

Rita-Maria Ibrahim  
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### The Curse of Being a Woman

The first story I ever heard was the one of Adam and Eve. In this story, God creates the world in all its beauty: rivers, skies, mountains, valleys, and creatures of the sky, ocean, and land. Then, God created the first man, Adam. When He saw that Adam was lonely, He decided to give him a companion. And so, God fashioned the first woman, Eve, from one of Adam's ribs. I remember the feeling of anger rising up inside of me, even as a child. I was struck dumb by the utter absurdity of my existence. Adam was lonely, and so, God fashioned Eve *from a part of Adam* to keep him company. Not only does this dictate that a woman's initial purpose is to please man, but also that she would not *be* if it were not for him. Since the inequality between woman and man dates back to creation itself, it is not surprising that this life sentence of minority is imposed on women since birth and follows them like their shadow until they are so far under the dirt that the sun cannot reach them.

The first thing I remember being taught is how to make myself as small as possible. My hair, my legs, my shoulders, my ankles: they are parts of me and they are too much. I am too much. A strand of my hair is a snake, luring man into a place of sin. The curve of my lips is an invitation. The innocence in my voice: a ploy to cause man to stumble. I am an obstacle to be avoided, a stumbling block to brave, land to be conquered. We do not teach men to control themselves, we teach women to minimize themselves. And so the women in my life took it upon themselves to teach me from their experience: do not walk alone at night, do not dress *provocatively*, do not make your opinions too controversial, do not raise your voice, be calm, be

poised, be palatable, be conservative of your body and your thoughts. This is to protect you, my mother said. This way you will be safe, she said. And I believed her, so I obeyed.

The first time my mother was wrong, I was twelve years old. She said I would be safe and protected if I minimized myself, if I melted into the walls of every room, if I existed quietly. And I did. I tried to. Yet, when I was twelve years old, I was sexually assaulted. For years, I was stunned into silence by shame. I was convinced it was my fault, that I was too friendly and outgoing, that the skirt of my school uniform should have been a little more below the knees, that, somehow, I initiated something, though I did not mean to. Years later, when I gathered the courage to tell my mother what had happened, she treated it like a rite of passage. “I am so happy it was not more than that”, she said. “It could have been so much worse”, she said.

The first thing I ever learned about women is that they have always been a minority. They were denied the right to an education, lest they learn to think for themselves. They were made to believe that their lives all lead up to wifehood and motherhood. They were denied work for a while, until they were allowed to work for mediocre pay. They had no way of making their own money, at least not enough to support themselves, and so they had no choice but to be dependent on men. Even today, in 2021, especially in Lebanon and the Global South, the gender pay gap is astoundingly persistent, and women are severely underrepresented in governmental, medical, entrepreneurial and technological industries, since these sectors are considered male dependent, and are therefore male dominant. Additionally, cases of sexual assault in the workplace are reported daily, as well as cases of female soldier rape, human trafficking of women, raping and/or kidnapping of minors, and murders of girls and women.

The first thing I was ever sure of is this: no matter what I do, how I behave, what I think, and what I say, I will be objectified, I will be perceived as less, I will be underestimated; I will be all of those things because I am a woman. And so, I make it my life's purpose to speak out, to learn and to educate myself and others, to have opinions, to express my liberty to agree and disagree, and to take up as much space as I possibly can.

This year, AUB celebrates 100 years of coeducation: a milestone that embodies the will of generations of women that spoke out against all odds and fought for their right to an education. This achievement and its centenary carries a message for women and men both. For women, it is a reminder of how far we have come, an invitation to keep the wheel of advancement and progression turning, and a challenge to do more and to be more in honor of the brave and strong women who have sacrificed so much for us to be here. For men, it is a call to take responsibility: a summons to acknowledge the long road women have walked and are still walking, and a bidding to walk it with them, hand in hand, and to endeavor to make the world a place that knows the worth of women, their ideas, and their glory: a place that welcomes women and admits its need for them.

The American University of Beirut, as an institution of higher education in Lebanon, must strive to educate its students on the extent of inequality that women face today, especially in Lebanon and the Global South. Consequently, its students: the husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons of tomorrow, will carry with them the drive to make this world a better place for their wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters. Furthermore, AUB must aim to instill in its students a deep-rooted respect for women, by introducing them to the revolutionary women who have changed the course of history. In acquainting students with these exemplary

female figures, AUB encourages its male students to credit women for contributing to making the world a better place in so many fields and aspects, and it inspires its women to aspire to dream bigger and to *be more* against all odds. The acknowledgement of women in history and women today ensures that they are treated better going forward, that they are appreciated and respected, and that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.