College its education was carried and spread by the early missionaries who were totally devoted to the role of teaching and rendering humanitarian services. It is important to go back to those early times and to the waves of graduates who were aware of their pioneering role, and carried with pride the enlightening message [of their education] to several Arab countries.

While researching the curriculum vitae of these pioneer women, a work published in six volumes, I was alerted to the great role that this, our university, had played in shaping these pioneers. I shall limit my mention to only a few of them, ladies whom I met and interviewed, especially those who participated in an educational mission campaign that started out from Beirut in 1937 for Mosul and Kirkuk in Iraq — big cities in rural areas. We find the



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graduates of the Junior College going there carrying all their knowledge of the modern fields of teaching, education, and enlightenment, with an emphasis on the role of women in the family as well as society. I shall mention as examples a few names like Anissa Najjar, Salwa Nassar, Rose Ghurayyib, Edvik Shayboob, and Najla Akrawi. To this day we are still seeking their goals: The empowerment of Arab women in the school classroom while teaching reading and writing, as well as in the home, where they instituted a new style of education that included mothers and other family members.

A few of these pioneer women told me stories of how they used to sit with the family over a cup of tea and recite poems or invent games derived from and related to familiar experiences, which permitted them to participate and express themselves in the best way. When they observed the difference in dress between the wealthy students and their colleagues who were less privileged, they decided to introduce a uniform, thus avoiding feelings of inferiority among the students. These home encounters were given the appropriate name, *qubulat*, which means a day at home; and with this type of encounter, education became accepted by all family members. And so instead of gossip dominating social gatherings, talk began to roam with Rose Ghurayyib around Al-Mutanabbi, and Abi Al-Ala' Al-Ma'arri and others, or with Anissa Najjar on the importance of rural revival and development. Ms. Najjar brought this idea

back to Lebanon where she founded her pioneering institution, the Village Welfare Society, which was and remains concerned with the development of rural society and educating women to best use their talents, while learning new methods in education, health care, and home economy.

These early educators were also aware of the role of sports in healthy education, so they introduced camping and encouraged the forming of sports teams, such as basketball. It was indeed a positive step and an avant-garde outlook at such an early time — the 1930s.

Where are we Today in Comparison?

The torch went on and is still expanding its circle, giving light and flame to an ever-increasing number of women students, not only in Lebanon but throughout the Arab world. Conservative families have known and still believe that LAU is the ideal university where their daughters can get their higher education in a healthy atmosphere.

So, what was started as a Junior College is now LAU, this prominent and big university, accepting both men and women and thereby providing a competitive atmosphere that urges our girls to develop and use a larger part of their potential talents. Unfortunately, as Dr. Salwa Nassar admitted during an interview I was having with her, many female university students continue to use only one third of their intellectual capacity, leaving two thirds dormant.

When I was asked a few years ago to be the graduation ceremony speaker at the Beirut campus, I was stunned by the large number of graduates of both sexes and the diversity of the fields of specialization, including the sciences, thus enabling this institution to meet the increasing community demands and requirements, and putting it on a competitive level with any one of the historically prominent Beirut universities.

When I joined this university in the mid-1950s, when it was still Beirut College for Women (BCW), I was coming from a remote village. I was naïve but boiling with ambition for education. With only five Lebanese pounds in my purse, I was still determined mentally to overcome all obstacles, despite my modest background in wealth and social status. Both administrative leaders, Dr. Roda Orme and Dr. Mary Sabry, welcomed me as someone special, a treatment I later discovered each of my classmates also received. I felt that I was a special person, privileged to be in this college and obtain a university education instead of, and I present myself as an example, someone destined to end her education in a third class elementary school.

I consider myself lucky to have had the opportunity to come all that way, which brings me to direct a special

appeal to our universities and their administrators to give our village boys and girls, and the unprivileged sector of our Arab societies, the same opportunity to reach higher education and achieve their ambitions. We must do this because the most important help we can give our youth is the opportunity to reach their goals in life. This is especially true for our young women who have to work doubly hard to get there, starting with home and community obstacles, and increasing in the wider society where they face challenges at every step.

The role of LAU has not been limited to a traditional teaching program, however. It has also played a very important role in other fields of knowledge. In 1973 it created the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), directed for 24 years by Dr. Julinda Abou Nasr, afterwards by Mrs. Mona Khalaf, and now by Dr. Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, who is present with us here, as the Acting Director. The Institute has expanded its activities beyond the university curriculum to join forces and interests with cultural women's activities in Lebanon and the Arab world. It has involved itself in publishing books on women's issues, especially in the fields of art, literature, education, and law, and in particular those related to women's rights, with an emphasis on those from rural areas. It has published 35 books so far. The Institute has held congresses, conferences, and lectures revolving around women in their many activities, thus attracting a wider audience than the university community and alumni.

I, as a writer who has researched the lives and careers of many of our pioneer women, wish to point out the importance of a documentary film prepared by Mrs. Mona Khalaf and her team on some of our pioneer women, their lives and their struggles, at an early period of our awakening. Further, I wish to note how we have listened with great interest to the voices of those who are still living — Emily Faris Ibrahim and Rose Ghurayyib, to name only two. [Rose Ghurayyib died in January 2006.]

The Center for Lebanese Heritage that was founded in 2002 takes LAU's cultural activities to an ever-wider audience. Its active Director, poet Henri Zoghaib, is ever-busy searching to bring forth voices from the past who form the roots of our present times.

The pioneering work of LAU did not limit itself to its country of origin, but went on to cover many Arab countries. In education and the arts, childcare, and the handicapped, LAU's alumni took the University's message and established centers and institutes in their countries: Mrs. Suad Jaffali in Saudi Arabia, Princess Wujdan Nasser took care of museums and heritage in Jordan, and in Kuwait we have among us here today a shining example of suc-



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cess in the personal presence of Princess Hissah Al-Sabbah.

The early history of women's awakening in the Arab world coincided with the advance of university education. It was also connected with national movements: The great Huda Sha'rawi of Egypt, who was the head of the Arab Women's Union did not limit herself to her country of origin, but extended her hand to her sisters in most Arab countries. They all worked with great enthusiasm, meeting the need for their talents and making important contributions to the building of strong nations.

Here, I would like to point out the importance of the support of the men who stood by the pioneer women and their cause since the beginning of their struggle. One of them, and perhaps the most well-known, was Kassem Amin of Egypt. His book, *The Emancipation of Women*, caused a revolution at the time. In Lebanon, one of the most supportive was the writer and journalist Girgi Nicola Baz, founder of *Al-Hasna'* magazine as well as Mohammad Jamil Beyhoum.

Their encouragement was much needed then, and today we still need more support from men in positions of political power and decision-making to consider the importance of the presence of more women in politics as well as other public activities. We need more women judges, ministers, and members of parliaments, as well as

diplomats who can reflect the image of the Arab women of today. Of course, I don't mean to deny the presence of our outstanding women political figures in many Arab countries, but their number is far lower than our aspirations. I hope the day will come when women will be judged by their capacities and qualifications not by their sex.

Earlier in my speech, I mentioned my writing about pioneer women; but I think that pioneer women are still among us, and each one of them has a story to tell. Many share the sentiments of their earlier peers, like Rose El-Yousef, who wrote in her memoirs, and I quote: "I made of myself this lady." They are proud to speak about their successes and the obstacles [they] surmounted.

My interest in researching their stories grew out of my feeling that there is a big gap between them and the

generations that followed. Our young and educated women are moving with the tides of the present times, seeking success — sometimes by the shortest roads. In my book, I try to tell these younger generations to look back a little to evaluate and compare, and to realize, also, that without those pioneer women and their struggles we wouldn't be where we are now. The same can be said about all the generations who helped build and advance LAU and other universities.

But research is not my main field of writing; I am first and foremost a fiction writer. I have written novels and short stories, and later in my career I have written for children, stories as well as novels, to encourage our younger generations to read in their mother tongue. This is a big issue facing educators and parents as well: How to make children read, especially in the Arabic language.

My writing, in general, reflects my life and experiences in a traditional society, and my rebellion against prevalent traditions that keep women where they have been for too many generations. Being a woman, it was most natural for me to write about women in my society, that is, the traditional society.

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Two more themes prevail in my novels and short stories: emigration from rural areas to big cities and abroad, and the war as I witnessed and lived its events in Lebanon. Since my early days I refused to accept the prevalent traditions as they were. When my par-

ents allowed my younger brother to leave the village and go away for his higher education and I was not allowed to do the same, I felt the unfair discrimination between the two sexes. If it were not for an emigrant uncle in West Virginia in the United States I wouldn't have been able to go to a boarding school. But the real struggle with my family came after my graduation from secondary school when I wanted to come to Beirut for my university studies. Here, I also had to surmount another obstacle: the financial part.

I remember well those formative years, when I had to work and study to live in the city, always conscious that all the eyes of my village were watching my steps. Being the first girl of my generation to leave for Beirut, I carried a big responsibility, not for myself only, but for the many generations of girls who came after me. But the new feeling of independence and freedom that accompanied me that morning on my first day at this University, with

the key of the boarding school (Al-Ahliyah) in my pocket, will never be forgotten. On that day I learned my greatest lesson: The importance of our personal freedom, and how we should always work to help others realize it. During that same year I entered the field of journalism, and this gave me the chance to push my ambition for independence even further. During the early years of my career as a journalist I was a minority among a majority of men. In the media at that time we could count the number of women on our fingers. At the start I was the only woman working for a weekly magazine. That was not easy. Actually, it was challenging and I took the challenge with great courage as I had to prove myself at every step and assure my colleagues that I was there for a serious purpose, like themselves.

There is almost no need to mention that young women journalists are now in every scene in the media, and they have gained more confidence in themselves and in their capacities than their predecessors. LAU, in its various programs, has contributed to this as well as [to the development of other] various fields in the arts and sciences.

I feel now that we have gone far beyond the question put to me by one of my colleagues in the early years of my career as a journalist, when he asked me: "Who writes your stories?" I confess that the question shocked me. At first, I thought the fellow was joking, and then I became aware of his seriousness; and when he noticed that I did not answer his question he added: "You know, every woman writer has a ghost writer — she needs one for sure."

More women are writing now, not in journalism only, but in all types of literature. Through their work they are seeking different goals, artistic as well as human. Researchers and scholars point out that women's literature in the Arab world is now surer, stronger, more polished and more committed than ever before. Also worthy of mention is that the identification of women writers as a group gives them more confidence and strength. At the same time, however, this can be negative when they are labeled as "feminist writers," as if to say they are inferior, or they belong to a different race, and this can encourage discrimination against, and even antagonism towards them.

Anyway, we are now witnessing the emergence of new women writers and scholars who are outspoken, concerned, courageous, and confident. We hope this may help to change the status of women in Arab societies. This tells us that there is more opportunity for women to express themselves, and that they have come a long way from the time when women's voices were allowed to express themselves in public on two occasions only: the

exuberant chants of weddings and the sad lamentations of funerals.

In the course of my personal research into the early period of intense women's activities, several characteristics became evident:

1. The women pioneers were mainly writers who came, mostly, from the middle class in their societies.
2. Much of their writing was about other women's activities, or about outstanding women in the East as well as in the West, extolling their glories and successes, with the obvious intention of demonstrating to their readers that women can be, and are, free and active leaders in their communities.
3. They established contacts with colleagues and counterparts in other Arab and foreign countries, as well as in their own countries. This gave them the opportunity to exchange ideas on similar issues and conditions. It is worth mentioning here that there was always a connection between the women's emancipation movement in the West and what was — and is — happening in our Arab societies.

Now let us return to the present and the continuing role LAU is playing in our modern times and world. At a meeting between the alumni and President Joseph Jabra, I learned from his welcoming speech how many dreams are still waiting to be realized. When he announced an upcoming project, a school of medicine at LAU, an alumna asked him whether there is a need for a new medical school when so many are available at other universities. Dr. Jabra answered: "We are serving the region and not one country only." Yes, indeed, hasn't this University always been serving the whole region, and since its earliest days?

This ambitious role was played by the various American and Lebanese presidents that preceded Dr. Jabra — each one helping to foster the development and growth of LAU towards ever higher goals and a more prominent future. But no one individual, no matter how strong and capable he/she is, can run a university without a team that puts its efforts together with the head. And if the university is the legitimate child born to a civilization, I believe that no civilization can be complete without a university. In this same sense, no civilization, in any nation or history, can be realized, and take its respectful place in history, without the complete participation of its female population.

We need, more and more, to share our talents and experiences. We need to work together, to help our nations to live in the present, and to keep advancing on the roads of freedom and enlightenment.

Thank You.