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## Arab Movement of Women Arising for Justice

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Four years ago, for the first time in the United States, a critical mass of Arab/Arab-American women converged at the INCITE! (Women of Color Against Violence) Color of Violence II conference. The momentous event inspired the women to imagine a space where Arab/Arab-American women would not simply be a caucus, but would constitute the entirety of the participants. The seed for the Arab Movement of Women Arising for Justice (AMWAJ) was planted.

In those four years, the AMWAJ organizing core, which expanded and contracted several times before gelling into the 11 women who would compose it, envisioned a space where Arab/Arab-American women could not just discuss the material and political events that shape their lives, but a space where they could delve deeper within themselves, and unpack their internalized forms of oppression including Zionism, racism, homophobia, sexism, and classism. They envisioned a skills-sharing space, in an effort to build a larger vision and movement of and by Arab and Arab American women and girls opposed to all forms of oppression.

This envisioned space became a reality this summer, when nearly 100 Arab/Arab-American women gathered from June 9-11 at Jones Preparatory High School in Chicago, IL (home to the largest Palestinian population in the US) for the first AMWAJ conference.

In preparation for the retreat, AMWAJ organizers agreed that they could not predetermine what issues the participants should discuss, and called for proposals to Arab/Arab-American women across North America by asking them, "If you could convene your own workshop and/or discussion to share with other Arab/Arab-American women, what would it be about?" The response was tremendous.

Proposals included issues of media portrayals and the demystification stereotypes of Arab/Arab-American women, sexuality and being transgendered and Arab, domestic violence in homosexual households, being mixed race, deconstructing eurocentrism, and internalized racism.

The weekend began with an opening celebration on Friday night that included a welcome address by long-time community activist Camille Odeh, a showing of Arab-American Action Network Youth shorts by Jenine Wehbeh and Rahab Hassan, and a hip-hop performance by Tru Bloo.

The first day began with a spiritual grounding session that sought to establish trust among the AMWAJ participants and set the tone for the rest of the gathering. It included the invocation of names of inspirational figures, the reading Khalil Gibran's "On Freedom" from *The Prophet*, and the sharing of prayer. Saturday's sessions culminated in a cultural performance or "Café AMWAJ," featuring Arab-American poetess, Nathalie Handal, Lamya "Amir" el Chidiac, DJ Emancipation, Aima Paule from the Mamaz, and the Nisaa Performance Troupe made up of Sarah Abdullah, Leila Buck, Rana Kaskaz, and Shadia Marji.

The gathering closed with a movement-building exercise wherein the participants broke into five groups of 12, who then became two groups of 30, and finally converged into one group of 60. Each successive grouping was given two questions to answer: "How can we concretely continue work of gathering?" and "What would be most helpful to you and your local community?" The movement building session produced an impressive list of next steps that included an AMWAJ II gathering and a national network of the participants.

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AMWAJ was just a beginning; a groundbreaking ceremony for a new path for Arab/Arab-American women down which they can create a viable movement capable of opposing foreign and domestic policies that ostensibly speak in their name while destroying their communities. Whereas most Arab/Arab-American institutions seek to change negative US foreign and domestic policies, AMWAJ seeks to address those concerns as well as such a movement's internal challenges. No global south community struggling against oppression is without these internal challenges, and AMWAJ is doing its part by creating a space where such challenges are named and the mechanisms to surmount them can be developed.

For Arab/Arab-American women who were not present at the gathering, you can still join this sisterhood and help shape it. To join the listserv, send an email to [arabwomensgather\(at\)yahoo.com](mailto:arabwomensgather@yahoo.com), to learn more go to [www.amwajgathering.org](http://www.amwajgathering.org).



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