

Participants turn on each other at forum on women- The Daily Star- 16 Oct. 09

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Participants turn on each other at forum on women

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BEIRUT: An elite group of Arab women gathered in Beirut Thursday for what was supposed to be a lively two-day forum on the status of women in the region, but which quickly descended into bitter exchanges between several attendees. Picking up the threads of last year's meeting, the third annual New Arab Woman Forum (NAWF) brought together prominent women from across the Middle East to muse over Arab women's poor political and economic participation and women social entrepreneurs, media workers and business leaders, as well as sexuality and Arab writers. But participants will more likely remember this year's gathering as the date Lebanese journalist May Chidiac reduced Belgium's first veiled MP, Mahinur Ozdemir, to tears.

During a panel on the role of media in shaping public opinion on women's issues, Ozdemir spoke of her own experience with the Belgian media, who attacked her joining the Christian Democrats party when she wore the Muslim veil.

Her presentation was met with scathing words from Chidiac, who called the Belgian-Turkish politician divisive and compared the veil to her two prosthetic limbs, the result of a car bomb assassination attempt in 2005. Chidiac also suggested Ozdemir's presentation was uninteresting and off-topic, prompting tears from the politician.

Chidiac was in turn criticized by several members of the audience, who called her attack on Ozdemir unwarranted. "We all know the story of May Chidiac, and so we thank you for not telling us, but we don't know her story and it's interesting to hear what she has to say," one participant interjected.

Some attendees took advantage of the heated discussion that followed to criticize the forum's high-profile composition: At \$300 a ticket, attendance at NAWF isn't available to everyone. "Surely you have to include grassroots activists in such a conference or you're excluding the majority of the region's women," said one participant who declined to be identified. "But how can they afford to pay?" Other participants regretted that the forum's first panel on women in politics had been cut short.

During that discussion, Aman Kabbara Chaarani, president of the Lebanese Women's Council, urged Beirut to adopt a quota system for women politicians and to implement international resolutions calling for gender equality. "Instead of moving ahead we are falling behind," she warned, saying the Lebanese government lacked the political will to advance women's rights.

Kicking off the forum earlier, caretaker Education Minister Bahia Hariri said NAWF, organized by the Arab League, women's magazine Al-Hasnaa and Al-Iktissad Wal Aamal Group, embodied "the pillars of rebirth to which the Arab countries and the Arab nation aspire today."

Sima Bahous, assistant secretary general for social affairs at the Arab League, outlined the main issues needed to further women's rights in the Middle East. "Although we are very proud of the achievements of Arab women in the fields of education, labor, economic rights, politics and legislative bodies, these achievements still fall short of our aspirations and needs," she said, pointing in particular to the region's staggering illiteracy levels. Some 100 million Arabs, 67 percent of whom are women, are illiterate, according to the 2008 International Review of Education.

Concerted efforts in the education, social welfare and health fields were needed, she said, adding that women's economic and political participation also needed boosting. Despite recent victories by women in politics, overall participation in the region remains less than 9 percent, while economic participation stands at about 30 percent, Bahous said.

An award ceremony honored former first lady of Lebanon Mona Hrawi, Ozdemir, Kuwaiti writer Leila Othman, and Saudi professor Suhair al-Quraishi for their efforts to promote women's rights in the

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