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## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY ON WOMEN ARTISTS AS ACTIVISTS

**Recommended time: One hour**

### **Small Group Work** [20-40 minutes]

Divide students into two groups. Have each group review one of the following artists' works. [If there is enough time, have groups switch after 15-20 minutes so that both groups explore each artist's works and interviews.]

Group 1: Zine from Bahrain by Tamadher al Fahal, Bahrain (pages 2-4 of this document)

Group 2: Interview with & images by Palestinian Artist Laila Shawa (pages 5-7 of this document)

### **Large Group Discussion** [15-20 minutes]

After smaller groups have reviewed the interviews and images, ask students to discuss reactions in their groups.

Convene the larger group and use the following questions to guide discussion:

- What issues do the artists Tamadher al Fahal and Laila Shawa address in their work?
- How does their art challenge realities they face in their respective contexts?
- What backlash have they or might they face in using their art to challenge inequalities?
- How can the arts be used to critique or change social realities? What other examples come to mind?

### **Optional Closing Activity: Free write** [5 minutes]

- If you could share any comments with these artists after seeing their work and reading a bit about them, what would you want to tell them?

### **Homework:**

Have students explore the International Museum of Women's exhibit "Muslima" online at <http://muslima.imow.org/>  
Students may also do an internet search to explore the work of women artists from the MENA region.

# WHAT SOCIETY

WANTS ME TO DO AS A MUSLIM

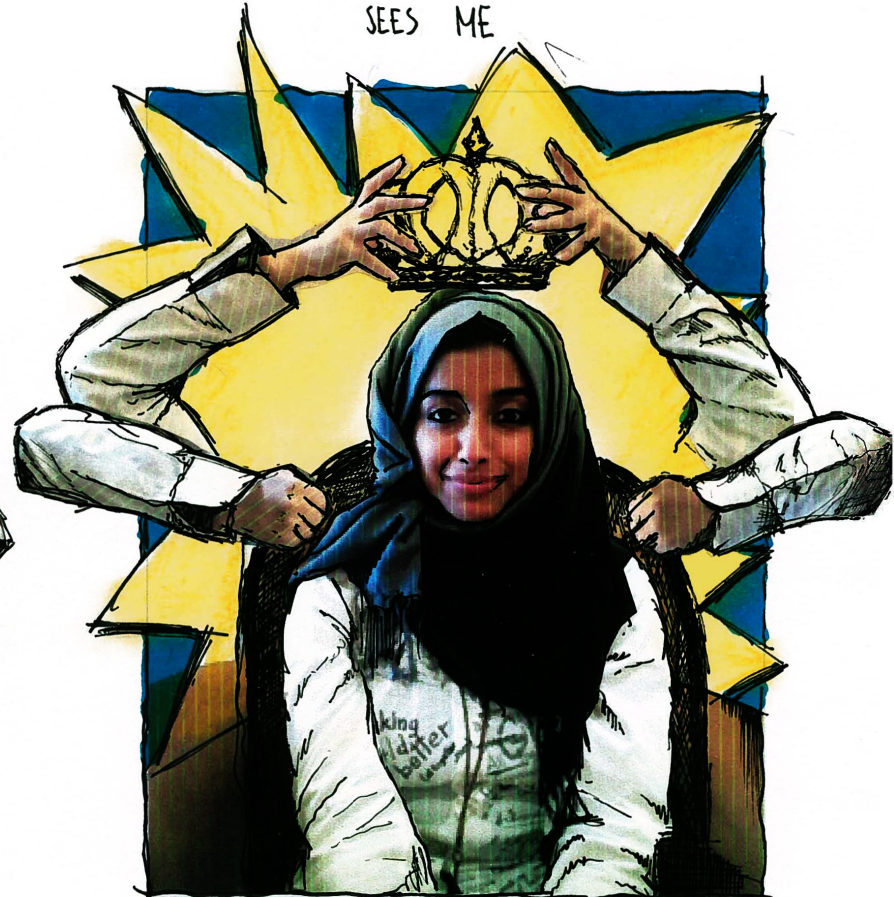
نغض البصر.. مثنى ومثناة ورباع.. ناقصات عقل ودين.. النساء اكثر خطا  
 جوفم.. يكفن العرس.. وشكر السكوي.. ناكراة جميل.. المرأة غورة..  
 تستسرفن من قبل السلطان.. الرجال قوامون على النساء..!! للرجل درجة  
 عليها.. لا للتبرج.. لا لاختها تصبغ فنته.. والفتنة اشد من العقل..  
 دامك بنت.. لا للخروج من البيت.. لا للدراسة والسفر من غير محرم  
 دامك بنت فائمة مخلوب.. عيون.. تكاتبين رجل فمهلك..  
 خلقتي من خلق.. خلفي.. لتخدمين زوجك.. المرأة  
 صفة والرجل صفة..  
 اصلاها ولا



\* There are some parts of quranic verses & prophetic quotes written above. They are mentioned not as an objection against them, but as what society 'abuses', mostly by literal interpretation.

# HOW ISLAM

SEES ME



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EXCERPT FROM *DIARY OF A MAD ARABIAN WOMAN* BY TAMADHER AL FAHAL, BAHRAIN

“The idea behind *Diary of a Mad Arabian Woman* was born from my everyday encounters with people in Bahrain. I have realized for quite some time that the society I am living in has been condemning women in lots of ways in the name of religion. Like many, I have been raised in a conservative environment where a successful woman can be defined simply as ‘the one who gets married first and fulfills her destiny by becoming a housewife!’

This portion of thoughts has been sitting in agony at the corner of my mind. It grew bigger with time – so big that it felt like I could easily write a book about it. Eventually I shared some of my distress with the outside world in the form of a small publication.

A zine (an abbreviation of the word magazine, pronounced ‘zeen’) is a small circulation, noncommercial publication. This made the zine the perfect medium to ‘unleash the beast’ in my brain. *Diary of a Mad Arabian Woman* talks about the contradictions and conflicts in the Middle East in the eyes of a young lady. The publication touches on several topics between culture and religion in a funny, sarcastic way, capturing the feelings of a person who is struggling to define what is right and wrong.

Ultimately, I was motivated to write this zine because I believe Muslim women are facing many issues in their everyday lives, from many parties. We experience the pressure of being an independent individual with a successful career, yet maintaining the principles of Islam and respecting the religion we believe in. On the other hand, there is the pressure of other cultures and the world as a whole that cast a generally wrong impression and – sometimes false images – about Muslim women. Trying to prove the opposite in both directions is challenging – but not impossible.

I am planning to do another zine, and I am trying to get as much feedback as possible on the first issue, so that the next one echoes not only the voice in my head but also the voices of many women who share my thoughts in one way or another.

Women in the Middle East had and still have an important role in shaping the true identity of Islam in many aspects of life. I believe everyone – men and women – can contribute through their strengths, and creativity is one of the most effective tools to do so. Tariq Ramadhan talked about the importance of a ‘Radical Reform’ in the Islamic world and how culture and arts can be a part of that reform. He argued that ‘the message’s universality resides precisely in this ability to accept inevitable cultural projections, claiming the right to move past earlier concepts to allow a necessary re-appropriation by present ones without ever betraying the immutable fundamentals of the religious message and its ethics.’ This was a great inspiration for me to prove that creativity can contribute to religion in many ways.”

**Source:** *Diary of a Mad Arabian Woman* by Tamadher al Fahal, from the International Museum of Women’s “Muslima: Muslim Women’s Art & Voices” exhibition, [muslima.imow.org](http://muslima.imow.org).

Full zine: *Diary of a Mad Arabian Woman*: [http://issuu.com/tamadher/docs/domaw\\_-\\_final\\_issuu](http://issuu.com/tamadher/docs/domaw_-_final_issuu).



**EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH  
PALESTINIAN ARTIST LAILA SHAWA,  
CONDUCTED BY MUSLIMA EXHIBIT CURATOR  
SAMINA ALI**

**Samina Ali (SA):** You have quite an impressive background: born in Gaza to wealthy parents, you studied first at a boarding school in Cairo then trained seriously in art at the Leonardo Da Vinci School of Art. Did you know at an early age that you wanted to be an artist?

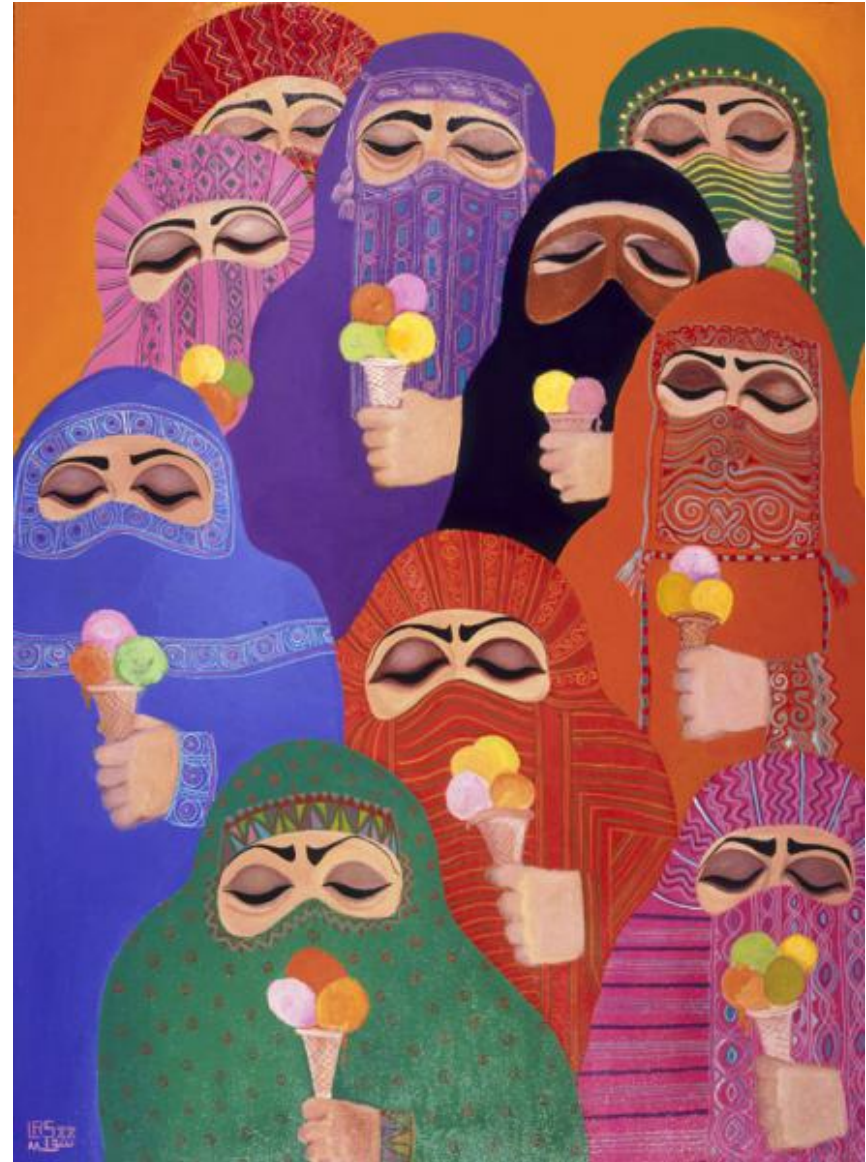
Laila Shawa (LS): I had a great curiosity about art at a very early age. I could not say if I was that aware of wanting to become an artist. I simply had an instinct for what I considered beautiful. I drew quite well, but that was the end of it. After graduating I joined the American University in Cairo (AUC) to study political science and sociology, more or less following into the footsteps of my family. I was aware that it did not satisfy me! One afternoon, I was having tea with my father and his friend, an architect who was Italian/Egyptian. In the course of conversation my Father asked me how I was faring at university, and my response was, “Not too thrilled!” My father’s friend then asked what I was reading at University, and I told him. He looked very puzzled and asked me

why, since I drew very well, did I not choose art? I looked at him in total amazement and asked where would I go for Leonardo Da Vinci art school, and that he could get me in. That was it! I looked at my father for a response, and he just shook his head and said “What a brilliant idea!” The rest is history. But it was pure coincidence that changed my life!

**SA:** In 1987, when you moved to London, you began a critique of the veil. *The Impossible Dream*, for instance, depicts a group of women holding ice cream cones in front of their veiled faces. It’s a humorous, catch-22 moment. What were you hoping to convey about the veil?

**LS:** The veil is what I would term as a *Bidaa* – something which was introduced to Islam (possibly by the Byzantines in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century), but has nothing to do with the teachings of Islam. The resurgence of the veil, starting with the Islamic revolution in Iran and its spread into the Middle East, was more of a sociopolitical phenomenon designed to control and subdue women, the so-called weaker sex, as a result of men losing control of their lives due to Western hegemony and complicit and corrupt dictatorships, in their various forms.

An incident in Gaza triggered this series of works. In the case of the Palestinians, women played a phenomenal role during the first Intifada. They stood up to Israeli soldiers while their husbands were hiding in fear of losing their jobs, as many of them worked in Israel as daily cheap labor. Their children were throwing stones at the IDF (Israeli



Defense Forces). The women defended their children and their husbands, which resulted in men losing their positions as heads of family. Women became too powerful and had to be put in their place. Hence the veiling of women, at least in Gaza – but I am sure the same applies to the rest of the Islamic World, although the reason may vary.

I come from a long line of strong women. My grandmothers were very powerful; my mother was a follower of Simon De Beauvoir. I grew up as an equal, and always believed in the power (and to some extent the supremacy) of women. Watching women subdued – but above all, seeing women accept it – is something I could not accept. My critique is more of the women themselves – their complicity in reducing their status to an invisible state, while at the same time yearning silently for the freedom Western women seem to enjoy. The tug is between the two states. So the message is obviously that they should give themselves more value and certainly more respect.

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Laila Shawa was born in 1940 to one of Gaza’s old landowning families. She studied at the Leonardo Da Vinci School of Art in Cairo and Rome’s Academy of Fine Arts. After graduation Shawa went home to supervise arts and crafts education in refugee camps for UNWRA and entered into an informal apprenticeship with UN war photographer Hrant Nakasian. In 1967 she moved to Beirut to paint full-time. When the Lebanese civil war started she returned to Gaza and for the next decade collaborated on designing and building the Rashad Shawa Cultural Centre. Shawa took up residence in London in 1987 and soon after started her socio-political critique *Women and the Veil* resulting in acclaimed paintings like *The Impossible Dream*. Shawa’s pioneering work during the 1980s of utilizing photography as integral to art production has left a lasting mark on contemporary Palestinian art.

#### Sources:

*Hands of Fatima* by Laila Shawa, from the International Museum of Women’s “Muslima: Muslim Women’s Art & Voices” exhibition, [muslima.imow.org](http://muslima.imow.org).

*The Impossible Dream* by Laila Shawa, from the International Museum of Women’s “Muslima: Muslim Women’s Art & Voices” exhibition, [muslima.imow.org](http://muslima.imow.org).

Interview and bio sourced from the International Museum of Women’s Muslima Exhibit: <http://muslima.imow.org/content/political-personal>.  
From the International Museum of Women’s “Muslima: Muslim Women’s Art and Voices” Exhibit: <http://muslima.imow.org/>.