Museums are a public space within the public sphere. Yet they also embody many aspects of the private sphere. This duality, (or perhaps neutrality), makes them appropriate as change-agents in the segregated arena of Muslim society. Museums belong to a universal and growing movement that societies can use to develop a common voice about social concepts such as those relating to women's equality. By using their collections, their exhibitions, their publications, and trained personnel, they can develop programmes that project a more inclusive, democratic, and positive image of women and develop relevant programmes that address the problems women face in their private, familial, and economic lives. Examples of some existing programmes include vocational training and literacy classes, the sale of artistic products, and exhibitions that dispel stereotyping and subervience of women.

“Typical” exhibitions

Many MENA ethnographic and history museums contain exhibits described as the “typical” environments of men and women. For instance, at the National Heritage Museum and the Salt Folklore Museum, both in Jordan, the women’s display includes women at work cooking, washing, grinding, and sewing while the men’s display depicts them at leisure lounging, smoking, and drinking coffee. At the Ethnographic Museum of Tetouan, Morocco, however, the new curator replaced the old “typical” display of a woman seated on the floor doing domestic work with one of a well-dressed woman in her home, seated at a table, and taking refreshment. What messages do these “typical” exhibitions give to their audiences? Where is the balance between continuity of heritage and subervence stereotyping?

Museums as educators

Museums, as public spaces, offer appropriate places for educational programming. Museums constitute ideal spaces for adult literacy classes. These classes might incorporate the museum’s collection in its teaching curriculum so that students learn about their history through the display of objects while learning to read. Literacy classes are being offered at the American Legation Museum in Tangier. The Museum of the Religion and Spiritual Heritage of the North of Morocco in Tetouan, now under development, offers an example of how museums can be used for education and women’s empowerment. The Museum will contain a library with legal and religious texts that will be available to a wide audience as well as to feminist scholars interested in the role of women in Islam. Another recent Moroccan initiative is the Museum of the Middle Atlas in Azrou; a crossroads for travelers where there is a rich tradition of artistic production in the area—particularly in weaving. Women who have participated in the development process will be served economically by the sale of their rugs and through training opportunities at this new site.

Museums in the MENA region area increasingly playing ever-new education functions, testifying to their role in cultural production. Museums clearly hold great potential to serve their audiences in new ways and to help promote women’s empowerment through inventive and comprehensive use of their facilities and programmes.

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Note

1. A longer version of this paper was presented at the workshop “Women’s Activism and the Public Sphere: Local/Global Linkages” at the 2005 Sixth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting in Montecattini, Italy.