

Viewpoints Special Edition

State of the Arts Volume VI: Creative Arab Women

The Middle East Institute
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July 2010





Middle East Institute

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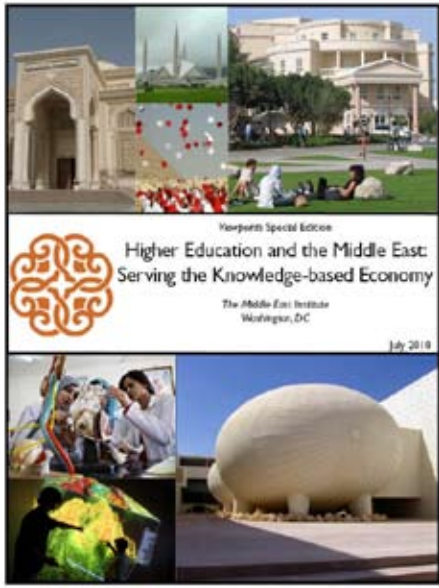
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Cover photos, clockwise from the top left hand corner: Tamara Abdul Hadi, Maysoon Pachachi, Mayson Pachachi, Jananne Al-Ani, Mahasem El Imam, Houria Niati, Sara Shamma, Sara Shamma, Sara Shamma,.

***Viewpoints* Special Edition**

Creative Arab Women

Recent Viewpoints



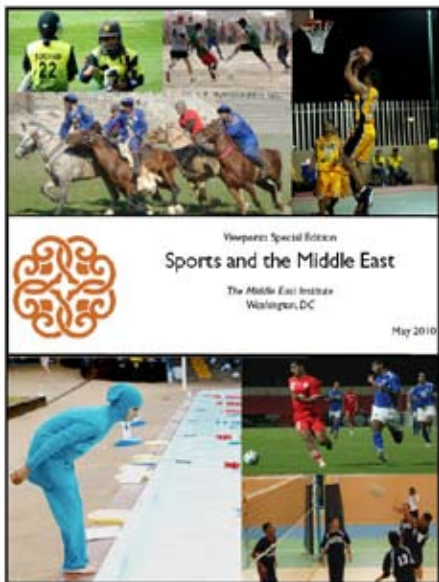
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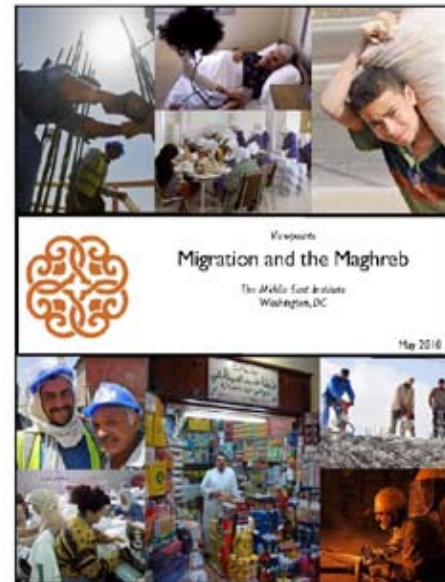
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Creative Arab Women

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Introduction

Creative Arab Women is the sixth edition of the MEI *Viewpoints* series on the State of the Arts in the Middle East. The 14 essays in this collection offer a glimpse of the rich and varied cultural output of Arab women in the region and the diaspora. Partly reminiscences and partly calls to action, they are essays of survival and empowerment that add a deeply personal dimension to the subject of the role of Arab women as cultural producers.

MEI is grateful to Dr. Noha Mellor of Kingston University, United Kingdom, for her inspiration, assistance, and contribution to this collection of essays.

Empowering Women Through the Arts

Noha Mellor

In the post 9/11 world, the Arab Region has been the center of global attention, with a renewed focus on Arab media and representations. Despite this increasing attention, there still is a lack of knowledge about Arab artists and media professionals, particularly women, who are mostly regarded as an oppressed species. We still measure female empowerment, by and large, by women's attainments in the economic, political, and educational spheres, such as employment, access to the labor market, and the number of female legislators, ministers, parliamentarians, or other decision-making offices. It is only recently that women's participation in the cultural field has begun to gain recognition as an important barometer to measure female empowerment. This field provides a vital platform for women to express their views about their identity and their rights within conservative societies not fully accepting of the role of women as culture producers.

Indeed, the creative sector is an important field within which the politics of gender and identity play out, particularly now with the skyrocketing demand for Arab cultural products by the growing youth population in the region. It is also a sector that, in the Arab world, has usually been male-dominated. Furthermore, access to this sector requires special skills and networking that may not be available to many Arab women not only inside the Arab region but also in diaspora communities. For instance, it is important to debate the role of female Arab cultural producers, the problems and prospects they face, and the different resources available to them in their native or host societies.

In the following sections, I provide my reflections on the role of creative Arab women, whether they are based in the Arab region or in Europe. My encounter with these women began with an idea to gather some of them for a conference in London in 2010, with support from the Anna Lindh Foundation. The conference included female Arab novelists, filmmakers, journalists, and performers from several Arab states, as well as women of Arab origin who reside in the European Union (EU). Although working in completely different contexts, these women seem to share an important characteristic — their passion to serve their communities.

REMEDYING INJUSTICE

In a region plagued by political crises ranging from military conflicts in Lebanon to wars in the Gulf, it is not unusual to find new forms of artistic expressions by male and female artists evoking life under conflict. For many female artists, creativity has been a



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Mellor...

powerful tool to influence their political surroundings. As the Iraqi-British filmmaker, Maysoon Pachachi put it, “There is an element in art, which is a direct confrontation to damage.” Maysoon grew up in Britain, where she received her film education, but her links to her parents’ homeland Iraq have become stronger over the years. Maysoon returned to Iraq after 30 years to set up the Independent Film & Television College, a free-of-charge film-training center in Baghdad. Amidst explosions and bombings, Maysoon felt that the Iraqis needed to reflect on their lives and voice their views to the world. Accordingly, she launched a project called Open Shutters Iraq, inviting 12 Iraqi women of different ages to share their experiences through participatory photography.

Lina Al Abed, a Jordanian journalist and filmmaker who lives and works in Syria, also saw the gap between reality and what is offered in news media. Al Abed noted that “the real life [in the Palestinian territories, Jordan, or Syria] is not that which is depicted in the news bulletins or books but rather in the very souls of simple people ... these are the brave people who have managed to survive a cruel and gloomy reality without losing hope.” Al Abed’s debut documentary film was featured at the Syrian documentary film festival Dox Box in March 2010. The film is about a school girl, Noor Al Huda, who lives in a slum on the outskirts of Damascus. For Al Abed, the real professional accomplishment was not in making a film, but in the feeling of responsibility towards her society, community, culture, and people.

For many female artists, creativity has been a powerful tool to influence their political surroundings.

Nurturing a strong sense of identity is of particular concern to those who grew up between two societies, such as Najat El Ouragui, an International Project Manager in theater and film in Denmark. El Ouragui admits that it was never part of her career plan to access the creative field, but that her decision to do so came as a reaction to the rising xenophobia in Denmark: “I needed to address this xenophobia in a country where people like me of other ethnic origin make [up] 10% of the population.” Rather than leaving this issue to politicians or media pundits, she felt the need for a more creative analysis of the identity politics in Denmark. Through her work, she facilitates theater, radio, and film productions in which young people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, in cooperation with professional Danish artists, tell their personal stories.

REAL REFORMS BEGIN AT SCHOOL

Many creative Arab women see the flaws in the existing educational programs in the region as a great obstacle facing women and men alike. Sawsan Zaidah, a Jordanian journalist, criticizes current teaching methods as being far from encouraging to any creative critical thinking. She studied for an Master’s degree in the UK, and her time as a student in Britain opened her eyes to the importance of critical analysis. “The best student [in Jordan] is usually the one who knows by heart all what is in the books rather than being the one who questions what is in these books ... Students are still taught to take ... religious and nationalist ideologies for granted and as the only reference for their modern life. Curricula are still celebrating Islamic victories creating a nostalgic generation after generation who feels helpless and frustrated about their current reality.” Zaidah argues that promoting critical thinking is the most important foundation

for progress.

Serena Abi Aad, a Lebanese filmmaker, had a similar experience during her film study in Denmark, where she learned to think outside the box. “In filmmaking, there are no rules ... [I’ve learned] ... to break every rule I ever learned in the Lebanese film school. One should learn to critique and break free from the same rules, if and when needed,” she said.

Another example is Reem Maghribi, a British-born Syrian-Libyan journalist who set up *Sharq* magazine in 2005 in London to help the Arab diaspora community get more visibility in the media. In 2008, Maghribi moved to Syria to lead the only English language daily newspaper, *Baladna English*, and to make a difference in the lives of many aspiring Syrian journalists. “The educational system in Syria prompts students to memorize information, not to question it,” she said. “With 60% of Syrians under the age of 25 and with an increasing number of students passing through the educational system every year, the country can barely manage to develop the quality of education and instead focuses on the physical expansion of schools ... That is why I am dedicating as much energy and resources to training the staff as I am to informing the reader.”

The majority of these creative Arab women seek to remedy injustice in their societies, whether it is directed against women and children in particular or marginalized groups in general. Through art, they communicate their views concerning the need for further reform — not only the political system, but also the educational system. These women are indeed passionate about reforming Arab educational programs in order to encourage critical thinking as the bedrock for change and gender empowerment.

It is only when women can think critically about their status, heritage, values, and identity that they can make sound decisions that affect not only their own lives but those of the generations to come.

Revisiting Arab Women's Diasporic Art Practices in 1990s London

Fran Lloyd

A decade has passed since the first major touring exhibition of contemporary Arab women's art took place in Britain, curated by Siimee Helen Keelan and accompanied by the publication entitled *Contemporary Arab Women's Art: Dialogues of the Present*. The overall project was developed in partnership with the Women's Art Library in London at a time when most Western non-Arab audiences knew little about contemporary Arab art and even less about contemporary Arab women's art practice. Focusing predominantly on work produced in the 1990s, it foregrounded the rich and diverse creative practices of five generations of Arab women artists working and living in the vastly different geographies of the Middle East, North Africa, and the diaspora of London.

In total, the exhibition included the work of 18 artists from Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Working within different geographic areas and informed by specific and differently-accented colonial and/or postcolonial histories and experiences, they recognized their work as contributing to a multifaceted and multi-sited dialogue on contemporary Arab women's subjectivities. In this context, this essay focuses on the creative practices of the artists included in *Dialogues of the Present* who live and work in the Arab diaspora of London. Here, I explore the diversity of their practices, referring to specific examples of their work and the differing ways in which they reconfigure, image, and negotiate their multiple positionings as Arab women and artists working across at least two cultures, while refusing to be defined by race or gender.

All of the artists discussed here relocated to London between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s — some as the result of voluntary or involuntary exile and others for professional reasons. The three generations extend from the painter Laila Shawa (born in 1940 under the British Mandate in Gaza) who trained in Cairo and Rome and the artist and singer Houria Niati (born 1948 in French-occupied Algeria) who moved to London in 1977, to the younger artists Jananne Al-Ani (born 1966 in Iraq) and Zineb Sedira (born 1963 in Paris), who both trained in London in the 1990s.

The majority relocated in the 1980s in the wake of the civil war in Lebanon and the Iran-Iraq war. In addition to Shawa and Al-Ani mentioned above, these include the painter Batool Al-Fekaiki (born in Iraq in 1952) and trained in Baghdad; Maysaloun Faraj (born 1955 in the United States and educated in Baghdad from 1968), and the two Lebanese artists, Saadeh George (born 1950) and the late Mai Ghoussoub (1952-2007).



Fran Lloyd, Professor of Art History and Associate Dean for Research and Enterprise, Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, Kingston University. She has published widely on contemporary visual culture and feminist art practice. Her publications include Contemporary Arab Women's Art: Dialogues of the Present (1999) and Displacement and Difference: Contemporary Arab Visual Culture in the Diaspora (2000).

The illustrator Sabiha Khemir (born in 1959 in Tunisia) also moved to London in the early 1980s to study Islamic art, subsequently establishing her career as a writer, scholar, and artist.

To speak of “Contemporary Arab women’s art” in the late 1990s was a strategic intervention to foreground a rich range of practices that simultaneously challenged the monolithic and stereotypical media representations of Arab women, who frequently were portrayed as passive, anonymous figures removed from the sphere of cultural production and from its histories. The 1980s and 1990s was a period of intense reevaluation of “Britishness,” as a generation of descendants of post-war immigrants from its former colonies challenged various forms of social and cultural exclusion based upon race and gender. New concepts of the diaspora emerged which were of particular relevance to the diverse practices of Arab artists engaged with multiple belongings, highlighting the effects of war and the refusal to fix female Arab identities.

For instance, Laila Shawa’s large-scale silkscreen prints *Children of Peace* and *Children of War* from the *Walls of Gaza* series, initiated in 1992, are powerful images that foreground the far-reaching effects of war on generations of Palestinian children. Using the media-generated visual language associated with American pop art, the repeated silk-screened image of the young boy on the gaudy colored surface presents an endless cycle of victim and aggressor. In the background are Shawa’s photographs taken over several years of the graffiti appearing on the walls of Gaza — a differently-positioned form of communication. (Image 1)

1. Laila Shawa, *Children of War* 1992-1995
Children of Peace, 1995, 100 x 230cm each, part of the
Walls of Gaza installation of 10 silkscreens on canvas



Courtesy of the artist

Saddeh George’s installation directly refers to her experiences as a doctor in Beirut during the civil war. *Today I Shed My Skin: Dismembered and Remembered* (1998) consists of life-size casts of George’s body, suspended in the gallery space. As acts of embodied memory, the translucent casts of her gendered body literally hold the traces of her past in Lebanon. Equally, as fragile, discarded skins, they refuse the fixing of identity by religion, race, or ethnicity. (Image 2)

Mai Ghoussoub’s installation *Diva* (1994) offers a parallel, gendered response to war. Supposedly attempting to recreate an over-life-size sculpture of the female Egyptian singer Um Kulthum as a homage to cosmopolitan Beirut, Ghoussoub represents the iconic signs associated with the singer — the glasses, the beads, the scarf — alongside the disembodied sounds of her songs. The materialized body of the female is notably absent.

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2. Saadeh George, *Today I Shed My Skin: Dismembered and Remembered* 1998 (Detail), Installation: life-size casts of tissue paper, gauze, resin and surgical sutures

Courtesy of the artist



Responding to the Iran-Iraq war, the subsequent sanctions on Iraq, and her forced exile in London, Batool Al-Fekaiki's oil paintings employ a different approach. Evoking her memories of Baghdad, recreating glimpses of its ancient buildings, her inscriptions in *Closed City* (1997) mark a different order of regenerative time symbolized by the female mythological figure of Ishtar.

Houria Niati's installation, *Ziryab ... Another Story* (1998) a series of hanging scroll paintings, a floor mosaic of drawings, a wall montage, alongside the text of Niati's Ziryab songs, brings together forms and motifs informed by both European and Arabic art and architecture. A tribute to Ziryab Iba Nafi, the 9th century Middle Eastern composer living in exile in Cordoba, Spain, then part of the Arab-Islamic empire, the installation points directly to other histories of Arab culture and to forms of music and song that travelled to Algeria and that survived colonization, war, and the strictures of Islamic Fundamentalism in the late 1990s. (See Cover)

Questions related to monolithic representations of Arab women are further addressed by the lens-based work of Jananne Al-Ani and Zineb Sedira. Al-Ani's early photographic installations and video works represent her three sisters, herself, and her mother, all of whom moved to Britain in 1980 from Iraq, where Al-Ani was born and brought up. In the large black and white photograph, *Untitled (Veiling Project)*, the direct gazes of the row of five seated women are depicted in various states of veiling, unveiling, or undress, working to both highlight and destabilize the codes that categorize and fix cultural identities. (See Cover)

Sedira's work of the 1990s explored complex questions of identity, perception, and experience through a performing of the self that draws upon her multiple belongings as a child of Algerian immigrants born in Paris in the aftermath of the Algerian War. Sedira initially explored this in-betweenness through the motif of the white veil which carried multiple personal, religious, and cultural meanings in both Catholic France and Algerian Arab culture. In black and white photographic works such as *Silent Sight* of 1995 the eyes of the artist, confined or framed by the slit-like opening, evoke an invisible veil, referring in part to what is not said through the silence of self-censorship. (Image 3)

Lloyd...

3. Zineb Sedira, *Silent Sight* 1995 (Detail), 40 x 180cm black and white photographic installation

Courtesy of the artist



Since the late 1990s female Arab artists have gained substantial visibility in the increasingly networked and globalized art world. A significant recent development in London is the Art School Palestine project (www.artschoolpalestine.com), a non-profit organization founded in 2005 by a group of art professionals, curators, and artists based in the Palestinian Territories and London. Working to overcome misrepresentation, gender inequalities, stereotypical views, and the media's focus on the Arab political tensions rather than on cultural achievements, Arab female artists continue to assert their presence and a renewed sense of identity through their diverse art practices.

Giving Voice to the Voiceless

Maysoon Pachachi

I am a documentary filmmaker of Iraqi origin and have lived in London for a long time. I worked for many years as a film editor on documentaries and dramas and was working toward my ultimate goal, which is to make a fiction feature film, when the first Gulf War erupted in 1991.

Like so many other Iraqis in exile, I sat glued to the TV every night, watching the “fireworks” exploding in Baghdad’s night sky and “smart” bombs taking out their targets as if in some video game. Hundreds of hours of British media coverage and yet there was not one ordinary Iraqi present in the footage; it was as if the whole country was empty, except for Saddam Husayn. For those of us with friends and family in Iraq, this created a kind of madness — a sickening realization that such coverage made it easier for ordinary people in the West to accept the war if they didn’t have to think about human beings like themselves being on the receiving end of all this firepower.

I was traumatized to the point of losing my grip on the English language, which I had spoken all my life. I struggled to remember names of the most ordinary objects — “table,” “salt,” “window” ... but maybe what was really being lost was the ability to speak about the loss. I finally rediscovered my voice, however, by making a documentary film about Iraq — a kind of history of the country from its modern beginnings in the 1920s through to the Gulf War, told through the experiences of Iraqi women living in exile in the UK. At this point I began to understand that you sometimes try to repair, in creative work, what has been shattered in the “real” world.

I went on to make other documentary films in Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, and Iran. In fact, most of my films have been about the Middle East, in one way or another.

And so I began to feel that I was like someone who lived on a bridge — between Europe and the Middle East — never entirely in one place or the other, but being a sort of conduit between the two.

My commitment is to make a space where people can tell their own stories — where they, hopefully, emerge as the complex, contradictory human beings that they are. However difficult the circumstances in which people are forced to live, I feel it is critical not to reduce them to mere abstract victims. Today, media stories about Iraq do depict Iraqis, though the narratives usually represent them as picking their way through smoke, fire, and blood



*Maysoon Pachachi is a London-based filmmaker of Iraqi origin. As a director, she largely works through her production company, Oxymoron Films (www.oxymoronfilms.com). Her documentary films include *Iraqi Women — Voices from Exile*, *Bitter Water about four generations of Palestinian refugees in a camp in Beirut*; *Return to the Land of Wonders about her return to Iraq after an exile of over 30 years*; *Iranian Journey and Our Feelings Took the Pictures*; and *Open Shutters Iraq about a participatory photography project with 12 Iraqi women*. She has taught filmmaking and she is a founding member of ACT TOGETHER: Women’s Action for Iraq (www.acttogether.org). In 2004, with London-based Iraqi filmmaker, Kasim Abid, she set up the Independent Film & Television College (www.iftvc.org), a free-of-charge film-training center in Baghdad.*

Pachachi...

in the aftermath of an explosion. Viewers are none the wiser: Who are these people? What is this neighborhood? Who is this mother crying on the pavement? Alas, all of them are portrayed simply as “victims.”

Our Feelings Took the Pictures: Open Shutters Iraq is my third film about Iraq and my most recent documentary. Its subject is an unusual photography project in which a group of women from five cities in Iraq lived and worked together for a month in a traditional courtyard house in Damascus. There they learned to take photographs, and at the same time, presented “life maps” to each other: large charts full of family photos, scrawled poetry and quotations, crisscrossing green, red, and black marker lines, detailing the ups and downs, forwards and reverses of their lives. The women unearthed memories buried for 30 years in the course of just trying to survive years of war, dictatorship, and sanctions. As I filmed the women listening spellbound to each other, without comment or judgment, I could feel them becoming more and more aware of their respective stories. It is as if the organ with which we listen to the stories of others is not our ears, but stories of our own. In the end, they had woven together the threads of their individual lives into a collective fabric of the Iraqi female experience.



Each of the women decided on the subject of the photo-story she wanted to shoot back in Iraq and returned there to take hundreds of photographs — all of them imbued with the sharp emotional truth of lived experience.



Six weeks later, back in Syria, they edited their work and wrote biographies, essays, and captions to accompany the pictures. My job was to make a film about the project, although, of course, I could not help becoming deeply involved in all aspects of the work. As I watched and filmed, I realized that all of us were participating in a transformative process: taking us from exploring and articulating our largely unspoken experience to making a work of creative expression. The women’s work now forms a traveling exhibition and dual language Arabic-English book; these portray a complex lived experience and history — individual and collective.

In 2004, I returned to Iraq for the first time in 35 years. I made a film and with my colleague Kasim Abid, who also is a London-based Iraqi filmmaker. I helped to set up a free-of-charge film-training center in Baghdad. We’ve had to work in a precarious situation, starting and stopping, always being ready to improvise. Nevertheless, our students have shown remarkable commitment and have now completed 15 short documentary films, giving a sense of ordinary life in Iraq, which is largely absent from the mainstream media.

I feel that for them, as well as for the women in the *Open Shutters Iraq* project, and for me as a filmmaker, all our work has been a form of resistance against the “un-making” of our world — both outside and inside us. And perhaps this is the real importance of creative work in a time of war and destruction.



The Art of Survival

Lina Al Abed

What does it mean to be a woman and creative in the Arab world?

For mere biological reasons, I am a woman and by birth I am an Arab. As for my work, I am a journalist and filmmaker. I am not sure whether “creative” accurately describes my work, and I am uncertain whether creativity means the same thing across different cultures. Can we describe some work somewhere as “creative” just because it belongs to a profession that is categorized as “creative” in western cultures?

In principle, a film, a novel, a painting, a poem, a fashion, an article, or a song made by an Arab woman is, I think, only a simple detail in her complex life. I’ve come to realize that the main achievement is not in the making of a film but rather in bearing our share of responsibility towards our world, our community, our culture, and our people. The achievement is to be able to express our feelings — to be brave, to cross the oceans and continents in order to address women elsewhere in the world and share personal experiences.

The so-called “creative” Arab women have crossed immense obstacles throughout the past century, but this has been the battle for all Arab women, whether classified as creative or not. To be fair, I think this volume should be entitled simply “Arab women,” for it is difficult to use the word “creative” in the Arab context. Arab women in the creative field have been referred to as “combatant,” “insurgent,” “audacious,” or even “crazy.”

It is difficult to reflect on the meaning of creativity in my life without allowing a bit of narcissism in narrating my life, my story through my lenses.

I am the daughter of a Palestinian man and an Egyptian woman. I lost my father, when I was only weeks old. I also lost my homeland. The sense of loss is what drives me to be “creative” — to express myself in word and film.

Shortly after my birth, my father, Ibrahim Al Abed entered one of the training camps in Lebanon, which were the center of Palestinian activities at the time. He told people there about his passionate dream to recover Palestine. I lost him for this dream to return our homeland.

Since experiencing these profound losses, I have lived with my mother, though neither in Palestine nor in Egypt. Instead, I have lived in Syria while holding Jordanian nationality. My brown complexion has always differentiated me from fair-skinned Syrian girls. Ever since I



Lina Al Abed is a Jordanian journalist and filmmaker who lives and works in Syria. She has worked in several Syrian TV stations. Her first documentary was Noor Al Huda, which depicts the life of a Syrian girl who lives in the slums in the outskirts of Damascus.

Al Abed...

was a little girl, I've always been asked the question, "where are you from?" My dark skin made Syrians think I was an Indian or perhaps a Filipino. If I change my hairstyle, I may even look like a native woman of the Gulf. Some Syrians have even told me that I could look Malaysian with nomad eyes. When I am abroad, I am often asked whether I am originally from Cuba or Colombia.

These hybrid cultures made me feel more like a citizen of the world than a citizen of one nation. I have never felt that I belonged to a specific identity or a nation and have gradually learned to see the world free from any narrow-minded patriotism or fixated perspective.

When I joined the field of journalism, I learned to deepen this sense of freedom. Continuous contact with grassroots movements and with humble and poor people on a daily basis has kindled a dream in me to recover the lost paradise where we could all live together and care about one another regardless of our backgrounds.

I know now that we see much more when we come face-to-face with the less privileged and see very little when we choose to see them through a televised news report that is guaranteed to fail to capture the miracles performed in those people's lives. Those people master the art of survival in a cruel and gloomy world and yet they never lose their hope for a better tomorrow.

Such lives are what I want to capture in my films. My most recent film zooms in on the life of Noor Al Huda, a 15-year-old girl who lives in a tent made of tin and cardboard, in one of the slums on the outskirts of Damascus. Noor walks 15 km to school, yet, she is never late to school. She confronts the camera to recount her story with poverty not only to Syrian audiences but to the whole world. Noor wants to improve her life but she does not ask for help. She wants to do it alone. I had known Noor for two years before shooting the film, and we became very close. My camera documented her daily struggle.

Noor Al Huda is my great achievement so far, not because the film won the Syrian Dox Box festival award, but because of Noor herself: an irrepressible young woman who still dreams of a better future.

In principle, a film, a novel, a painting, a poem, a fashion, an article, or a song made by an Arab woman is, I think, only a simple detail in her complex life.

Living the Dream

Lina Chawaf

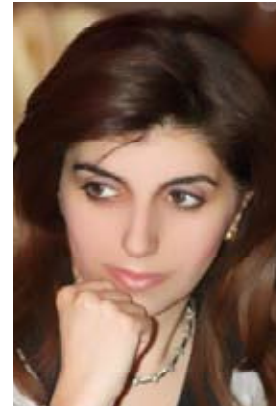
I have always dreamed of working in the media field, even though it is a difficult career for Syrian women, especially those from the countryside. Fortunately, I grew up in Damascus, the capital city, and a city where people of diverse religious backgrounds have always managed to coexist. Opportunities offered for women in the cities, however, are still conditioned by their social class, education, and sometimes even their religious background.

I am from a large family of many writers, actors, and other artists. Therefore, it was perhaps no accident that I found myself drawn to the field of media. Nevertheless, I felt that my interest was reinforced by a certain sense of mission — a mission to help my countrymen and develop our social lives. I've always seen media as a strong platform to voice my opinions and critique, but it took me a long while to find the right channel to fulfill my mission. At the age of 18, I began my career, working for nearly six years in a theater with many famous Syrian directors. I then studied Fine Arts at the University of Damascus, specializing in graphic design. My first job was in TV with many notable Syrian directors, before moving to the private art production sector working as Creative Producer for commercials.

However, during those years, I still felt that I could do more to help society. I thought of radio as an effective medium. With a small group of like-minded Syrians, I lobbied the Syrian government until, in 2005, it finally permitted the establishment of private radio channels. I was granted a license to set up the first private radio station in Syria — Arabesque radio station. The station began with a small team of young people. We broadcasted live for the first time on July 1, 2006. Our target audience is young people. We communicate with them in their own colloquial language, addressing their everyday problems and using humor at times, even in our commercials.

Arabesque is now one of the most popular stations in Syria, addressing topics that only a few years ago had been regarded as taboo, such as homosexuality, lack of communication between married couples, sex education in Syrian schools, developing the Syrian educational system, and women's progress in the labor market. We even launched a campaign calling for a smoking ban in all public places.

Environmental and health problems have also been discussed on Arabesque, including the problems of pollution, water rationing, and smoking. Issues affecting our society



Lina Chawaf holds a degree in Fine Arts from Damascus University. She was a TV director and an art director for several years before she founded the private radio station Arabesque FM. The station hosts a weekly talk show that deals with sensitive social issues. She also writes for the monthly magazine Shabablek, which targets young Syrians.

Chawaf..

have also been picked up and debated with our audiences in and outside Syria; these include domestic violence, child abuse, and street children. During the past year, we adopted several environmental causes. One of the station's campaigns was to expose the risks to drivers' safety posed by not wearing seatbelts, chatting on mobile phones, and smoking while driving. To communicate the message effectively, our reporters stopped drivers in the street and awarded those who followed the traffic regulations. We have reached out to all humanitarian associations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Syria in order to extend their work and communicate their goals to our audiences. The station also covers all cultural activities in Syria without receiving any financial remuneration from Syrian cultural institutions.

Debates about these topics are in fact very popular in Syria, as shown in the huge number of audience comments submitted by SMS, email, and phone. The number of Arabesque listeners has reached 700,000 people per month through live streaming on our website, www.arabesque.fm.

Arabesque has developed into a major media outlet in Syria, and has made itself known in Europe as well, after taking part in collaborative projects with European media outlets such as Deutsche Welle in Germany, DRP3 radio in Copenhagen, and Radio Monte Carlo in Paris. Together with these European stations, we've developed new live shows that target young men and women. This was a very important step because it allowed young people in both regions to take a deeper look into what's happening on the other side of the world, and to discuss how they live, work, and spend their free time. I understand the need to address this growing "youth market". That is why I also write regularly for the Syrian youth magazine, *Shabablek*. At Arabesque, we also work on joint intercultural activities with all foreign institutes in Syria out of our deep conviction that culture — including cinema, performing arts, visual arts, and journalism — plays a major role in better profiling Syria abroad.

Arabesque is now one of the most popular stations in Syria, addressing topics that only a few years ago had been regarded as taboo

I am delighted that more women than men apply for jobs at Arabesque and show great interest in working in the media field. I believe women are more apt to succeed in the journalism field because their social skills are usually more sophisticated than men and hence they can easily reach audiences' hearts and minds.

Securing a job as a journalist, however, could even be the easiest part in a woman's journey. The most difficult part is to know how to balance her relations with her male colleagues and how to cope with social pressures from her family and friends. Some women find it difficult to convince their husbands to let them work as journalists, and many men oppose the idea for no logical reason. Nevertheless, I believe that there is hope for every hard-working individual, man or woman.

Crossing the Minefield

Mahasen El Imam

I have been a journalist for more than 40 years. I became a journalist because I believe that journalism is creative work that touches our common life directly and indirectly, while impacting on our nations' political, economic, and social settings. I started my journey in journalism as a junior reporter in October 1968. Thirty-four years later, I was honored as a Knight Fellow by the Knight International Press Fellowship in Washington, DC — a prize awarded for my outstanding work under difficult and sometimes dangerous circumstances. I was recognized for challenging my government's restrictions on press freedom, and for bearing a great deal of risk when I covered the Iran-Iraq war, despite my newspaper's refusal to provide me with adequate training for reporting in conflict-ridden zones.

In 1994, I became the first female editor-in-chief of a Jordanian newspaper. In December 1999, I set up the Arab Women Media Center (AWMC) in Jordan to support female journalists. Shortly after AWMC's inception, I resigned from the Jordanian Press Association, where I had been a member since 1979 because of the criticism I had faced for accepting foreign money to fund a training conference. I still do not understand why accepting this support was wrong. Surely, I would not have sought foreign support had I had local funds available to me in Jordan, and had the Jordan Press Association helped young journalists and endorsed gender equality.

The Center is the only one of its kind in the Arab world. Within only three years, it managed to attract nearly 200 members. I consider the Center to be my greatest achievement in the male-dominated field of journalism. The Center runs courses for female Arab journalists, provides networking opportunities, and organizes conferences geared towards changing the status of the national media.

The challenges faced by a female journalist in the Arab region are immense because of a strong male dominance combined with our rather prohibitive tradition. Women working in this creative field must be strong, patient, and decisive. There have been times when, working in this field, I have felt as if I were crossing a minefield unprotected. Nevertheless, my passion for creative journalism has carried me forward.

I started as an 18-year-old reporter when there were only a handful of female journalists in Jordan. My fellow male journalists preferred to treat me as a stranger and unwanted colleague. Because there were no academic journalism programs in Jordan, I had to



Mahasen El Imam is a Jordanian journalist. She is the founder and Director of the Arab Women Media Centre (AWMC), an organization that aims to help Arab women journalists in their careers and to help them promote women's issues. Mahasen was the first woman to be accepted by the Jordanian Press Association [JPA] as a registered journalist. She was also editor-in-chief of Al-Bilad, one of Jordan's most popular weekly newspapers.

leave my home and my family to obtain training abroad. As a wife and mother, I had to meet family needs before fulfilling my professional needs as a journalist. Male colleagues were reluctant to train me. In their view, journalism was exclusive to men. They advised me to stay at home and save myself the continuous harassment and rude comments, but I chose not to do so. I have always felt that society places a burden on women to prove themselves, rather than changing its outdated views and its regard of journalism as a below-average profession. Indeed, women have to work twice as hard as men to prove themselves, and are usually held to a higher standard than men.

The Arab Women Media Center was established an umbrella organization to shelter (metaphorically speaking) and assist women in the media sector. This endeavor reflects my belief in the power of action, more than words, to overcome male domination. Providing women with strong training and skills enables them to compete in this field.

The Arab Women Media Center is a recognized media non-governmental organization (NGO), not only in Jordan but also in other Arab countries. The diversity of our membership reflects this fact. Our training workshops have included more than 350 journalists and non-journalists in the past two years. The Mayor of Amman has recently renamed the street on which our center is located as the Arab Women Media Center Street. Earlier this year, the Center signed a memorandum of understanding with Amman Al Ahlia University; there are plans to cooperate with other Jordanian educational institutions.



The Center fulfills my longstanding dream to create an NGO for female journalists, whether in print, broadcasting, or online media, and to help them in their careers and to promote women's issues. I wanted to offer journalists of this generation fresh opportunities for development that were not available to me and are still not available to many female journalists in Jordan. Though there is much work to be done, fortunately, the past decade has seen new democratic reforms in the region. This has given Arab journalists some hope of gaining a bit more freedom and autonomy to provide the Arab masses with free, uncensored, and accurate news and information.

I remind the many female journalists who join the Center that if they strongly believe in their dream, they should not wait for others to fulfill it.

Capturing Life on Camera

Tamara Abdul Hadi

As a photojournalist, I do not only wish to communicate my own experience in this creative field, but also the experiences and inspirations of other women in the Arab world. When I first realized I wanted to pursue a career in photography and photojournalism, I was flooded with warnings. My father and friends all warned, “This is a tough path you are choosing; you should be ready to work hard to prove yourself.” What I didn’t realize then is that my father’s warnings would make me even more determined to follow my dream. My father, as a young man, was also a photographer and most of our family photographs were taken by him.

As women in the Arab world, we have been making progress in terms of social, political, and personal achievements. When I got my first job as a photographer with Reuters News Agency in Dubai, I used to go on diverse assignments — taking photos of the Prime Minister of Dubai, a sports tournament, or the stock exchange. Immediately, I noticed that I was the only woman among the many photographers. This did not intimidate me, but made me proud. Nevertheless, I kept thinking that there should be more women working in this field. Early in my career, I wanted to take photos of special moments — documenting some of the people and places that I had seen in my two years of living in Dubai. One of my subjects was South Asian construction workers in Dubai. I spent months with them while they worked and visited where they lived, photographing and documenting their lives as I saw them in order to communicate this to the outside world. I began to travel for assignments to countries such as Yemen, Kuwait, and Bahrain. My experiences were generally very pleasant and mostly obstacle-free. That is, until I went on assignment to Saudi Arabia.

Working as a photographer in Saudi Arabia made me realize how challenging it was to be taken seriously as a woman in this particular field, and above all to be treated as an equal. It was then that I realized that I have to push harder to demand the respect that I deserve. One day, I was walking in the Ministry of Interior in Riyadh when the wind blew my head cover slightly off. As soon as this happened, I heard an elderly man screaming, “Woman, you have got one foot in hell!” His words shocked me. In Jidda, however, I had a completely different experience. I went with a male correspondent to photograph in a women’s college there. As we approached the building, the security stopped him while I was ushered in. I was delighted: the tables were finally turned. I then spent some time with the young women in that college, which was a fascinating, eye-opening experience. Many of the women told me that they loved creative arts, spe-



Tamara Abdul Hadi is an Iraqi Canadian photojournalist based in the Middle East. Having begun her career as a photographer and photo editor in 2006 for Reuters in Dubai, UAE, she moved to Beirut, Lebanon in 2008, where she continues to work on assignments and personal projects. Tamara’s work has been published in The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, among others.

Abdul Hadi...

cifically photography, and that they wished to enter the field after they graduated. I encouraged them to pursue their dreams.

It is doubly challenging to be a woman and photojournalist in the Arab world. Nevertheless, the advantages by far outweigh the disadvantages. Being a woman helped me obtain access to places that men could not get into as easily, such as the women's college in Jidda. I also was able to gain access to stories that women would only share among each other. I had the opportunity to photograph women in their own safe environments, free from the watchful male gaze, such as the women's police academy in Dubai. I also remember photographing female domestic workers who had escaped abusive households and found refuge in the women's shelter City of Hope in Dubai. The challenge in such situations has been to get women to accept being photographed. Therefore, I have had to find creative ways to tell their stories without jeopardizing their safety by revealing their identities.

Even though I may be treated differently from male photographers, my work stands for itself. I enjoy professional recognition for this work. I know and admire the work of other Arab female photographers, such as Eman Mohammed, a Palestinian photojournalist based in Gaza, Dalia Khamissy based in Beirut, and Farah Nosh, currently based in the United States. Their drive and professionalism never ceases to inspire me. I am also lucky to have been surrounded by amazing women in my immediate family: both my mother and sister are artists whose work focuses on history, social injustice, and personal growth.

I have chosen to focus on social change because I want to shed light on injustice. Photography is the creative medium through which I have shared my experiences and expressed my convictions. By engaging in photography and other forms of creative production such as writing, filmmaking, and painting, Arab women can counter the stereotypical images of women that are prevalent in their own societies as well as in many western countries. The belief that the arts and creative professions can be tools for gender empowerment has inspired me to give workshops in photography to aspiring Arab women in the Palestinian territories and Lebanon.



Teaching Women to Dive into History

Hana Sadiq

I became a fashion designer because I wanted to change people's view of our Arab heritage. Traditional Arab dresses are usually regarded as outdated and unfashionable garments which should be replaced with more modern-styled and practical clothes. I have decided, therefore, to bring traditional dresses back to the fashion scene by breathing new life into them. I have kept the original cut but changed the fabrics and colors. In so doing, I feel like blending the whole Arab world in my dresses. Before embarking on my designs, I did a lot of museum research and read a number of books on traditional Arab fashion. My collections are the outcome of the inspiration I have drawn from those sources.

Although I began my professional life as a painter, fashion design was a natural step forward, rather than a totally new direction in my career. As a child, I used to sit beside my mother, observing her sew dresses and then trying to make dresses for my dolls. My Iraqi roots — nostalgia and deep affection for the country — also have been a source of inspiration.

My career began 25 years ago. I felt that Arab women had developed a mediocre taste in fashion and clothing. They used to wear either Western clothes that didn't really fit Arab women's figures or lifestyle, or traditional dresses that were outdated and impractical. This realization led me to focus my professional mission on designing new fashion lines that could highlight traditional Arab art and modern refinement.

Surely, being a woman has made my journey a bit more difficult than if I were a man. For instance, it was not easy accessing remote villages, where I conducted my research and where fashion had remained static compared to the cities. I used to journey through small cities and villages, interacting with locals in an attempt to understand the story behind each culture, art, and design. For generations, women have created a heritage of untold value, not only for the Arab people, but for all mankind — a mirror of history and an outlook on life. Every woman used to embroider for herself or for her sister or daughter. I now have a collection of 5,000 pieces of old silver Arabic jewelry and over 300 traditional Arab garments. I believe authenticity is the key to our culture and world. Much of our art and design changed during the Ottoman period. Since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, they have changed yet again.

I have faced tough competition from established Arab male designers. However, I have



Hana Sadiq is an Iraqi fashion designer, specializing in the integration of Arabic art with contemporary haut couture. She holds a degree in French Literature from the University of Baghdad. Hana studied textile design, silk painting, and ceramics in Paris. Her publications include a book about the symbolism of Jordanian women's tattoos, and another book about natural cosmetics used by Arab women. Her recent book is about Jordanian silver jewelry. She has lectured on Arabic silver and clothing both in the Arab world and in Europe and has written articles on these subjects for the Arab press. She has received numerous international awards for her work such as the honorary prize for international fashion in Moscow (1987), medal for best Arab designer in Athens (1989), four silver awards in Italy (1999-2001), and honors certificates in Paris (1998) and at the Saint Etienne Biennale (2002). <http://www.hanasadiq.com/>

Sadiq...

found it advantageous that Arab culture is rather conservative and that women would prefer to be dressed by other women, not men. The journey remains difficult for female designers. The ability to pursue their careers is usually determined by the support they can obtain from their immediate families. I was fortunate in that my husband was very supportive. His help in tending to our children's needs when I was busy in my work and his faith in my talent were instrumental to my success.

I consider myself a pioneer in this field. I have managed to build a reputation as a female designer. I have worked for the luxury fashion house Yves Saint Laurent, as well as on my own label of fashion and jewelry, integrating Arabic art with the best of contemporary haute couture. My body of creative work includes the design of five costumes for Claudia Cardinale in the film *The Pink Panther*.

I believe authenticity is the key to our culture and world.

The fashion design market in the Arab world is now full of new talents, most of whom are Lebanese. However, because each of us has a distinctive style, we do not necessarily compete for the same market segment.

Currently, I am based in Jordan. My main challenge there is protecting my designs from copyright infringement. I find comfort in the realization that the copying of my designs is a sign of their artistic merit and potential commercial value. This motivates me to be even more productive. The broader challenge has been to change Arab women's perception of our traditional clothing heritage. Usually, traditional dresses are looked down upon — seen as representing an archaic style reserved for old photos of grandmothers and great-great-grandmothers or rural women in remote villages. I believe that I have helped to change this perception by showing Arab women how traditional dresses can be trendy and suitable for important occasions such as weddings.

Our cultural heritage can unite all Arab populations. Man-made borders can vanish through art.

Cultural Creativity: Catalyst for Social Development

Najat El Ouargui

The term “creativity” is not reserved solely for the art industry. It can be applied to describe a working methodology within various fields, even science. The word “creativity” refers to someone who sees or solves things in a non-traditional manner or who adds a new perspective to well-established ideas, familiar dilemmas, or rigid constructions. Creativity is a central resource in every society because it allows for the development of new visions.

As a cultural worker in Denmark and abroad, specifically in the Middle East, I am profoundly discouraged when people harbor a deep skepticism towards cultural work in relation to social development. I am particularly disturbed by the notion that social issues can be addressed only within a political frame. To the contrary, many social issues can be handled in a far more creative manner. In fact, I believe this is necessary.

The C:ntact Foundation, where I work as International Project Manager, was established at one of the most well-reputed theaters in Denmark, the Betty Nansen Theater. The catalyst for the establishment of C:ntact was Executive Director Henrik Hartmann, who, in the wake of the 2001 general election, grew concerned about the agenda of the new government.

In the 2001 election, 52.3% of voters cast ballots for a new government, which consisted of Venstre (the Danish Liberal Party), the Conservative Party, and the Danish Nationalist Party (the crucial supporting party, which had carried a total of 12% of the vote, in the process becoming the nation’s third largest party). A new political and cultural reality appeared to be dawning in Denmark. The issue of immigrants went straight to the very top of the political agenda. Consequently, the tone of the debate changed from practical and rather impartial to harsher and more openly hostile, fueled by a remarkably compliant national media. The renewed focus on immigrants did not reflect the influx of new Danish citizens as an important resource for the future of the Danish welfare society at all. Rather, immigrants were viewed almost solely as a giant problem rooted in irreconcilable cultural differences between “us” and “them.” At the time, immigrants made up as little as 7.4% of the Danish population. What mechanisms had suddenly made immigrants the country’s biggest and most urgent problem?

Concern about leaving this question to be answered only by politicians and pundits led C:ntact to begin its work. Indeed, there was great need for a more creative investigation



Najat El Ouargui is International Project Manager in theater and film C:ntact at the Betty Nansen Theatre, Denmark. She holds an MA in English and Social Studies from the University of Copenhagen, and has worked in various political organizations such as the Danish Centre for Human Rights. She was previously head of public relations at several Danish cultural institutions. Through her current position at C:ntact at the Betty Nansen Theatre, Najat initiates and supervises artistic collaborative projects in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, including projects that target adolescents in conflict-ridden areas.

of the subject of the immigrant population in Denmark. Who, and where, are these people of different ethnic origin whom everybody talks about but no one cares to talk to? Why are people so fearful of immigrants, who constitute such a small fraction of the population?

In an effort to address these and other vexing questions, C:ntact began making major theater, radio, and film productions featuring young people — primarily those of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. These young people told their personal stories in cooperation with professional theater, film, and radio directors. The productions communicated the youths' personal and societal conflicts in a transparent manner that was compatible with mainstream culture, thus generating a large audience.

Through the years, C:ntact has established itself as a platform for many untold stories and taboo issues in Denmark. This format allows for views and perspectives to flourish, unlike the more rigid media set-up. Most importantly, the stories generate an emotional understanding of conflicts; people are given an insight into the men and women behind the stereotype, culture, or religion. Analyses of our projects clearly reveal that the creative work of the participants — whether members of ethnic minorities, prison inmates, or privileged school kids — is an empowerment process. They can take the stage or camera and freely express themselves without a filter and without having their statements edited or distorted.

The widespread popularity of C:ntact's productions is reflected in its annual audience of 36,000 viewers. C:ntact's methodology and approach has attracted partners from around the world — in places of conflict, refugee camps, or specific areas where the integration of different groups or cultures into a single community is needed.

There are some who argue that the benefits of creative projects of this nature are quite limited and short-lived. Yet, given my experience in Denmark and abroad, I firmly believe that creative cultural projects have the capacity to break down ingrained social conventions and contribute to social cohesion. The effects of creative input on both the individual and society cannot be measured and translated into scientific units. Nor should they be underestimated.

Creativity is a central resource in every society because it allows for the development of new visions.

Supporting Syria through Media Training

Reem Maghribi

My gender was the very reason I became a journalist. While I have always worked in communications — first in technologies and later as a graphic designer — my move into publishing six years ago was prompted by my desire to be a full-time mother without giving up my career. So I set up *Sharq*, a bi-monthly culture and lifestyle magazine for and about British Arabs in London. That is not to say that working in the creative sector is easy. There was nothing easy about setting up *Sharq* from my living room. However, the flexibility of the working hours was as attractive as the feeling of bridging the ever-expanding gulf between the two societies of which I am part.

I was born and grew up in London, but I moved to Syria two years ago to become the Editorial Director of *Baladna English* newspaper, Syria's only English language newspaper. I am now responsible for steering the direction of discussions among, and between, Syria's burgeoning expatriate and youth populations, and to provide one source of professional experience for aspiring newspaper journalists hoping to work in a foreign language title that adheres to high international standards.

Baladna English launched in December 2009, well over a year after the government paper *Syria Times* folded. So while Syria's standing in the region and internationally had strengthened as its political ties had been improving through a number of exchanges of visits by dignitaries, interaction between people was limited due to the limited communication tools developed in Syria.

Syria Times folded because, upon review by a well-known international consultancy, the newspaper was found to be of such a poor standard that it would be better to close it and start from scratch. Thus, the only English-language publication through which Syria could communicate with the outside world for decades, was of such poor quality that it had to be shut down.

The fate of *Syria Times* reflects the general state of communication in the country. And now, with more expatriates (expats) living in Syria, many working in its booming development sector, we have three target audiences in need of information: the Syrian, the expat residing in Syria, and the outside world. That is why we launched *Baladna*. The main goal of the paper is to inform Syrians and expats about developments in Syria — from new legislation to theatrical performances, new business opportunities, and restaurant openings. However, a second goal has emerged out of the need to fulfil the first.



Reem Maghribi is the daughter of a former Libyan diplomat and a Syrian mother. After establishing a strong reputation as an editor, publisher, and communications consultant in London, where she was born and grew up, Maghribi moved to Syria in 2008 where she is now editor of the only English-language daily newspaper, *Baladna English*. Maghribi is also founder and editor of *Sharq* magazine, an English-language publication about Arab culture and lifestyles, launched in print in London in 2005 before going online with a readership of over 300,000 throughout Europe and the Arab world. Maghribi has appeared as a guest on various primetime programs including GMTv London, SkyNews, BBC World, and Al-Jazeera. She has also been a speaker on panels in the Houses of Parliament, and in Doha.

We realized that without quality reporters, we cannot provide quality reports. Without a training ground and a history of quality reporting, Syria lacks skilled journalists, particularly those who are fluent in English.

As such, I find much of my time spent on staff training. After taking interns during the newspaper's development phase, teaching communications studies at Kalamoon University, and working with the strongest cadre to produce a daily paper, I have identified the failings in the existing training programs and have developed a new program accordingly.

Critical thinking has been vastly underdeveloped in Syria.

In a bid to decrease our reliance on non-Syrians (usually transients) and establish a strong foundation from which the paper and the industry can grow, the new training program focuses on the development of critical thinking. And here a popular joke comes to my mind:

They asked a Sudanese man once: "What is your opinion of eating meat?" He responded: "Eating, eating, I know that word." They asked an Egyptian the same question ... "Meat, meat, I know that word," he answered. They asked a Syrian, who replied, "Opinion, opinion, I know that word."

Critical thinking has been vastly underdeveloped in Syria. The educational system teaches students to memorize information, not to question it. This is in part due to the country's demography: 60% of Syrians are under the age of 25. With increasing numbers of students passing through the educational system every year, the country can barely manage to afford them all a seat in school. Therefore, the focus has not been on improving the quality of education but rather on the physical expansion of institutions.

Everyone has noticed the problem. The Syria Trust is developing a huge project, a Discovery Center akin to the science museum in London, to encourage learning through play and exploration and to develop critical thinking among Syrian youth. The main Discovery Center, located in Damascus, will open in 2011. Meanwhile, young Syrians in other cities are profiting from smaller regional Discovery Centers that have already opened. While this initiative is admirable, its impact will take an entire generation to be felt.

If Syria is to maintain and benefit from the impressive work it has done in recent years to raise its standing both politically and economically, it needs to ensure that channels of communication are open and understood. I am very happy to be in a position where I can use the skills I learned and developed in London to improve the prospects of Syrians and Syria while at the same time producing a daily paper of interest and benefit to expats in Syria.

An English language daily can have a significant impact, particularly in a country like Syria, where the concept of marketing and public relations seems so obscure that I, as a journalist, actually have to beg for information about events and projects that in London would have drowned me in press releases. This year will mark the opening of the first faculty of media in a university in Syria. The new faculty at Damascus University will offer four degrees in radio and television,

electronic media, writing and publishing, and public relations. Thus, both journalists and marketing departments will hopefully improve in the coming years and help each other develop and prepare the information the country and its residents need to be able to take advantage of all that Syria has to offer.

To date, those interested in a career in journalism had but one choice in terms of training. Syria's five state universities have, for decades, offered only one multidiscipline degree in media through the faculty of arts and humanities. That is now changing. Other training options are now available too. Among them is a project by the European Union and the UN Development Programme who have been running training programs for a selection of Syrian freelance journalists under the name *Tawasol*.

Al-Jazeera also offers a number of intensive media and public relations courses at a center in Damascus. However, considering the cost of the courses, the likely beneficiaries are foreigners wanting to gain a better understanding of, and perhaps strengthen their presence within, Arab media, and corporations not wanting to wait another five years before hiring graduates from the new media faculty who may send their employees for intensive training before a product launch.

Ultimately, however, on the job training is essential. That is why, at *Baladna*, I am dedicating as much energy and resources to training the staff as I am to informing the reader.

Education: Bedrock for Social Change

Sawsan Zaidah

I was 12 years old when I decided to be a journalist. At the same age, I also decided that I was a feminist. I was only a child when my father left home. Thereafter, I lived with my four sisters and my ambitious mother, who was determined to give us the best education so that we could obtain good jobs. Yet, I was surrounded by a patriarchal society in which men are privileged and are in control of the lives of their female relatives. I also consider myself an atheist and a liberal woman living in a religious and conservative community. I believe in personal freedoms and individualism in a collective and tribal society. However, being different has also helped me to be creative. I grew up to face the reality that my last name, which indicates my Palestinian origin, would be an obstacle to my career opportunities in Jordan where Palestinians are looked upon with suspicion. This is a disadvantage when dealing with government departments, particularly in professions such as law and journalism.

Just like young people of previous generations of Jordanians, I was exposed to the collective hegemonic system of public education for 16 years of my life. It was difficult to find support and space in such a system to think critically, not to mention creatively. True, Jordan has achieved remarkable progress in reducing the rate of illiteracy and educating more women. In addition, there are efforts underway to improve the infrastructure and to introduce computers in schools. However, the core issues have yet to be addressed: The current teaching methods are still far from encouraging any creative critical thinking. In fact, if a child dares to think out of the box, s/he is immediately “disciplined” to think like the rest of their group. The best student is usually the one who has memorized the contents of books rather than being the one who questions what the books contain.

Computers and information technology (IT) have been introduced into schools, but this should not be the top priority because such facilities cannot help students break free from collective thinking. Students are still taught to accept traditions, religious, and nationalist ideologies as the only frameworks for leading their lives in the modern era. Curricula still celebrate Islamic victories, creating nostalgia in generation after generation, who feel helpless and frustrated about their current reality.

There have been some initiatives by civil society in Jordan to introduce needed changes, but they usually face two major problems. The first is that they have to accede to donors’ demands, such as introducing computers into schools. Microsoft, for example, decided



Sawsan Zaidah is a journalist reporting on media and women’s issues in Jordan. She is the development manager of the Community Media Network (CMN), a Jordanian NGO that aims to promote independent, professional and alternative media, as well as community radio and citizen journalism in the region. The CMN runs Radio Al-Balad and AmmanNet website. She worked as the manager and editor-in-chief of AmmanNet, the first local independent FM radio station and the first internet-based radio station in the Arab region. Sawsan has an MA, with distinction, in Online Journalism from Nottingham Trent University, UK.

Zaidah...

that this ought to be a priority for Jordan. The second is the rigidity of the Ministry of Education, which has been controlled by Islamists since the 1980s.

Problems such as these urged me to think about how to improve my life and the lives of others. Media and journalism are effective tools in this battle. Although I wanted to be a journalist, it was not easy to find a job. I was fortunate to have been awarded a scholarship to study in the UK. A year there helped me to develop my journalistic skills, deepen my understanding of the profession, encourage critical and new ways of thinking, and earn a Master's Degree, with distinction, in new media and journalism.

I returned home, armed with new ideas and determined to improve the situation of media in Jordan. AmmanNet was the only organization that embraced my ideas at that time. I created the radio program and website Eye on Media, the first radio program and media watchdog website in the Arab region, where self-criticism is rather non-existent. Eye on Media's journalists monitor and analyze local media content and discuss with other journalists the problems facing the media in Jordan, such as journalists' professional standards, ethics, freedom, and independence. My experience in this program has equipped me to function as a trainer consultant for a number of local and international media development programs.

The current teaching methods are still far from encouraging any creative critical thinking.

Being a woman has given me additional motivation to improve media in Jordan. More than once in my media shows, I have dealt with media coverage of women's issues. But I had not been satisfied until I produced my own radio show on women's issues, a vehicle that has enabled me to debate issues that I am passionate about, such as the personal freedoms of young women in Jordan. In a series of 12 radio shows and reportages, I discussed the independence, sexuality, and self-expression of women, among other issues. Gender inequality in the workplace was the topic of another 12 radio shows. They covered different professions, including domestic and factory workers as well as bankers and lawyers. The show presents stories of creative women who have overcome gender inequality and succeeded in their work.

In a short period of time, I have become a leading member of a young team of professionals at AmmanNet who, since 2000, have helped to introduce media initiatives to the Arab region. In order to influence the educational system, we created a media literacy program for students called School Radio. To encourage citizen journalism also among youths, we created the Youth News run by young people addressing their peers. Such initiatives are part of our main goal to establish and to disseminate our experience in community radio and to develop its role in empowering local communities.

Journalism has always been my passion. Every week, I produce and present my radio show Eye on Media. I write news stories for *Al-Sijill* magazine, which is known to be the most progressive, independent, and high-quality media outlet in Jordan. My stories in *Al-Sijill* cover taboo subjects such as personal freedoms, homosexuals' rights, religious restrictions on media freedoms, and the tribal system. A good journalist can write on those topics, but a creative journalist can convince an established outlet to publish them.

Thinking Outside the Box

Serena Abi Aad

The word “creativity” has many connotations. A creative person is always expected to produce something new and even revolutionary, which makes creativity an unpredictable process. I sometimes feel creativity pouring into my efforts as a filmmaker. Yet, other times I feel that I can no longer come up with fresh ideas, leading me to doubt my talent and even to reconsider my career in the film industry. Nevertheless, filmmaking remains fascinating work and continues to be my passion.

The only obstacle to producing a genuinely creative piece of work is one’s own thinking. Sometimes we place restrictions on our thinking, and we therefore see the world through very narrow lenses. Unfortunately, our educational systems can limit our creativity, though they are supposed to foster and develop it.

I attended one of the most prestigious film schools in Lebanon in the hope of broadening my perspective on the arts and on life. My family has regarded me as “crazy” and as a “rebel” because I chose to study film in spite of being such a good math and science student in high school. But the truth is that I spent my time at the theater doing school plays. I turned most of my school projects into small film projects. Every time I could use a camera and my classmates as actors, I would find a new story to tell. I could also turn what was expected to be a simple PowerPoint presentation into a mini-film. I always wanted to tell people stories that could move them.

My life changed in December 2007, when at the age of 23, my graduation short film won Best Short at the European Film Festival in Beirut. The date is etched into my memory not because of the award I received but rather for the tears which my father shed. In fact, that was the only time I saw him cry. That same day, my father’s criticism of my career choice ceased. Since then, he has celebrated my work and accomplishments.

The Lebanese film school I attended taught me a lot about Brecht, Tati, Melies, Antonioni, and Fellini, among others. I learned a great deal about film techniques such as continuity in shots, when to use track and dolly, and when to have locked shots, or the difference between video and film, sound designing and mixing, linear and non-linear editing, and so on.

I thought I had learned all the rules of good filmmaking. I later realized, however, how little I knew and how much more there is to learn. This happened when I joined a docu-



Serena Abi Aad is a Lebanese filmmaker. She graduated from the Institute of Audiovisual Studies at the University of Saint Joseph in Lebanon, where she directed three short films and one documentary. She toured festivals across Europe and the Middle East and won several awards for her films, such as Best Emerging Filmmaker, at the Middle East International Film Festival in Abu Dhabi (MEIFF).

Abi Aad...

mentary filmmaking workshop in Copenhagen, Denmark in the summer of 2006. There I met the most wonderful and most influential film scholar, Mr. Arne Bro. He taught me, among other things, that there are no “rules” in filmmaking. He gave me the courage to break every rule I ever learned in the Lebanese film school, or rather, to break free of rigid conventions and thus to experiment.

I have been working with TV commercials for the past two years. I have been keen to apply the critical tools that I learned in the Danish National Film School in Copenhagen. I now realize that creativity is about thinking outside the box. I hope that the new generation of filmmakers pursues their craft in this spirit.

In the field of cinema, in which I work, creativity interacts with commercial and ideological interests. A filmmaker plays a range of roles: she expresses her opinion about the world around her, uses her imagination to package this opinion as a creative product, and leads a team of co-workers to turn this product into a sellable commodity.

I’m grateful for all the experiences I’ve had in this field, both good and bad. They have been part of a learning process, through which I have learned about myself and the world around me. Cinema is also a profession that has taught me to forgive and to accept differences and diversity.

I studied Mass Media at Cairo University and worked for Nile TV and the local Channel 3. I quickly realized that journalistic work is about reporting immediate events. Yet, I wanted to express my opinions about these events. So, I chose to return to university to study cinema and filmmaking. Although my family did not object, I remember my mother’s warning that I’d chosen one of the hardest paths in life: facing people’s criticism on a daily basis while seeking their approval of my professionalism.

I earned a BA in filmmaking, spent an additional two years at the Higher Institute of Cinema to complete a diploma, and then travelled to France and Switzerland for further professional courses. In Geneva, I made my first short documentary about the Egyptian novelist Bahaa Taher, a left-wing activist who lost his job in the broadcasting sector during the Sadat era, recently returned to Egypt, and won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2008. Next, I turned my gaze to society, particularly to injustice in its different forms. In 2000, I released *The Thorns*, a documentary about violence against women, whether at the hand of husbands or fathers and brothers.

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Creativity in Disclosing Injustice

Hala Galal

One day, I was reading a news story about a young Egyptian woman. She was waging a battle in court against her boyfriend, who had denied the paternity of their infant daughter. I was incensed by the unfairness of Egypt's laws, which this man was exploiting. That is why I made *Family Matters*, a documentary about cases like this one and Egypt's outdated family laws. Then followed a film about female circumcision. Then another called *Women's Chitchat*, which gained wide recognition in and outside Egypt. The latter film is a portrait of four generations of Egyptian women from the same family in Cairo. The film first traces the life of the grandmother, who enjoyed an emancipated life following the women's movement to the 1920s and the 1930s. The film then traces the lives of the younger female members of the family, whose lives are marked by the regression and increasing intimidation of women.

I have encountered this regression in my daily work as a female filmmaker. The team of male colleagues with whom I work — from the cameraman to the office boy — seek to challenge my authority as a film director, often by asking personal, inappropriate questions, such as “are you married?,” “does your husband approve your working so late in the night?,” “with whom do you leave your kids?,” “why are you not wearing a veil?” These questions reflect males' reluctance to accept women as decision makers. In fact, establishing my authority in filming locations has been a constant challenge. A cameraman, for instance, may challenge my request to shoot from a certain camera angle, though he would not do so in the same manner were I a male director.

This personal challenge has also pushed me closer to the marginalized, the minorities, and the weaker groups in society, and filled me with a great desire to support them. I also wish to change the stereotypical image of women in Arab cinema, and to produce films that instead present a more nuanced image. Injustice against women has prompted me to produce films about women's issues. However, I have learned that shouting on a film location or at male film critics does not yield results. Instead, I have learned the art of negotiation and maneuvering to get my male colleagues to accept me as a female filmmaker, and to accept my ideas as being creative and professional.

Having toured international festivals, I have come to realize that I can share my visions and dreams with filmmakers from other countries and cultures. Communicating my work to others abroad and learning how my work can be appreciated or critiqued according to others' criteria is a great opportunity for me. I even sought funds from



Hala Galal is an Egyptian filmmaker. She has a BA in Media Studies from Cairo University and a BA in Film Studies from the Higher Institute of Cinema. She has worked as a film director, script writer, and producer. She co-founded Semat Production and Distribution and has been a consultant for Caravan of the Euro-Arab Cinema, a project funded by the European Union, EuroMed Audiovisual II program. Her filmography includes Closed Circle (2008), Egyptian Woman in the Parliament (2008), and Mediterranean Women: Making Life Choices (2008).

Galal...

Europe to produce several films when it was hard to get financial support for my films inside Egypt. This has made me realize that if the opportunities to gain recognition in my own country decrease, there are people in other nations who can appreciate my work, despite the differences in ethnicity, religion, and language. This realization has strengthened my conviction that we, as human beings the world over, can stand united against injustice and intolerance in all its forms.

Discovering Life in Painting

Sara Shamma

I was born in Damascus in 1975. My father is an engineer and a music lover. He used to listen to Jazz and Rock music and play as a drummer in a band. I grew up with 1960s and 1970s tunes. My mother, however, is a Sociology and Child Psychology graduate — a real intellectual who appreciates literature and arts. She is also a determined woman with a strong personality, high principles, and immense affection for me and my two younger brothers. I have always felt that our house was full of love, caring, and freedom.

I have become a painter by profession. The truth is that I have always dreamed of being a painter. My family encouraged me to pursue this career. I now feel very fortunate to work with the one form of art which I am passionate about.

I started painting when I was only four. As a child, I painted on the floors, the walls, and the furniture — but nobody ever shouted at me. My mother would always say, “nice work, shall we clean up now?” My parents’ encouragement has given me confidence to pursue my dream and to have faith in my skills. They sent me to painting classes and provided me with all that I needed to practice painting.

At the age of 14, I did a portrait of The Beatles. It was such an accomplishment that it made me see how painting could be a powerful tool. Since that moment, I knew that painting would be my career.

I therefore joined the Faculty of Fine Arts, Department of Painting at the University of Damascus, where the percentage of female students is over 50%. The four years I spent at university were fun, but not very informative. I learned about new techniques by reading new books and discovering new tools on my own. I later taught at an art institute for a couple of years. I wanted to implement methods different from those I had learned at the university, but I discovered in the end that art cannot be taught, or that maybe it is better not to be taught.

I participated in numerous exhibitions in Syria, Arab countries, Europe, North America, and Australia. I was the official representative of my country in some of them. I also held many solo exhibitions in Syria and abroad, and received several local and international art awards such as the first prize, the Golden Medal, in Latakia Biennial, Syria in 2001, the Fourth Prize at the BP Portrait Award at the National Portrait Gallery in London



Sara Shamma graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts, the University of Damascus. She has served as a member of art jury committees and participated in numerous exhibitions around the world. She is the recipient of many national and international awards. Sara accepts commissions for portraits, and her artwork has been acquired by museums, organizations, and private collections in many countries.

Shamma...

in 2004, the First Prize in Painting in Waterhouse Natural History Art Prize at the South Australian Museum in 2008, in addition to other awards in Spain and the United States.

Since 1994, I have worked as a full-time independent artist. I enjoy every moment of my work. I don't plan my painting, and I don't make sketches. I stand facing the white canvas after having spread all of the colors in front of me, as if exploring all possibilities in painting. With the right music in the background, I set off on a new adventure. Painting for me is an adventure because I don't know its ending, and because it is full of surprises. Its main fuel is my love of exploration.



When I paint, I feel like traveling, learning, and discovering the world. It is self-fulfilling and a great source of pleasure. If I plan a painting in my mind, then I never complete it, because it is already a completed project with a clear ending. There would be no point and no pleasure in working to realize it on the canvas.

For me, painting is an independent being; it emerges with its own will, not mine. I sometimes feel that my paintings are like close friends.

My sources of inspiration are music and the people around me. Anyone I pass — man, woman, or child — may inspire me. I am inspired by their faces, hands, eyes, expressions, and even the shapes of their bodies. I am also inspired by my family and my husband, who are very supportive.



I am also inspired by myself — my image, my person, and my personality. When I look at myself in the mirror, I see the whole universe. And when I paint a person, I feel like painting the whole universe. Everything around me is a source of inspiration — every movement, every sound, every scent, and every touch. I paint with oil colors. I feel the pulse of life in them, for they are adaptable to each touch and the vigor I want to create.

I don't believe in the geographical classification of contemporary art movements. For me, art is one global medium that is not influenced by a pre-defined identity or movement. Nor do I believe in gender classification of art, because men or women sometimes use gender to justify their own failure, rather than to express genuine differences.





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