

A frank discussion from woman to man

By India Stoughton

BEIRUT: "The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women," Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network and former Baptist minister once said.

"It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians."

Unfortunately, Robertson is not alone in his negative view of feminism. The word "feminist," which used to be associated with the bravery of the suffrage movement, these days seems to appear more often used as a pejorative than a positive term.

Though most people would probably not equate it with witchcraft or matricide, the word is often associated with a strident, man-hating caricature, whose main stand revolves around maintaining a healthy crop of armpit hair, rather than campaigning for equal pay.

As such, many women these days are reluctant to associate themselves or their work with feminism, whether or not the term – devoid of its emotionally charged context – fits.

Lebanese sculptor, writer and businesswoman Nadine Abou Zaki has worked with women for the past 10 years, both as the editor-in-chief of Al-Hasnaa, a monthly Arabic women's magazine established in 1909, and as the founder of the Arab Women's Forum.

She is also the author of three books, the latest of which, "De Femme à Homme," (From Woman to Man) deals with gender issues and what it means to be a woman in the 21st century.

Abou Zaki opens the work with a disclaimer. "To tell the truth, it's mostly my distance from the feminine which pushed me to write these letters," she explains. "I am not a feminist. Nor an activist ... Nor am I a subscriber to women's forums."

Presumably she is referring here to Internet forums, rather than the New Arab Women's Forum of her own creation, of which she remains the executive chair.

Abou Zaki founded NAWF in 2001. "At this period the Arab world was witnessing the emergence of what I call the new Arab woman, and there was really a lot happening," she says.

"There was the emergence of a woman who has a new vision – a new culture – and it was very important to address this. It's a continuation of my work in Al-Hasnaa ... We address the woman in all the aspects of her life."

Her dislike of the word feminist, she explains, comes from a reluctance to be pigeonholed as someone with preconceived ideas about women and men and the interaction between the two. Before writing "De Femme à Homme" she had no idea what would come out, she says. It evolved and developed as she went along.

The result is a more personal take on this concept of the "new Arab woman" – a series of Abou

Zaki's own experiences, observations and questions.

The first third of the book is made up of the insights gleaned on a series of her trips abroad in connection with various gender-related events, from conferences in Saudi Arabia to the Paris opening of Eve Ensler's "The Vagina Monologues."

The second part consists of the correspondence between Abou Zaki, who holds a doctorate in philosophy from the Sorbonne, and her ex-professor Pierre-Marie Hasse.

"We've stayed in touch for more than 15 years now," Abou Zaki says. "Whenever I travel to Paris – and I go often – we always meet and we spend hours talking about philosophy.

"We were not intending to write a book together," she adds. "We were sitting in the coffee shop and a professor of literature ... sat with us.

"By coincidence we were talking about women – I was organizing the New Arab Women's Forum and he had just finished writing his book – and before she left the cafe she [asked] us 'Why don't you write a book together about women?'"

Abou Zaki began compiling material: "I started writing about all my observations regarding my trips and everything I saw related to women.

"Then we were talking about these trips ... and we decided to start a correspondence ... I'm an Arab woman, he's a French man, and we thought this correspondence could be interesting from this point of view."

The letters – which begin in 2008 and continue for two years – cover topics (for the most part raised by Abou Zaki) from gender equality, to the incapability of men to bear children, to postnatal depression, to what to call a vagina.

"In French, there is an expression: 'd'homme à homme' which means 'frankly.' You talk frankly from man to man," she says. "The title 'De Femme à Homme' refers to this idea. I want to say ... that [this] is a frank and intimate discussion. That this is also possible from woman to man."

"De Femme à Homme" by Nadine Abou Zaki is published by L'Harmattan and is available from Librairie Antoine.