

Betty Crocker, Not Bin Laden: The Lives of Arab Women

Doris Bittar, November 2003

I immigrated to the United States from Lebanon in the mid 1960's. Over the years I have noticed the increase of casual references to the oppressed women of the Arab world. Many of these well meaning reports are also infused with free-floating assumptions about the entire region. The stereotypical examples from throughout the Arab or Islamic world do little to educate people about the realities of life for women in the region - which vary wildly. In fact, the average American reading these articles may find the negative ideas about women's lives in the Middle East reinforced rather than challenged. The overwhelming majority of Arab or Muslim women would find the stereotypes that the West holds of them to be alien. Women in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Algeria among others would find themselves more at home in Ireland than in Saudi Arabia.

Women in the Arab, Islamic or Middle Eastern worlds do have to struggle for more rights but their reality may be more *familiar* to us than we think. The picture to hold in your mind is the Betty Crocker kitchen of the 1950's. It may even be the transitional environment of the 1970's where I witnessed my own mother's need for more freedom to find her own voice. Like many mothers here *and* in the Middle East, she chose to first raise her family and then work on her personal growth after we grew up.

The Arab/Islamic world is a mass of contradictions when it comes to the rights of women and there is not a "one size fits all" theory or generalization. For example, education from elementary school to college for girls is considered by most to be of equal importance as education for boys – even in Saudi Arabia. Democracy, too, varies from country to country. In fact, the first democracy in the Middle East was Lebanon whose religious laws combined with secular rights is very similar to Israel's. At best we can say that some of the countries in the Middle East are emerging democracies whose relative freedom for women has paralleled liberation movements of the past century.

Terms such as "Islamic" which are automatically equated with a lack of freedom are problematic. Syria boasts large minority populations of Kurds, Armenians, a dozen denominations of Christianity, Shiites, Turks, Alouites, some Jews and others. It is very proud of its multi-ethnic, multi racial and multi religious reality. Some Arab Muslim women may be freer than Israeli and Lebanese women because their countries do not follow religious laws in matters concerning marriage, divorce and abortions. I have a *hijab* wearing friend who has her I. U. D. put in and removed in Damascus because she feels they are more careful. As in many European countries, abortion has not been politicized and is legal in at least a half a dozen countries. Given the recent rulings in the United States that limit abortion procedures and the general decrease in interns learning these procedures in American medical school, it may become easier to get a safe abortion in Egypt than here in the United States. If this trend continues there may be more doctors in the Arab world who can competently perform abortions than here in the United States.

Some Muslim women may be freer than Christian women as I witnessed on a recent trip to Syria and Lebanon for the simple reason that it is expected of them to have separate bank accounts from their husbands.

One particularly disturbing press story coming out of Iraq helps to illustrate the clouding of reality: The kidnapping of girls and women in Iraq is on the rise, but the obvious effect of how the Anglo-American occupation contributed to this trend is omitted. The economy of prostitution is part of the war economy. The demand for prostitution has increased because of armies' demands and so the illicit trade to profit from this has increased. This works because the foreign soldiers are strangers and the effect of shame upon the abductors is absent. To speak of freeing Arab women - as the Bush administration has listed as one of the reasons we are "liberating" Iraq - in light of how it is adversely affecting women's lives on the ground - is something that makes the Arab community here and abroad see red.

Generally speaking, status and rights of women has been relatively high - on the level of Spain, Italy or even parts of this country. Women have held public office, practiced medicine, taught at universities, worked as architects, artists, teachers, surgeons, etc. Throughout the Arab world regardless of economic class you will see a diversity of interpretation of Islam. Among sisters one may wear the *hijab* and the other has a stylish haircut and wears business suits.

The majority of Arab women are not the oppressed subjects of Afghanistan or the ridiculously restricted of Saudi Arabia. The majority of Arab women as most women of the world are struggling with familiar issues - not alien ones. They are balancing hectic lives of caring for their families and working. Yet, the relentless stereotyped assumptions day in and day out make Arab American women feel like the task to educate and have an honest discussion is nearly impossible. At this time the exchange of ideas between Arabs, Muslims and Americans of all backgrounds is of the utmost importance. It may even help us forge better strategies on how to improve the lives of women and their families here in the US.

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