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Nadia Hijab

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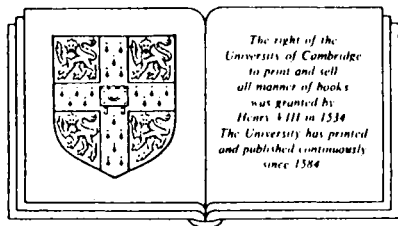
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**To A. and W., who, when our world was less
troubled, created a happy Arab family**

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Preface

'I have been asked to write a book on Arab women': this answer to polite enquiries on what I was doing with myself these days usually resulted in interesting (and sometimes interested) reactions. Arab women were on the whole pleased and helpful, as were many Arab men. The latter often, only half-jokingly, asked, 'Why not a book on Arab men?', and added worriedly, 'You will write, won't you, that Arab women enjoy their full rights?' As for sociologists of all nations, their reaction was somewhat disparaging: they thought the subject too general. Anthropologists tended to lose interest when it became clear I was not planning to spend several years in one village on, say, the Nile Delta.

The most frequent reaction to my statement, which showed how marginal this subject is still considered to be, was: 'Shouldn't someone in your position (I was then editor of a monthly political and socioeconomic magazine), shouldn't someone in your position be writing about something much more important?' If my interlocutor were Arab, this remark would usually be followed by a list of the problems plaguing the Arab world, from the Israeli occupation of Palestine, to the failures of economic development, to the lack of political freedom. If my interlocutor were Western, the remark might be followed by a pitying look, presumably for having fallen into some feminist trap.

It was after the first few reactions of this nature that the subject of my research began to really intrigue me. If I had described the book as being on political, economic and social currents in the Arab world today, which in fact it is, there would have been no problem. The problem was clearly the focus on women. I can understand, and sympathise with, some of the reluctance in the Arab world to 'focus on women' in the Western feminist scene. Most Arabs do not see their society as made up of individual men and women. They see the members of society as complementary; both sexes and different age groups are expected to give up some rights and to take on some responsibilities to forge a coherent community. By and large, men are seen to be as much the victims of their surroundings – family, society or state – as women, and are not viewed as public enemy No. 1.

However, women in the Arab world, as in the rest of the world, have

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faced one form or another of discrimination on account of their sex for centuries. This sets them apart, whether one likes it or not, and makes it important to examine their situation. Furthermore, in the Arab world today, some of the most heated debates are on women's role in society. To what extent should they be involved in the process of development and the modern work sector? To what extent will that affect their traditional roles as wives and mothers? The debate reveals the resistance of some to changing women's roles, and the conviction of others that, unless there is change, Arab society will find it difficult to move forward, at the economic and political levels as well as at the social level.

This book, then, is about the Arab world today – its society, its economy and its politics – as seen through an examination of the debate on Arab women at work. I shall speak of the 'Arab world' and of Arab women, although there is a great deal of diversity from one Arab country to the next; within Arab states between village and town; and within towns between different classes. I consider that the Arab region as a political and cultural entity has more common features within it than it has with any other grouping. The majority of its 180 million people share language, history and religion. The term 'Muslim world', for example, brings in countries that do not speak the same language, or share the same history as the Arab world. Nor do the various international geopolitical terms currently in use do the job: the 'Middle East' or 'Near East' is not sufficient to cover the Arab world, as those who add on 'and North Africa' implicitly admit; and terms like 'Western Asia' have been geographically stretched by the United Nations to include Egypt.

I shall seek to avoid generalisation by giving concrete examples and country case studies to illustrate certain trends. I shall particularly try to shed some light on the nature of the debate in the Arab world today, and to make up in synthesis what may be lacking in specifics: a good deal of material has been produced on the subject of Arab women, but a comprehensive picture of the situation has yet to emerge. I do not aim to attack or to defend the existing situation, but simply to describe and to analyse it. Nor shall I seek to show that it is better or worse than in the West, as some writing on the subject tends to do, leaving it to discerning non-Arab readers to compare the various stages of development in the Arab world to phases in their current or recent history; they may be sure that these comparisons exist.

The book is based on my observations and interviews in the Arab world and on Arab and Western writing on the subject. I should like to take this opportunity to thank those who have helped me, beginning with the following institutions: the American Middle East Peace Research Institute in Boston, whose generosity made it possible for me to take time off for

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research; my former publisher and colleagues at *The Middle East* magazine, IC Publications (the title 'Womanpower' was the title of a cover story I wrote for *The Middle East* in June 1983); the Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University in Washington, where I spent a rewarding year as visiting scholar; and VideoArts Television and Kufic Films, for the opportunity to take part in filming 'Family Ties', the ninth programme in the 10-part series *The Arabs*, during which time some of the material in this book was collected.

I should also like to thank the Centre for Development and Population Activities (Washington), the International Centre for Research on Women (Washington), the International Labour Organisation (Geneva), the World Bank's Women in Development office, the United Nations Social and Economic Council, the *Middle East Journal* (Washington), and the Welfare Association (Geneva), for access to their resource centres; and *Forum 85*, the newspaper of the NGO Forum on women held in Nairobi in July 1985, and my fellow journalists on that short-lived but sparkling publication, for an instructive three weeks.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in the text and bibliography:

AN	author's notes, based on interviews
MERIP	<i>Middle East Research and Information Project</i>
TME	<i>The Middle East</i> magazine
IWSAW	Institute of Women's Studies in the Arab World
ICRW	International Centre for Research on Women
ILO	International Labour Office
UN	United Nations