

Syrian Women and Civil Society

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I- Women’s Role in Serving Social Causes till 1967:

Syrian women played a significant role in establishment of women’s societies and literary salons since the start of the 20th century. These began as charitable societies concerned with the issues of education, reform and did to the poor. From here emerged the notion of literary and cultural clubs and salons to deliver lectures, exchange opinions, and to bring women out of seclusion, and to enable them to express their ideas through active participation in the intellectual upsurge and renaissance. This led to the appearance of women’s societies. Mrs. Nazek Al-Aabed established Nour Al-Faiha, the first women’s society, in 1916. In 1918, a number of female activities in public life established another one under the name of the society of Syria Women. In 1920, another group of women established the Women’s Library Club, with the aim of the advancement of Arab women and raising their scientific and social awareness. Consequently, Syrian women’s interest in public affairs increased, while civil societies and intellectual clubs began to proliferate, and women’s activities in the social, economic and political fields began to emerge. From 1922 to 1965, there were more than fifty women’s societies which can be classified as follows:

- 1- Charitable cultural societies;
- 2- Health care societies;
- 3- Disabled and elderly-care societies;

- 4- Family and child-care societies;
- 5- Delinquent care societies;
- 6- Artistic societies;
- 7- Intellectual societies; and
- 8- Political socio-economic societies.

There were also educational societies to eliminate women's illiteracy such as:

- The Society of Graduates of Teachers Colleges, established in 1928, to educate women and give them vocational training;
- The Literary Society, 1928, to give girls sound education;
- The Female Cultural Seminar, 1942, to promote women's socio-cultural awareness, and to establish public libraries;
- The Women's Educational Association, 1943, to advance the status of women and promote the national industry;
- The Arab Girls' Guidance Society, 1955, to eliminate girls' illiteracy; and
- The Society of Arab Women, 1955, with branches in all Syrian governorates, with educational, health and cultural objectives to serve women and children.

There were other societies concerned with economic and humanitarian issues. These included:

- The Society of Women's Advancement, whose objectives included the promotion of national industry;
- The Milk Society, 1922, concerned with helping mothers, children, the refugees and the poor;
- The Women's Red Crescent Society, 1942, concerned with humanitarian work in war and peace, and in times of disaster, giving aid to sick and wounded soldiers,

establishing hospitals and clinics, and giving first-aid training to volunteers; and

- The Society of Charitable Public Relief, 1945, to help the wounded and disaster victims, to open old people's houses and to give women first-aid training.

There were also other female societies concerned with women's political, social, economic, health and legal rights. These societies led female demonstrations in 1929 and 1942 in defense of women's right to vote, and thus played an important role in enabling Syria women to attain their political rights. Syria women gained the right to vote in 1949 and the right to nomination in 1952.

Other female societies included:

- The Society of National Arab Women, 1944, with the objectives of gaining political right for women and the achievement of national Arab goals;
- The Arab Women's Union, 1944, to defend women's political rights, to establish relations with unions and associations of Arab women, and to take part in conferences to advance the status of women;
- The Syrian Motherhood and Childhood Association, 1948, the first female popular, democratic organization which included women of the poor classes, peasants, workers, and all categories of women, working in the field of women's legal, political and socio-economic empowerment;
- The Society of Syrian Family Regulation: This society runs 18 clinics throughout the country, offering services of procreation – guidance, including health advice, tests, medical analysis, radiography, distribution of contraceptive devices, barrenness

consultations, motherhood and childhood care, early detection of cancer as well as family planning services and requirements in the rural and remote areas within 20 villages in the Damascus countryside slums.

Women's National Struggle against Imperialism:

Women contributed to the movement of liberating the country and gaining its independence. They fought side by side with men in the rural and urban areas. They played an important role in all Syrian revolts. They used to smuggle weapons, documents and supplies to freedom fighters, and to help prisoners, delivering letters, leading demonstrations against French colonialism and urging the people to fight. Some leading women were outstanding in this field, such as Aadela Al-Jazairi, Fatema Al-Mahmasani, martyr Randa (also known as masked fighter), Selma Qarquora, Naifeh Al-Jaber, Aziza Kheir-bek, Fatema Al-Rahhal, Khadija Mreiwed, and Umm Abdu, who took part in the battles of Damascus, and Umm Mahmoud, who participated in the Revolt of Jebel El-Arab, where 95 women fell martyrs. Thurayya Al-Hafez established The Soldier Society and the Women's Army, which fought against imperialism. As early as 1928, she led a women's demonstration in Damascus.

Mary Ajami (publisher of the magazine Bride, issued in 1910) visited the prisons where Turkish butcher Jamal Pasha detained hundreds of Syrian inmates in 1916. She also played a big role in fighting Turkish and French imperialism.

Nazek Al-Aabed (1878-1959) took part in the battle of Meisaloun with Yousef Al-Adhma, and was the first woman to obtain the military rank of "captain". She was the spokeswoman of demonstrators against French colonialism.

In 1920, a team of women lead by Mrs. Aadela Al-Jazairi met the King-Green, mission which was sent to Syria to seek the opinions of Syrian people. Those women demanded independence and rejected all forms of foreign occupation, mandate, protection and trusteeship. In 1928, women played a big role in boycotting the elections staged by the French forces of imperialism.

II- Women's Work after the Establishment of their General Union in 1967:

In 1967, women's societies were united in one organization (the General Union of Syrian Women), which undertook the task of empowering Syrian women, improving their cultural and socio-economic status and enabling them to take part in the political life and representing them in national, regional and international fora. The Syrian Motherhood and Childhood Association, established in 1948, together with other civil societies that preceded the Women's General Union continued their activities in the field of empowering and promoting the status of women, although these activities mostly charitable and educational character. They remained successful models.

III- Women's Work after the Beijing Conference, 1995

In recent years, following the Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995, the opening up of the political climate and the involvement of citizens in public affairs, new civil societies appeared, concerned with the issues of empowering women. These included the Syrian Fund of Rural Development, Ferdous, in 2001, the Mawrid Foundation in 2003, the Syrian Society to Develop the role of women, in 2004, and the Society of Social Initiative, in 2005. Applications to launch more societies are registered with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The active social movement played a role in focusing attention on women's issues; and the civil societies under license, female groups and women's rights

activities worked to increase women's participation in decision-making positions. They also worked for amendment of some articles in some discriminatory Syrian laws, (the laws of nationality, personal status, and the penal code). They proposed draft laws to the People's Assembly, aimed at the advancement of status of women and the elimination of discrimination against them. We refer here to the draft amendment of the Law of Nationality, submitted to the People's Assembly by the Association of Syrian Women on March 30, 2004. The Assembly approved it and referred it to the government to have its opinion thereof.

There were other types of activities by female civil groups and societies under license to serve the cause of women's empowerment. Such activities included, for example:

1- Conferences, seminars and studies about Syrian women, organized by some active publishers:

- Al-Shumous Publishing House held its second cultural meeting under the title: "Women: Images and Events. A field study was presented about domestic violence against women in Syria;

- Al-Fikr Publishers held a special cultural meeting about women from 2000 to 2005;

- Etana Publishers held a conference under the title " Women and Society" in 2003. This resulted in a set of proposals sent to the official authorities, and a women's electronic page launched. Etana also held a conference under the title of "Women and Traditions" in 2005, with an exhibition of women's photographs, of all categories, documenting the status of women's rights of Syria.

- Al-Shumous Publishing House also held the Fourth Women's Cultural Conference under the title : "Women's Societies and seminars in Syria in Hundred Years", in 2005.

2- Studies and researches concerning women's rights were published by female activities, while civil society activities, advocates of women's rights, members of civil societies, female lawyers, judges and journalists published articles on these subjects in the local papers. They also issued magazines concerned with women's affairs, such as *Arab Women*, issued by the Women's General Union, and *Nun Al-Niswah*, issued by the Association of Syrian Women.

3- Promoting women's awareness of their rights has occupied a significant part of the activities of women's organizations. It is difficult to enumerate the various seminars workshops held in all Syrian governments throughout the year to achieve these objectives. These activities are carried out by various women's organizations, such as the Women's General Union, the Association of Syrian Women, the Family-Planning Society, Syrian Publishing Houses, the Syrian Centre of Women's rights, the Society Supporting the Cause of Women, the Society of Social Initiative...etc.

4- Seminars, workshops and training courses are held to discuss women's rights, and the relevant international conventions, particularly CEDAW, and to work to withdraw the Syrian government's reservations thereon.

5- Tracing discrimination against women in Syrian laws, in order to seek to amend them, in addition to thwarting all forms of violence against women, raising awareness of such dangers and helping the female victims thereof. The assistance is legal, psychological, medical and involves finding shelter, securing work, rehabilitation and caring for the children of the female victims of

violence. There are a number of houses to shelter such women and girls, particularly the one run the Society of the Nuns of the Good Shepherd in Damascus, which receives women and girls from all social segments, offering them shelter, clothes, rehabilitation, medical care, as well as legal and social assistance.

6- Regular reports about the status of women are prepared, parallel to participation in international, regional and local conferences.

7- Questionnaires are circulated to seek opinions of the amendment of discriminatory laws against women.

8- Campaigns are underway to collect signatures to advocate all the above-mentioned objectives.