



# POLITICAL ECONOMY

## Introduction

*This chapter seeks to shed light on the effect that the political economy structures of Arab countries have on the condition of Arab women, taking into consideration the fact that the economy and politics overlap and intertwine. Emphasis will be placed on the role that political structures play in disempowering women in the Arab countries.*

## THE PREVAILING MODE OF PRODUCTION, THE LEVEL OF ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE AND THEIR IMPACT

AHDRs 2003 and 2004 concluded that the mode of production in the Arab countries is dominated by rentier economies and levels of economic performance marked by weak economic growth.

The combination of these two characteristics results in weak production structures in the Arab economies and a paucity of means of expansion, creating conditions for the spread of unemployment and poverty. Furthermore, rentier economies and the weak performance of institutional structures needed for the proper management of enterprises and society as a whole are linked to a culture of short-term profit-taking and worsening corruption. The overall result is a pattern of economic activity with disastrous consequences for individual economic empowerment. Other societal conditions magnify the impact of this pattern on women owing to their vulnerable economic position.

These unhealthy effects include high and rising rates of unemployment in the Arab countries, particularly among graduates of education, and the inevitable and consequent

increase in poverty and misdistribution of income and wealth since the labour market is the most important economic resource for most people in developing economies. This mix of factors results in a narrow labour market throughout the Arab world, and low rates of its expansion through the creation of new job opportunities. The weak efficiency of the regional labour market exacerbates its impact on unemployment rates. This in turn leads to reliance on foreign labour in those Arab countries that bring in guest workers. Naturally, the weakest social groups, including women, suffer the most.

Given “economic reform” and “structural adjustment” programmes or, as some prefer, “capitalist restructuring”, this pattern of production and slow economic growth has reached alarming proportions since the mid-1970s. This occurs in certain Arab unregulated free-market economies in the context of economic globalisation, without the institutional structures necessary for an efficient economy and equitable distribution – prerequisites for an efficient capitalist economic system capable of supporting human development (Fergany, in Arabic, 1998, 47-82).

A tight job market, slow job creation and the spread of women’s education along with society’s irrational preference that men should take what jobs there are have combined to increase the unemployment of women, especially educated women, even in Arab countries that import non-Arab workers (chapter 3). The state also has withdrawn from economic and service activity and limited government employment, which had previously represented the preferred form of employment for women and a bastion of their rights. As a result, Arab countries are witness to an unfortunate phenomenon: an abundance of qualified female human capital suffering from above average rates of unemployment.

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Another factor that has helped to disempower women economically is the bias in labour practices against women when they do work, particularly in the private sector, which has reduced women's relative earnings. These earnings constitute one of the most important sources of income for most people in developing countries, meaning that women are at greater risk than men from poverty and disempowerment resulting from scarce job opportunities and weak earnings.

The oil boom temporarily helped to expand economic activity and public services, creating a good demand for Arab labour, including that of women, in the Arab oil countries, especially in education, health and government. However, this demand shrank in the mid-1980s when the real value of oil declined and economic growth slowed throughout the Arab region. The effect of the oil boom was similar to that of the Arab countries' engagement in wars (Iraq's with the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example). The absence of men, who were away on the battlefield, contributed to expanding the female labour force, particularly in public services and in the government. However, these were the very same spheres that structural adjustment policies sought to rein in. When the oil boom and the war ended, attempts were made to restrict women's employment in order to limit unemployment among men.

In an international cross-sectional analysis of the relationship between the tempo of economic growth and economic structure on one hand and the GEM<sup>1</sup> index on the other hand, covering a sample of 80 countries, including four Arab countries (Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen), it was concluded that:

- the level of development is significantly and positively associated with women's empowerment. This relationship explains about 64 per cent of between-country variability in the GEM;
- the relationship has weak predictive power, however, as the coefficient of determination is rather small;<sup>2</sup> and

- transformation in the economic structure during the process of development is likely to improve the empowerment of women with the rising share of the services sector in GDP as this variable is positively and significantly associated with the GEM.

These results should spur Arab countries to pursue institutional reforms aiming at the empowerment of women, as the likelihood of attaining this objective based on economic reforms leading to higher growth alone could require long periods, as the example of Yemen shows (Abdel Gadir Ali, background paper for the Report)

## **POLITICAL STRUCTURES**

### *GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS AND THE LIBERATION OR MARGINALISATION OF ARAB WOMEN*

Arab women have undoubtedly secured some gains in political participation during the last three years, with legal recognition of their rights to vote and to stand for local councils and parliament. Their presence is also on the rise at the highest levels of executive authority in most cabinets in the Arab States.

Appointing a woman to a ministerial position has been a general rule in most Arab governments since at least the 1990s, and the practice has grown steadily since then. However, the nature of women's participation in government has generally been:

- symbolic (one or two female ministers in most cases);
- limited to smaller portfolios (usually ministries of social affairs or ministries relating to women); and
- conditional (the number of female ministers fluctuates with numerous changes of government).

This is not to deny that women have achieved representation in Arab government bodies

<sup>1</sup> Gender empowerment measure.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Yemen would be expected, according to this relationship, to increase its GEM of 0.123 to 0.163 if it manages to raise its per capita real GDP from \$889 (in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms) in 1995 to the real income level of Egypt of \$3,950 in 2003, the year of comparison. Based on the experience of income growth in Yemen during the period 1990-2000, with a relatively large average growth rate of 2.4 per cent, Yemen would be expected to attain this result in approximately 63 years.

whether as a result of internal or external pressure or both (Guessous, background paper for the Report). Nonetheless, such progress remains limited, as can be seen from three drawbacks in the trend.

First, women in decision-making institutions, whether executive or legislative, tend to be sidelined since the position of prime minister<sup>3</sup> and the essential ministries that allocate resources, define foreign policy and safeguard internal and external security remain in the hands of men. Furthermore, the positions of speaker of parliament and chair of the overwhelming majority of committees are reserved for men. In those countries that allow political parties, the vast majority of party leaders are also men.

Second, at a time when women's membership in parliament has taken off, they do not enjoy personal safety. In fact, they may have lost other rights, as in Iraq.

Third, the limited extent of Arab women's empowerment becomes apparent when compared with the status of women in other parts of the world (Al-Sayyid, background paper for the Report).

Arab political systems may differ in the democratic margin that they offer, the rights that they grant women, the level of political participation that they encourage and the extent to which their decision-making mechanisms are constitutional and representative. In all cases, however, real decisions in the Arab world are, at all levels, in the hands of men. Decision- and policy-making commonly reflect the patriarchal view of the dominant male elite (Al-Baz, in Arabic, 2002).

Moreover, while equality of the sexes appears as one of the general principles of Arab constitutions, some States fail to apply the principle to their election laws. This is the case with Saudi Arabia, which excluded women from its first municipal elections in February 2005, and with Kuwait, whose election law of 1962 – before its amendment in May 2005 – restricted the right to vote and stand for office to men.

One paradox is that, at first glance, statistics on political participation show advances in the political participation of women in countries under oppressive dictatorial systems or traditional tribal-hereditary regimes. This

indicates the weak relationship between increasing the number of women in authority and the progress towards democracy.

Female appointments have grown as some Arab States have learned how to work around pressures from the United Nations agencies for the empowerment of women and the linking of external aid to improvements in the condition of women. The result has been a token representation of women, while citizens in general and women in particular remain on the margins of public affairs (Fayyad, in Arabic, 2004).

The number of seats held by women does not necessarily mean that women are democratically represented; it may, in fact, reflect concessions to a group of women supported by the State against other women on the fringes of dominant political forces. In such cases, the presence of women's groups in power does not express a broad social movement but instead an elite balance of power, economic interest, and internal and external political considerations. This is betrayed by the composition of the dominant women's elite and its failure to represent other more diverse sectors and trends (Ezzat, background paper for the Report).

Arab rule takes different forms – from monarchy to ruling families to pluralistic democracies to governments under the shadow of occupation. These various forms shape – and limit – the means of political and civil participation available to women and men alike, which are usually very limited. The result is that women are doubly-wronged: the dominance of the modern nation-state impedes their full enjoyment of civil and political rights, while the law binds them to the guardianship and protection of their male relatives in all areas of their individual human rights. In a similar vein, national legislation defines women as minors in need of the guardianship and protection of their male relatives in matters relating to their rights of marriage, divorce, child care, employment, travel, or even the entitlement of children to their mother's citizenship. Thus, the social contract applied to Arab women remains mired in patriarchy and nowhere approaches that of “the fraternity of men”. Dominated by men (fathers, brothers and husbands), and thus

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<sup>3</sup> Jordan was the first Arab country to appoint a woman as deputy prime minister.

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viewed by the State as incomplete individuals, women are denied a direct relationship with society. This relationship is instead mediated by the kinship with men who are viewed as “individuals” and citizens in the light of their sponsorship and leadership of their families. (Jad, background paper for the Report).

### *POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE ISSUE OF WOMEN*

Arab political parties have come to espouse the general cause of women in their programmes, but from that initial point, they diverge on:

- the space given to the subject on their platforms; and
- the ideological context in which their concepts and positions on women are situated.

Political parties tend to assign women’s issues to economic, social and cultural categories. They have not viewed the position of women as a gender issue to be differentiated in the general policy discourse. Rather, they see

it as part of the general social question. Parties thus promote slogans stressing women’s rights to education, employment, health care and welfare and ask for guarantees of their rights under personal status law and in political life by endorsing women’s rights to vote and stand for election. The political and ideological conditions under which these parties were founded and their subsequent experiences, positive and negative, have influenced the kind of attention that they give to women’s issues. Most of them began life under Western colonialism. Their agendas focused on nationalism, independence and resistance to colonialism. Social issues, including the issue of women, were postponed until after independence.

After independence, the parties began to crystallise general programmes around the desired reforms, with political, social and cultural dimensions all intersecting. The issue of women, as half of society, took on a new dimension. Adopted functional reform slogans acknowledged that reforming the whole (the society) required reforming the part (the family), and reforming the latter entailed an objective re-examination of the status of women, who are fundamental to the family. Attention was therefore paid to personal status laws not in order to guarantee equal human and social rights for women, which would enable them to guide their families better and, in that way, influence society. Rather these reforms were meant to regulate marital relations and guarantee some of the women’s rights within the traditional family structure. The education of women was held to be a public good, not because it was considered a basic right, but due to its positive effect on children’s upbringing and because it would provide men with educated spouses and companions such as those available to European men. Parties drew their authority from different sources, turning to the new Salafite ideology, nationalism, liberalism or socialism according to their ideological leanings. Their reformist appeals concerning women were influenced by thinkers such as Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi, Muhammad ‘Abdu, Qasim Amin, Farah Antoine, al-Tahir al-Haddad, Salama Musa, Muhammad Ibn al-Hasan al-Hajawi, ‘Alal al-Fasi and others.

#### **Luminary: Djamila Bouhired**

Name: Djamila Bouhired  
Cell number: 90  
Military Prison: Ouran  
Age: 22 years  
Eyes like the two candles of a “temple”  
Black Arab hair  
Like the summer  
Like the waterfall of sorrows.

With these lines, the poet Nizar al-Qabbani immortalised the Algerian woman militant.

One of the most outstanding of the women militants who fought on behalf of the Algerian national liberation revolution against French colonialism, Bouhired joined the underground resistance movement in 1956 when she was not yet 20 years old. She was captured in a raid by the French Special Forces. Brought before the court in July 1957, she was sentenced to death. Massive pressure from international public opinion however forced the French to delay execution of the sentence and she was transferred in 1958 to the prison at Rheims, in France. Following the progress of Algerian-French negotiations, the signing of the Evian Agreement and the announcement of Algerian independence in May 1962, Algerian prisoners were gradually

released, Bouhired among them. After independence, Bouhired assumed the presidency of the Algerian Women’s Union, until her resignation.

Of the day she was sentenced to be executed Djamila Bouhired says, “It was the most beautiful day of my life because I was confident that I would be dying for the sake of the most wonderful story in the world . . . I still remember that on returning from the courtroom to the prison, when our brother prisoners shouted to us to ask what our sentence was, we replied with the hymn that those condemned to death would sing and that begins ‘God is Most Great . . . Our sacrifice is for the motherland.’ I was with Djamila Bou ‘Azza and it was a moving moment. Thousands and thousands of voices repeated the hymn with us, to give us courage”.

She remembers, too, the day when she, along with her female comrades, were released from prison. She says that she roamed the streets of Paris for 48 hours aimlessly and without resting and that Paris impressed her so much that she asked herself naively, “If their country is so beautiful, how come they want to take ours?”

*Farida Allaghi*

The political failures that have befallen the Arab world's various projects for reform or change have led to fierce controversies, resulting in sharp political divisions, the balkanisation of the party-political map in Arab countries, and the fragmentation of party positions on women. Fragmentation did not, however prevent parties from making women's issues an essential cornerstone of their discourse and activities, which led to:

- formation of women's wings within parties;
- formation of ostensibly independent women societies and unions, which in reality were dependent on parties in their structure and political line;
- participation by women in leadership bodies although in small numbers varying from party to party;
- the coordination of party demands with those of civil society, including women's organisations; and
- the inclusion of women's issues in party agendas under both general demands affecting men and women (education, health, employment and social development) as well as specific women's campaigns targeting personal status laws, political rights (to vote and run for local and parliamentary elections; equality in gaining leadership positions in various institutional and administration bodies) and advocating for women's quotas in political parties.

Despite their fragmentation and competition and the common restrictions placed on them by ruling regimes, political parties have helped to push the issue of women to the forefront through:

- party groupings and blocs;
- coordination with organisations in civil society that shared their ideas;
- coordination with women's movements to reinforce their positions and demands; and
- coordination with official agencies and ruling or governing parties when called for by political alliances.

Through these efforts, they helped achieve victories for women in Arab countries (Guessous, background paper for the Report).

Yet for all this, in women's matters, the common legacy of political parties, both those in opposition and those in power, has been

the complete restriction of female political activity. No party has corrected the almost total absence of women from executive positions in government and society or the modest level of their presence in lower structures, and no party allows women a decisive voice in its internal affairs.

#### QUOTAS FOR WOMEN IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

It is understood that quotas should be applied as part of a comprehensive developmental process if they are not to serve as a purely symbolic gesture whose effect will disappear once they are removed.

In Jordan, with its recent experience with democracy, quotas have enabled some women to enter parliament and have helped to break down some of the barriers to women's political participation while also nudging tribal groupings to nominate women for office. There is consensus, however, that quotas are only an interim step towards a society willing to apply full equality.

Growing demands by Arab women's groups and the increasing response from governments for quotas as a way for women to reach decision-making positions have led to certain positive changes. In Morocco, the percentage of women in parliament went from 1 per cent in 1995 to 11 per cent in 2003. In Jordan, the percentage of women in parliament rose from 2.5 per cent in 1995 to 5.5 per cent in 2003. The same is true in Tunisia, where the percentage went from 6.8 in 1995 to 11.5 in 2003 (UNIFEM, in Arabic, 2004, 270), and in Iraq, where it reached 25 per cent with the 2005 elections. UNIFEM states that the experiences of Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia prove that the quota system is a good mechanism for increasing representation of women in various legislative bodies.

Quotas have also helped women to enter local government councils, where, however, resistance to their presence is growing. Women first entered these councils in the occupied Palestinian territory when the Ministry of Local Government promulgated a law, under strong pressure from the Palestinian women's movement, mandating that one woman be

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appointed to each of certain local councils. As noted in part one of this Report, in the first elections to these councils under the Palestinian Authority in December 2004, 139 women were nominated and 59 were elected compared to 852 men nominated and 254 elected. In other words, women gained 17 per cent of the total number of seats (306) in the 26 locations where elections were held. Thirty-five of these women won against men – which was considered a victory for the Palestinian women's movement – while 24 won by quota (Al-Ayyam newspaper, 2004, 9).

The Palestinian legislative elections of 2006 provide a unique case permitting the examination of the effect of quotas on the volume of women's parliamentary participation. The elections were held under a mixed system that allowed for the election of half the members of the assembly from party lists and the other half by direct vote in the constituencies. Quotas for women were also fixed for the party lists. The number of women candidates for local constituencies was 15 out of a total of 414 candidates, and not one won. The number of women candidates on the party lists was 70 out of a total of 314 candidates, of whom 17, or 24 per cent, won. Thus the percentage of women in the Legislative Assembly elected in 2006 was 12.9 per cent (17 out of 132 members), while the percentage of women in the previous Assembly had been 5.6 per cent. This difference may be explained by the fact that there had been no quotas for women in the Palestinian legislative elections of 1996 while in 2006, quotas were allocated on the party lists (three per list) and that no quotas were allocated for the constituencies.<sup>4</sup>

A genuine democracy enhances the political participation of women. This, in turn, anchors democracy in Arab countries.

#### *ARAB CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE ISSUE OF WOMEN*

Since the early 1990s, there has been a significant spread of activist and nongovernmental organisations in the Arab world. A large number of these organisations deal with

issues of empowering women politically, economically, legally and socially. Some have succeeded in organising national campaigns to change certain laws that discriminate against women (such as the Jordanian penal code relating to "honour crimes"). They have also helped to secure women's quotas (in Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, the occupied Palestinian territory and other countries) and to pressure governments into action to curb violence against women.

Many Arab laws specify that private social and women's associations are forbidden to involve themselves in policy or in political matters. This is a legal obstacle to the free expression of opinion, which implies that politics is removed from the activities of civil society and from private charitable and social work (Hatab, in Arabic, 2004, 157-169).

Despite the importance of these organisations and groups in providing services that segments of the female population need, doubts exist about their ability to change the prevailing gender-biased power relationship in Arab societies. Many studies have indicated that these organisations are to be found mostly in urban centres, away from the poor, marginalised regions (Ben Nefissa, 2001; Hanafi and Tabar, 2002; Jad, 2004b; al-Shalabi, in Arabic, 2001; ESCWA, in Arabic, 2006b, forthcoming). This means that the most deprived and needy women are beyond their operational reach. Furthermore, representation of women in such groups is usually restricted to the educated middle class. The spread of this type of social organisation would not necessarily mean greater political or social representation for all segments of the female population. It also appears that many of them do not basically seek to organise women to defend their rights and interests; rather, rights are defended in general since achieving these rights is in the interest of all women. Experience indicates that political forces with greater popular support and representation, find this type of discourse easy to oppose and refute even if they are perceived to be acting against women's interests as in the socially conservative political movements.

<sup>4</sup> "Programme on Governance in the Arab Region." (2006). <http://www.pogar.org/countries/elections.asp?cid=14> (Accessed 26 April, 2006).

## The role of the media

The media usually play an important role in spurring political participation and in changing stereotypes of social gender roles; they are, however, a double-edged sword. They are an arena for the forces of change in social gender relations but also a weapon in the hand of forces hostile to change. Thus, inconsistencies are common in media discourse when episodes of violence against women are reported or when sensitive issues such as so-called “honour crimes”, female circumcision or changes in personal status laws crop up.

In the Arab world, broadcast media, notably satellite channels, and print media are expanding, employing more women in some countries as statistics indicate. Other countries, such as Yemen, are actually experiencing a decrease in women’s participation in mass communication media (audio, visual and print), although the number of women is gradually increasing in this domain. Society and the family still consider working in these media to be shameful and unacceptable. Noticeably, Arab women’s interest in the media is limited mostly to their traditional concerns, such as cooking, housekeeping and cosmetics. At a time when women in Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territory, for example, are expressing increased interest in the media as a profession, there is no indication that more women are becoming reporters.

With a few exceptions, the ownership of political and hard news media remains a male bastion. Women’s ownership of companies that produce social publications is far more common than their ownership of companies publishing political journals. In any event, women play no role in planning media policy or making media decisions. In Lebanon, a small percentage of news agencies – a mere 11.68 per cent of the total – are owned by women. In the occupied Palestinian territory, there are no women on the editorial boards of any of the three newspapers though there is one female chief editor of a newspaper in Iraq.

The question remains to what extent the increasing number of Arab women working in the media would influence the general direction of programming positively and help to counter the stereotyped female images purveyed by

commercial media. These are images that imply that women’s freedom of choice goes no further than the selection of a specific washing powder or electric appliance and where equality means only women’s equality as consumers, with the freedom to purchase goods pushed by an advertising market that distorts society’s consciousness and women’s consciousness of themselves. The entrance of women to policy-making levels in the media, especially women who are fully aware of social gender relations, would instead help the industry to decide what the true image of women should be.

The emphasis on certain patterns of consumption of cleaning supplies and products reinforces the stereotype of women in these areas. A new wave of commercial media concentrates on the female body as a locus of desire and temptation for men to promote, perfume, clothing and beauty products. This new commercialism, evident in many Arab media, not only strengthens old stereotypes of men’s and women’s roles but also encourages forces resistant to any change in these roles. Overcoming this new trend requires that the State and civil society take a serious stand to ensure that the media become gender-aware agents of change able to challenge stereotypes and prevailing gender relations.

## DIFFERENT POLITICAL POSITIONS ON ARAB WOMEN

Political forces on the Arab scene do not oppose the rise of Arab women or their political and social participation; all accept the legal and political equality of women. The problem lies in these forces’ implementation of their principles in party and political life. In all cases, participation by women is weak, though perhaps greater among dominant ruling parties that rely on mass mobilisation, especially among regimes that do not embrace pluralism, such as Syria and Tunisia. The one exception to this stance on the rise of women is the Salafite movement, now in decline in many countries but clearly influential in the Arabian Peninsula in general, with differences among the different countries.

Political currents and forces are not fixed, revolving around ideology alone; rather, as political forces, they move in a

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general sphere governed by a political and social culture. Therefore, it is important to measure party discourse favouring women's political empowerment against performance and understand the controversial, complex relationship between the two. The ruling party in an Arab State such as Egypt may support the participation of women, but at the time of the elections, narrow political calculations take priority over original pledges. Thus, in the recent parliamentary elections, the party nominated only six women out of 444 candidates even though it had originally promised to field 25 (Reuters). A leftist party in Morocco may be ideologically progressive where women are concerned, but women may hold only a few seats on its central committees, etc. There are differences in the various movements in the area. The Maghreb (western Arab countries) left does not necessarily take the same positions as the Mashreq (eastern Arab countries) left on the state, religion and women. The Muslim Brotherhood in Morocco does not have the same political strategies and practices as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria. For this reason, the positions of the political forces may better be described as a complex matrix. The latter cannot be simply divided vertically into major political forces but must be examined horizontally to understand differences on the geographical, regional and even national levels (Ezzat, background paper for the Report).

#### ISLAMIST POSITIONS ON WOMEN

The position of the Salafite currents was always clear, namely, that a woman's place is in the home and that her role is to care for the family. While Salafites may have accepted women's right to vote by analogy with allegiance to the ruler, they adamantly rejected their right to seek and hold public office "to avoid pitfalls" (saddan al-dhara'i'). The Salafites were opposed to women being active in civil society, adopting, as a principle, a division of social labour that limits women's role to that of reproduction, motherhood and child raising and warning against the mixing of the sexes. The most that could be expected from the Salafites was an acceptance of independent feminist activity in private charities.

The targeting of the Salafite movement, in both its non-violent and violent forms, as a source of terrorism following the events of 11 September 2001 brought about a state of disarray not only in its organisational structures but also in its traditional assumptions. Thus, despite the movement's historical rejection of issues such as the mixing of the sexes and the political participation of women, major differences, or perhaps even struggles, arose within the movement over the role of women. One tendency gave precedence to the concept of male superiority (*qiwama*) over those of sovereignty (*wilaya*) and participation, while others acknowledged the participation of Salafi women through military operations in which they shared (as in Iraq) or accepted political rights for women, excepting only the lesser and greater imamates (as in Kuwait). However, the great majority in Yemen and Saudi Arabia rejected the latter tendency. But all accepted the idea of women's independent social activity in the field of private charitable work.

On the other side of the arena, the Muslim Brotherhood adopts a principled position in support of women's political rights, accepting in this regard the independent interpretations of contemporary scholars, from within the movement or those ideologically close to it, such as al-Ghazali and al-Qaradawi, which are based on jurisprudence. In March 1994, before the Population Conference in Cairo, the Brotherhood in Egypt issued a paper on "Muslim Women in Muslim Society" that reflected a moderate position accepting women's political participation (except in the greater imamate). In the reform initiative led by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2004, there was also a moderate position on women's issues. The movement's organisations in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Tunisia hold positions that take as their starting point the rallying cry of the civil state that gives women their political rights. There is also a broad Shiite political current in Bahrain and Iraq that shares the Muslim Brotherhood's point of view on this, while at the same time the conservative Shiite tendency favours basic restrictions on the role of women in public and political life.

Women's activities in the political sphere vary among the different trends that have



adopted the Muslim Brotherhood's intellectual vision. Women have a conspicuous presence, and a number of outstanding figures, in Morocco's Justice and Development Party, and these have made their voice heard for several years in the debate over the Personal Status Code. Women came to the forefront in the Moroccan elections of 2002 when 15 women were elected to parliament from the Party's list. As a result of the Party's proportional division of its seats, six of these actually entered parliament along with 35 other women as part of the boom in the number of women in parliament that followed from the national understanding that women would be given quotas on party lists. On the other side of the Arab world, women have a noticeable presence in the Islamic Union of Kurdistan, with five in the Political Bureau out of a total of 35 members and three seats in the Kurdish parliament. Three women from the Union also sit in the Iraqi parliament.

The strength of the Salafite movements in some countries, especially in the Arabian Peninsula, has driven the Brotherhood, despite its intellectually liberal position, to take hard-line stands against women's political rights in, for example, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, while in Egypt and Syria, their main concern has been related to security. There are three main reasons for this: first, the relative size of the movements and the power relationships between them; second, the relative sizes of the societies themselves, their civilisational backgrounds, and the cultural context in which they operate, in view of the obvious differences between the Gulf States and Egypt, Morocco and Syria; and third, the nature of the political regime and its degree of openness. There is, however, no one model. Thus, while the Islamists in Kuwait are allowed wide political space, they tend to take hard-line positions, and while the Brotherhood is allowed only a narrow margin by the restrictions placed on its legal status, its intellectual and individual positions on rights and women's political participation have become more open. In Morocco, things fluctuate, and in the Sudan, things are better in both theory and in reality because of the weak impact of the Salafite movement there compared to the strength of Brotherhood thinking and the Sufi orders.

BOX 9-1

### Shaykh Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din: No Objection to Women's Holding High Office

"On the question of the eligibility of women for high state office, an examination of the evidence makes it clear to me – though God, Great and Glorious, knows best as to His commands

– that the consensus of the jurists as to the illegality of their undertaking and assuming authority is a claim that has no significant basis".

Source: Shams al-Din, in Arabic, 2001, 5.

BOX 9-2

### 'Abd al-Halim Abu Shaqqa: Women's Right to Vote and to Stand for Election

#### Islamic Law Approves Women's Right to Vote

The fundamental rule says, "Things are originally permitted". Since there is nothing in Islamic law that denies women the right to vote, we consider that this right is legitimate ab initio. In practical application, however, we choose from among legitimate things what suits our circumstances and serves our interests.

We would like to present here an opinion by Dr. Mustafa al-Siba'i, may God bless his soul. Dr. al-Siba'i was professor of shari'a (Islamic law) and Dean of the Faculty of Shari'a (Islamic Studies and Jurisprudence) of Damascus University. The opinion of his that we quote is that of a group of shari'a specialists, expressed at a dialogue on the extent to which shari'a approves women's right to vote and to stand for election. Dr. al-Siba'i said, "Following discussion and deliberation on various views, we have determined that Islam does not prohibit giving this right to women. Election is an exercise through which the Nation selects agents to represent it in legislation and monitoring the Government. The election process is one of appointing agents, through which a person casts his vote for those whom he selects to be his deputies in parliament, to speak on his behalf and defend his rights. A woman is not prohibited by Islam from giving a power of attorney to someone to defend her rights and express her will as a citizen".

#### A Woman's Right To Stand for Election to Legislative Bodies

The discussion here will centre on two themes: first, shari'a's approval of a woman's right to run for office and second, the introduction of special conditions for a woman to exercise this right.

First: Shari'a's Approval of a Woman's Right to Stand for Election

We reiterate that the fundamental rule

is that "things are originally permitted". Since there is nothing in Islamic law that denies women the right to vote, we consider that this right is legitimate ab initio. In practical application, however, we choose – from among legitimate things – what suits our circumstances and serves our interests. We quote here an opinion of Dr. Mustafa al-Siba'i, may Allah bless his soul, in which he said: "... If the principles of Islam do not prohibit a woman from being a voter, do they prohibit her from being a deputy? Before we answer this question, we must know the nature of a 'deputy of the nation'. It performs two major functions:

1. Legislation: the enactment of laws and regulations.
2. Monitoring: scrutiny of the acts and work of the Executive Authority.

With regard to legislation, there is nothing in Islam that prohibits a woman from being a legislator, because legislation requires, first and foremost, that a legislator should have knowledge of the basic and indispensable needs and necessities of the society. Islam gives both men and women the right to learn. Our history tells us of women who were scholars of Hadith, jurisprudence and literature, etc".

Second: The Introduction of Special Conditions for a Woman to Exercise this Right

With regard to monitoring the Executive Authority, this falls into the category of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong. In the sight of Islam, men and women are equal in this regard. Allah, glorious and sublime, said in the Qur'an: 'The believers, men and women, are protectors, one of another: they enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil' (Qur'an, At Taubah, verse 71). Therefore, there is nothing in Islamic texts that takes away from a woman her eligibility to participate in parliament's work of legislation and the monitoring of executive authority".

Source: Abu Shaqqa, in Arabic, 1999, 446-448.

Despite the fact that the position of the Muslim Brotherhood is in principle in favour of women's political rights, there are no women

### Luminary: Zaynab al-Ghazali

Zaynab Al-Ghazali was greatly influenced by the religious education imparted to her by her father, who was an Azhari scholar and who used to call her Nasiba, in happy reference to Nasiba bint Ka'b al-Maziniyya al-Ansariyya, a celebrated Companion of the Prophet. After her father's death, she moved with her mother to Cairo to live with her brothers, who were studying and working there. As her older brother would not agree to her acquiring an education, she went to a girls' school on her own and asked its headmaster to accept her. Al-Ghazali studied in State schools but this was not enough for her. She started taking classes in the religious sciences from sheikhs from al-Azhar in order to combine modern academic sciences with their traditional counterparts that depended on direct transmission from a sheikh.

After obtaining her secondary certificate, al-Ghazali met Huda Sha'ravi and joined the Women's Union. It was planned that she should go on a scholarship to France but she did not do so despite her having been selected, along with two other young women from the Union. Al-Ghazali continued to repeat Sh'arawi's slogans and to adopt her projects for the development of women and their preparation to take on her cultural and social role even as she prayed, fasted, read the Qur'an and wore a European-style hat.

Subsequently, a certain incident constituted a turning point in her life and led to her rebirth as a woman who wore "modest dress", resigning from the Women's Union in the process yet never for a moment losing her faith in Huda Sha'ravi or her friendship for her despite the secular orientation of Sha'ravi's movement and her opposition to "the veil".

Al-Ghazali represented an early response to the calls for an Islamic vision of the liberation of women and an irrefutable retort to all those who sought to link women's backwardness to Islam. She founded the Society of Muslim Ladies in 1937 as a personal initiative unrelated to any political or male organisation and obtained a permit from

the Ministry of Religious Endowments when still only eighteen years of age. She held regular weekly meetings for activism and proselytising. Following her success, she initiated a relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood that led to her society amalgamating with the latter.

The activities of the society were not limited to good works and it also turned to political action as something inseparable from social action. In al-Ghazali's view, politics impacted on cultural and social charitable work. Given the society's objective of defending Islam, demanding implementation of the shari'a, and calling Muslims to the Book of God, it naturally collided with all political parties and the authorities. This clash reached its apogee with her house arrest on 20 August 1964 as part of a campaign against the Muslim Brothers that peaked with a sentence of life imprisonment against al-Ghazali, who was released in 1971. Al-Ghazali speaks of this painful ordeal in her famous work, *Ayyam min Hayati* (Days from My Life) (Dar El Shorouk, 1995), which is regarded as a historical documentation of an important era – from 1964 to 1971 – in the life of the contemporary Islamic movement.

Zaynab al-Ghazali held an optimistic and positive view of the role of Muslim women. Despite her repeated references to "The kingdom of women, on whose throne she would sit and which made of her a queen in her home", she believed that the route to the development and modernisation of the Islamic world was via women and that the advancement of society began and ended with her. She visited most of the countries of the Islamic world as a proselytizer and supporter of the Islamic movements during the second half of the twentieth century. She wrote a number of works, some of which have yet to be published. Her published works are *Nazarat fi Kitab Allah* (Views of the Book of God), *Nabw Ba'th Jadid* (Towards a New Renaissance), *Ila Ibnati* (To My Daughter) and *Mushkilat al-Shabab wal-Banat fi Marhalat al-Murabaqa* (The Problems of Young Men and Women during Adolescence).

Haytham Manna'

on the Brotherhood's Consultative Council in Egypt, Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory or the Syrian Arab Republic – the homes of the strongest Brotherhood movements. In Egypt, for example, the movement did not nominate a woman to the people's Assembly until 2000, in Alexandria, a unique case. There are no politically recognisable women's faces in the movement, only "sisters" – actors who are well known within the circles of the Islamist movement but who are not prominent public women. The Muslim Sisterhood wing of the movement was not created by Hasan al-Banna, its spiritual leader, but crystallised under the leadership of Zaynab al-Ghazali, who was from the Muslim Women's Association. She declared allegiance to Hasan al-Banna, joined his group, and led the Muslim Sisterhood within the Brotherhood; historically speaking, however, it was not the Brotherhood that established the women's wing. The expectations of Zaynab al-Ghazali's movement remained higher than Hasan al-Banna's vision. The latter concentrated in his "Letters" on women's social role in the family and the call to join the movement.

In Syria, the Brotherhood recently published "A Political Plan for the Syria of the Future: the Vision of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria". In this document, it stressed the human symmetry between men and women as well as their asymmetry in certain roles related to motherhood and femininity, the two being reconciled within society. It stated that three injustices threaten the Muslim nation: westernisation, slavish adherence to tradition and extremist thinking. Later, however, the Brotherhood retreated and affirmed that the home is the basic arena for women, that participation in public life should be by merit and that society has an excess of women's efforts. This swing is often evident in the writings of the Brotherhood since Hasan al-Banna became its spiritual leader. It reflects an ideological conviction of human equality on the one hand and concern about the breakdown of the family on the other as if the entry of women into public life was not a support for the family. There is, in the Brotherhood's thinking, a sharp division between the private and the public, between the family and the political, and this division of roles is deeply rooted in its mentality despite

its belief in individual rulings that support women's political role. Such vacillation may reflect indecision in the Brotherhood's position as much as concern about the exposure of women to the same risks of imprisonment and torture as men. Certainly, it is clear that every time the group mentions political rights, it feels it necessary to stress the role of the family even in short political statements.

Women's true difficulty with the Islamists is not linked only to their discourse and position on women. It stems from the Islamists' broader ideological system regarding politics. Paradoxically, this system does not reflect the original Islamic vision, which conceived of a society and state based on participation at all levels and on political presence, not just political representation – the type of system, in short, within which it would be easy to find a place for women (Ezzat, background paper for the Report).

The challenge before the Islamist's vision of women is how to develop an Islamic alternative that can coexist with differing or opposing trends and advance women's position forcefully in discourse and practice not as a result of, but as one of the conditions for, building the Islamic society that they desire. In this way, women's participation in the shaping of the model would become part of the empowerment of the model, not simply their own empowerment, and "the woman's voice" would take part in creating, developing and renewing the model as one of the pillars of its "Islamicity". When this happens, the social discord created by backwardness, poverty, the digital divide and the educational decline in the Arab world will be more of a problem for the religion than the supposed problem of women. Moreover, "avoiding pitfalls" will be a guide to help women to enter the public sphere, not to isolate them from it, and will serve to defend their participation, not to justify their exclusion from it. No corruption matches that of oppression. A nation that does not possess its freedom and does not apply standards of justice is a worthless nation even if every woman were to drape her body to the ground and put a thousand veils over her head (Ezzat, background paper for the Report).

Any rereading of the history of the

BOX 9-3

### Heba Raouf Ezzat: The Development of Islamist Discourse on the Subject of Women

The important thing for the future of women is not just to criticise or refute the Islamists' ideas about them but to seek out a way to develop this discourse and these applied positions and to discover the points of entry for such a development. This is crucial because, at this time, the Islamist discourse remains one of the most important vectors of cultural identity and the collective imagination. It has a powerful presence socially and politically, and its development may turn out to be a pathway to reform. This is a task that is too critical to be left to the Islamists alone.

Source: Ezzat, background paper for the Report.

What feminists must understand is that this comprehensive ideology contains within itself the potential for justice and freedom. Such a dialogue cannot take place until the circumstances in which the broad public debate is taking place evolve since the Arab world today does not possess a clear vision for its survival and continuation as a nation, let alone for a renaissance. How then can we expect it to attain a unanimous consensus or even a general agreement on women's issues? This is the real problem.

Islamic movements must use this approach not to understand the past and present but to formulate a better future. If a call like that of the Brotherhood were to bring women into the public, civil and political sphere under a system that believes in democratic action, the face of the Arab nation as it is today would change. Its nationalist currents would be closer to, and more capable of a discussion of the real issues of absolutism, social violence, economic decline and the consumerism that devours people's future while playing with their dreams. What would have happened, for example, if the Brotherhood had put their female leaders onto their election lists from the time that they began participating in parliamentary elections in Egypt in the mid-1980s, or what would have happened if the "re-considerations" by al-Jihad and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya had begun at the beginning, and not the end, of the 1990s and included their position on women and not just their position on violence?

The connection between the reawakening of religious consciousness on the one hand and the future of democracy and of the Arab woman on the other needs to be made absolutely clear. Escape from the constraints of the "Islamic-secular" dichotomy is the key not just to beginning the process of liberating women from inside the Islamist vision. It is also a way for Islamists to escape from the narrow theoretical and applied constructs of the savage beast of secularism and to deal with their fears of westernisation. It would enable them to

*The challenge before the Islamist's vision of women is how to develop an Islamic alternative that can... advance women's position forcefully in discourse and practice not as a result of, but as one of the conditions for, building the Islamic society that they desire.*

*For many Arab countries, the issue of women's political rights became a type of democratic façade*

transcend their embattled and split vision of society and see that the opposite of their core concept of the Islamic state (ruled by men with or without the participation of women) is not necessarily a heretical, secular state out to put an end to Islam. In adopting this view, the Islamists take shelter behind a traditional and largely local cultural legacy without renewing it out of fear of the annihilation of their culture and civilisation. In reality, the alternatives are much broader than that.

Attention should focus on this critical historical moment in the transformation of the concept of the state and the reality of its power. Its influence on conceptions of authority must be studied. So, too, should the political space in terms of content, form, contexts and concepts. The intellectual and jurisprudential system must be reorganised in such a way that sovereignty (*wilaya*) means quite simply citizenship and that women are no longer a "problem" but partners in the formulation and manufacture of the entire "thesis".

## **THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT OF THE SITUATIONS OF ARAB WOMEN**

### *EXTERNAL PRESSURE FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN ARAB COUNTRIES*

*Western pressure on the Arab States with respect to women does not come out of a vacuum but is a part of the prevalent culture of the country exerting the pressure.*

The international agenda has witnessed fundamental changes since the beginning of the 1990s, with the increased importance of issues such as human rights, women's and minority rights, and democratic change. These issues received even greater attention, especially in the Arab world, after the events of 11 September 2001, when a perceptible concentration of interest in women appeared.

One of the consequences of 9-11 was that the Arab world came to be viewed as an incubator of fundamentalism and a seedbed of terrorism owing to uncontainable tensions in its conservative traditional social structure. The focus shifted to the cultural factor, with the goal of envisioning different societies that would embrace alternative values and new ideologies. At the heart of these values lay such issues as

minority rights, democracy, expanding the base of political participation and the involvement of women in the development process. It was in this context that what are now known as "reform issues" began to take shape.

For many Arab countries, the issue of women's political rights became a type of democratic façade. Women offered an easily manipulated symbol for countries that wanted to escape political criticism of their undemocratic conditions at a time when human rights reports and reports on women's affairs were pressing for change.

Western pressure on the Arab States with respect to women does not come out of a vacuum but is a part of the prevalent culture of the country exerting the pressure. As a result, it is laden with many preconceptions about the condition of Arab women. Such pressure is not grounded in past struggles of Arab women. It is often ignorant of their achievements, whether in the framework of civic activities that preceded NGOs or those of national and pan-Arab movements.

If Western criticism of the condition of the Arab woman from the academic, feminist and even political standpoints is sometimes based on fact, it does not occur in a pure form but is often mixed with concepts and ideas circulating in the West about women's liberation. These in turn are linked to developed market economies and the fragmentation of society. They can also include Orientalist concepts characterised by the demonisation of Arab men and an almost theatrical crusade to free women, in body and spirit, from their domination.

The new wave of Western interest in advancing the position of women has led donors to support projects solely because a visible women's or feminist institution puts them forward or to support any projects to strengthen the status of women that seem topical. No proper studies carried out to measure the effect of these projects on the status of Arab women in their society, in the family or in relation to the State. Nonetheless, the Western trend in general is to provide support to women in the public arena who speak on behalf of women's issues demanding appointments in the administration and membership in parliament.

Women's empowerment projects sponsored by Western organisations and support funds do not threaten any political system. They convert a major issue into a group of small projects with which any non-democratic system can live. In the most extreme cases, they create a type of tension between the Islamist and conservative movements and the dominant system. The system welcomes this tension, if it is contained, because it helps its image internationally and at the same time results in a compromise domestic solution that does not threaten it.

Western pressure and the ready accommodation of it in some Arab countries are particularly clear with respect to the representation of women in the political framework, such as parliament and the cabinet. Of course, the representation of women in parliament (or men, for that matter) falls short if there is no truly democratic representation of citizens as whole.

While the general trend in the Arab world towards empowering women through new legislation is to be welcomed, the crucial factor is not the issuing of laws but their enforcement on the ground.

It is clear that in this era, it is no longer possible or necessary to pass through all the

stages of social transformation; the granting of voting rights to women cannot wait until local conditions are ripe. However, the opposite course should be resisted, i.e., to believe that democracy is merely universal suffrage and that women's equality with men means granting positions to women or simply having them in office. These are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the pursuit of equality. Indeed, they are not nearly enough; on the contrary, they become separated from equality and democracy if undertaken as well-intentioned initiatives to appease a foreign power through the appointment of women from the existing social elite as window dressing for the regime, (Bishara, background paper for the Report).

#### THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS

International organisations operate on many levels in many spheres at the same time. Though each has its own field of specialisation, each tries to approach the subject of empowering women from a holistic angle, i.e., through the concept of sustainable development and, subsequently, through a concentration on good governance.

*The representation of women in parliament (or men, for that matter) falls short if there is no truly democratic representation of citizens.*

#### Luminary: Dr. Hala Salaam Maksoud

Hala Maksoud was celebrated as one of the most important leaders of the Arab-American diaspora in the United States from the mid-1970s until her death in 2002.

In 1980, Maksoud, in collaboration with former senator James Abu Rezk, founded the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, which she headed from 1996 until her resignation for reasons of ill health in 2001.

During her tenure, she was able to expand the activities of this important institution, founding 80 branches and seeing membership rise to 20,000. She also created strong networks with a number of American civil society organisations, thus strengthening the role of the Committee, which came to the fore on the American and international stage as one of the largest and most important Arab-American non-governmental organisations in the United States.

In 1982, Maksoud led a sit-in in front of the White House in protest at the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, mobilising American public opinion and confirming her role in American public affairs.

Hala Maksoud possessed a talent for communicating with different types and groups of

people and a capacity for persuasion and for the building of outstanding personal relationships. She devoted most of her time to working for Arab causes in the American arena through her lectures and articles and by participating in conferences and seminars on television and radio, whereby she focused on eliminating negative stereotypes of Arab women.

In addition to these activities, Hala Maksoud was permanent secretary of the American Committee on Jerusalem, treasurer of the Committee for the Preservation of Palestine Heritage, president of the Association of Arab-American University Graduates, and founder and president of the Arab Women's Council.

In 2002, she was awarded the Achievement Prize of the American Immigration Law Foundation in recognition for her overall achievement.

Lebanese by birth, Maksoud obtained American nationality and married the Lebanese Arab thinker, Clovis Maksoud. She had a doctorate in political theory from Georgetown University. Some months before her death, she was preparing to publish a book on "The Islamic Content of Arab Nationalist Thought".

*Leila Sharaf*

*The granting of voting rights to women cannot wait till local conditions are ripe.*

### The Role of United Nations Agencies and Regional Organisations in Supporting the Empowerment of Women

A brief overview of the work of some of these organisations is highlighted below:

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) represents the UN's global development network, which seeks to assist countries in achieving the Millennium Development Goals and in meeting the challenges of democratic governance, poverty reduction, crisis prevention and recovery, energy and environment and HIV/AIDS. UNDP works to ensure that the empowerment of women and human rights are mainstreamed into all of the organisation's programmes; the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), seeks to promote economic and social development among its 13 member states and has played an extensive coordinating role since the Beijing and Beijing + 10 conferences; the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), is dedicated to advancing women's empowerment and gender equality to meet challenges that include feminised poverty, the spread of HIV/AIDS among women and violence against women while supporting a number of Arab countries in the translation of the Beijing programmes, strategies and plans; the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), advocates children's rights particularly those related to health, education, equality and protection and is committed to "levelling the playing field for girls"; the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, which has concentrated its strategy on a human rights-based approach to development also aims to promote gender equality in the enjoyment of these human rights; the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), which has given priority to gender mainstreaming and the importance of improving conditions of rural women and to promoting opportunities for rural economic growth, given that women constitute a high proportion of the agricultural labour force,

especially in the informal sector; the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), which has concentrated its efforts and its resources on improving women's reproductive health and making motherhood safer through the promotion of gender equality and legal and policy reforms; the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), which has given priority to assuring the quality and effectiveness of education for young women and mainstreaming gender issues in the areas of education, the sciences, communication and culture; and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which has concentrated on increasing women's participation in environmental protection.

Some Arab funds and funding institutions are also active in the area of women's empowerment. These include the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD) that supports the economic and social development of Arab countries through financing development projects, encouraging private and public investment in Arab projects and providing technical assistance services; the Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organisations (AGFUND), whose initiative to fund projects aimed at the advancement of Arab mothers in the areas of health and education was launched in the 1980s and which collaborated with UNDP and the Government of Tunisia in the establishment of the Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR) in Tunis in 1993. CAWTAR aims to help forge a new perspective on the Arab woman and to change traditional views of the roles of the sexes in social development through raising the level of awareness among policy-makers, planners, interested and involved groups, and ordinary people about the current situation of Arab women and their actual and potential contribution to comprehensive and sustainable development.

*Some Arab funds and funding institutions are also active in the area of women's empowerment.*

The Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 constituted a critical turning point by giving international, Arab and local action a significant impetus towards the improvement of the conditions of women in Arab countries. Subsequent international financial contributions were channelled within the framework of the follow-up on the implementation of the Beijing Programme for Action. In this same context, the 2000 and 2005 New York conferences (Beijing + 5 and Beijing + 10) were convened to monitor results and renew momentum. Emphasis was also placed on following up on the implementation of the

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (UNIFEM, in Arabic, 2005).

Inter-Arab action and an initiative on the part of ESCWA, UNIFEM, the Arab League and CAWTAR to draw up an Arab Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women to 2005 accompanied the preparations for the Beijing Conference.

This plan outlined nine strategic objectives for Arab women derived from critical areas of concern: safeguarding the right of Arab women to participate in power structures and decision-making mechanisms; poverty alleviation for

Arab women; assuring equal access to all levels of education; assuring equal access to health services; promoting Arab women's economic self-reliance and capacity to enter the labour market; overcoming the effects of war, occupation and armed conflict on Arab women; elimination of violence against women; participation of women in managing natural resources and safeguarding the environment; and the effective use of communications media to bring about changes in roles in society and promote equality between men and women. In order to implement the Arab Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2005, governments and regional and international organisations as well as financial institutions and funds agreed to join together to make the necessary financial arrangements. Budgetary resources were allocated and priority was accorded to supporting NGOs working in the field of the rise of Arab women.

The Arab Plan of Action accorded special attention to the institutional aspect. It urged that programmes and activities organised by the Commission on the Status of Women of the United Nations, the Department of Women's Affairs in the General Secretariat of Arab States and the other relevant international and regional organisations and institutions should be coordinated. It also stated that an official mechanism concerned with women's issues should be established and directly linked to the highest executive authority, with its own budget sufficient for the implementation of the programmes and projects for the advancement of women contained in the national plans and strategies of each Arab country. In 1996, the Arab plans of action were translated into a Unified Arab Programme for Action that focused on three priorities, namely, poverty, the family and women's political participation.

ESCWA and the Arab League directly monitored the phases of implementation of the Arab Plan of Action and the Unified Arab Work Programme as well as the Beijing Programme for Action by continuing contact with all the Arab countries at both the official government and private and research levels. UNDP, UNFPA and UNIFEM took part directly in these efforts along with the League of Arab States and CAWTAR.

In July 2004, the Arab States approved the Arab Women's Beirut Declaration, which establishes a framework and outline for the empowerment of women in the coming decade (2005-2015), i.e., following the ten-year review of the Beijing Conference.

## KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

### 1- ESTABLISHMENT OF MECHANISMS TO EMPOWER WOMEN

Support, including technical and educational support, has been provided to establish national mechanisms for women's affairs in several Arab States. In Algeria, a ministry was created to deal with the family and women's issues. In Bahrain, the Supreme Council for Women was established (2001). A ministry for women's issues and advancement was created in the Comoros and a commission for women's advancement in Djibouti (1999). The National Women's Assembly was established in Egypt (2000). Women were empowered in the Ministry of Social Affairs in Jordan and, it may be pointed out, Jordan was the first Arab State to establish a National Commission for Women (1992). The National Committee for Lebanese Women's Affairs was formed (1998) and a ministry for women and to safeguard the family was established in Morocco (2002). A general directorate for women and several government training centres for women, in addition to gender units in the relevant ministries, were established in Oman. The Ministry of Women's Affairs was established in the occupied Palestinian territory (2003). The Supreme Council for Family Affairs was established in Qatar and deals with women's affairs through its Women's Committee (1998). The National Council for Women was created in Syria (1995) and Yemen's Women National Committee, which was created in 2003.

*The era following the Beijing Conference has been distinguished by increased international efforts in the Arab region for the advancement of women.*

## *2- APPEARANCE OF ARAB INSTITUTIONS AND MECHANISMS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN*

The era following the Beijing Conference has been distinguished by increased international efforts in the Arab region for the advancement of women. International and regional organisations have played a major role in coordinating and providing links between Arab countries on the official, private and civic levels through workshops, numerous Arab regional conferences, joint research and studies and in preparing strategies for the rise of Arab women.

## *3- INTERVENTION, NETWORKING AND COORDINATION*

As noted, international organisations favour a holistic approach to women's issues, irrespective of their individual specialisation in line with the overarching concepts of sustainable development and good governance. Working with Arab governments poses special challenges because of the sensitivity of some women's issues and the lack of coordination between public departments on the one hand and poor cooperation between governments and NGOs on the other. Arab government departments, for the most part, also lack up-to-date management and communication tools and technology.

## *4- COOPERATION WITH GOVERNMENTS AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS*

In their dealings with Arab countries, the international organisations took an established policy approach based on cooperation with both governments, NGOs and all civil society organisations. Most programmes and activities were based on three-way participation. The general goal was to induce governments and NGOs to work together. Many difficulties that had traditionally hindered such cooperation were addressed and sometimes surmounted by working to reduce fears on both sides. These partnerships in turn allowed for the

accumulation of significant efforts and the attempts to harness them towards the advancement of women. International organisations relied on a dual mechanism: to ask the governments and, on a separate track, the NGOs to prepare progress reports on a specific specialisation or a subject connected to an upcoming international conference. The governments prepared a national report while the CSOs prepared a shadow report. This dual approach allowed the international organisations to maintain a critical sense in writing reports on conditions and achievements, permitting an objective appraisal of actual progress, and of obstacles and gaps (Kiwan, background paper for the Report).

*Working with Arab governments poses special challenges because of the sensitivity of some women's issues.*