

Women's Struggles Today: Perspectives from the Gender Symposium in Cairo, Egypt

CODESRIA held its annual gender symposium in Cairo from 9 to 11 May, 2016. This edition focused on the theme of "Women's Struggles Today."

At the opening ceremony Dr. Shahida El Baz, Director of the Arab and African Research Centre (AARC), Dr. Ebrima Sall, Executive Secretary of CODESRIA, and Professor Helmi Sharawi, Vice-President of AARC, emphasized the need for more human, more inclusive societies that are more responsive to struggles for gender equality. Reacting to their remarks, Dr. Ghada Waly, Minister of Social Solidarity, also focused on the concept of inclusiveness, recalling the need to connect with Africa (which she illustrated through the cultural drums festival in Cairo organized by the civil society and attended by 13 African countries). She also magnified the exemplary cooperation between AARC and CODESRIA which, she said, demonstrated the vitality of the Pan African vision of both institutions. The young scholars of the AARC, diplomats and other personalities like Dr. Mervat Al-Tellawy, former President of the National Council for Women, graced the opening ceremony with their presence.

The theme of this year's Gender Symposium, based on reflections from the experiences in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Egypt, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan and Uganda, was aimed at examining the challenges imposed today on the struggle of African women by the current trajectory of the African States which looks like an "ambiguous adventure" of democracy (the Arab Spring, constitutional changes, empty political debate and fragmentation of the political space). To which extent does the observed security drift, both at global and local levels, and the exacerbation of violence it generates impact on the struggle of African women today? How do women build spaces for contesting and for influencing public policies for greater consideration of their rights

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and liberties? One of the objectives of the Symposium was also to create opportunities to question the female leadership figures emerging on the continent today, the new forms of women's organizations and the features of women's social movement in the current context. What are the new issues addressed by the agenda of women's struggles and how are they impacted by social networks and other ICT infrastructure? What have been the responses of states and other segments of society?

These issues and others were at the heart of the reflections in the thirteen papers delivered during the 2016 edition of the Gender Symposium mainly focusing on the following four thrusts:

- Women's struggles today: discourses, practices and epistemological challenges;
- Women's struggles today: trajectories and national perspectives;
- Between the local and the global: new challenges in women's struggle;
- Women, power, and politics.

The discussions were fruitful and helped to identify a number of research areas and perspectives.

- The need to re-examine the policy to face the new epistemological challenges in the theoretical management of women's struggle today: through subversion and deconstruction, the reversal of perspective, by questioning interstices (at private/public space level- and disciplinary level) and memories;
- Managing the evolution of women's struggle in relation to what is referred to as "the gender market";
- The issue of writing the history of women, their struggles between private and public spaces;

- The discourse of women on religious issues (especially in the context of the liberalization of the media space and religious radicalism);
- Research on how public policies take account of gender disparities effectively or not;
- Analysis of women's biographies and autobiographies.

The second highlight was the tribute on 11 May to Helmi Sharawi, a former member of CODESRIA's Executive Committee. The words by Dr. Ebrima Sall and Dr. Shahida El Baz in the introductory paragraph of the booklet which collected various written testimonies in honor of Helmi Sharawi are highly indicative of the philosophy underpinning such an event, "*Celebrating those who have made great contributions to the advancement of scholarship and the strengthening of our community is also one good way of making our community more cohesive and much stronger.*"

This idea strongly emerged from testimonies of poet Zein Alabdine Foad, Ambassador Samir Hosni, the former Minister of Culture, Prof. Emad Abu Ghazi, of Prof. Abdul Gafar and Aminata Diaw, which were in perfect harmony with the written testimonies of Samir Amin, Abdallah Bujra, Issa Shivji, Nouria Bebghabrit, Claudio A. Furtado, F. E. M. K. Senkoro, Maréma Touré Thiam, Fatim Ndiaye and Marie Ndiaye.

The fact that young researchers from AARC, including Abeer Rabei, Tawia Tawfik, also wanted to pay tribute to him, remains the most eloquent expression of Helmi Sharawi's character: an intellectual concerned about the issue of continuity within the African social science community. Many of his friends and family made very moving testimonies about this convinced and tireless Pan-Africanist who relentlessly worked beyond barriers, to understand Africa as a whole and in its diversity.