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978-0-521-26992-6 - Womanpower: The Arab Debate on Women at Work

Nadia Hijab

Excerpt

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## Introduction

We must stop considering ourselves part of the world's folklore.

*Lutfia al-Gabaili, Libyan editor*

In the 1970s, Arab governments began to talk more frequently and more eloquently about the 'need to integrate women in development'. Specialised departments were created, plans debated and women recruited. That was followed, in the 1980s, by a veritable eruption of interest at the popular level, reflected in the dozens of conferences and seminars held in the region and abroad on Arab women and their role in society.

This Arab awakening was part of a worldwide process that gained momentum when the United Nations declared 1975 International Women's Year. Indeed, two Arab countries, Egypt and Tunisia, were among the seven countries that introduced the resolution at the UN for a year to highlight women's issues. The Year became a Decade, its aim to achieve equality for women, and development and peace for the world by 1985.

### The UN Decade for Women

It could not be said, by 1985, that the aims of the Decade had been achieved, in the Arab world or anywhere else. This was admitted in the documents presented during the End-of-Decade conference in Nairobi in 1985. In spite of some progress, the UN described the overall achievement as 'modest' (UN, 1985d, p.22). It identified the obstacles that continued to block the advancement of women around the world as: deeply rooted traditions; poor understanding of the significance of women's issues; and lack of financial resources to reform the position of women (UN, 1984b, pp.21–2). It felt that world governments still lacked the political will to change the conditions which made women second-class citizens.

Clearly, it is premature for the world to pat itself on the back in the matter of human rights for women. Still, the impact of the UN Decade in the Arab world and elsewhere should not be ignored. Perhaps its major achievement was to raise awareness at the national and international levels of the

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handicaps that women still faced on account of their sex. Governments did begin to take concrete steps to remedy the situation as a result.

This was revealed in a UN questionnaire that was sent to member states to find out whether their national development policies took women into account. Of the 92 governments that replied by 15 October 1984, 71.7 per cent said they did include specific planning for women in their national development plans – and 67.4 per cent had done so in response to the UN Decade (UN, 1984b, p.4). Furthermore, several governments had set up departments of women's affairs, to handle the integration of women in development during the Decade. Of 96 countries that had done so, 44 had established bodies between 1975 and 1985.

Of course, the efficiency of the newly created departments and ministries depended on the commitment of the governments concerned. Some simply wanted to be seen to be doing something; others wanted to look 'modern', since the status of women seemed to have become the major indicator of a country's modernity. The UN found that the work of national departments had not, in many countries, been extended to regional and local levels. A closer look at the national development plans showed that women were still seen as passive participants and consumers needing social welfare, rather than as a constituency of development that had long been denied the opportunity to develop its full potential (UN, 1984b, p.19).

In an interesting exercise, the UN undertook an examination of its own system to find out to what extent it practised what it preached. An in-house survey was conducted on the position of women working at the UN (UN, 1985a, p.6). It was found that, although UN policy makers were more aware of the need to integrate women in the system, the actual number of women employed by the UN at higher levels remained dismally low.

### **The Arab world and the UN Decade**

This brief background shows that the position of women in the Arab world is not unique. Women around the world are still considered to be an underprivileged group and many of the obstacles they face are the same: deeply rooted traditions, lack of finance to improve conditions, lack of political will to change the situation. This is why, in 1985, the UN conference at Nairobi adopted further strategies to achieve the aims of equality, development and peace, and extended the time limit to the year 2000.

In the period leading up to the adoption of the new strategies at Nairobi, the situation of women was reviewed in each UN region. For an indication of how Arab governments viewed the situation in their region by the mid-1980s, it is instructive to look at the recommendations of the UN's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, which groups 13 Arab

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countries: Bahrain, Democratic Yemen, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates and the Yemen Republic (UN, 1985b). The ESCWA recommendations reveal, perhaps unintentionally, some of the reasons why women in the Arab world have not yet achieved the elusive goal of equality and why their involvement in the modern work sector is as yet limited.

There were two striking things about the approach of the Arab region as compared to that of the other regions – Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. First, the ESCWA report started with a cultural definition of the region that none of the other regions had felt necessary: ‘The Strategy for Arab Women in Western Asia to the Year 2000 is based on the heritage of Arab–Islamic civilization and the religious and spiritual values of this region, the cradle of the messages of God which affirm the dignity and freedom of all human beings in this universe’ (p.40).

This statement was a clear indication of the Arab attachment to a shared heritage; but the fact that it was felt necessary to assert this so categorically indicated an uneasy awareness that this ideal was under threat. Moreover, the statement immediately defined the framework for any discussion of women in the Arab world today: such a discussion had to fall within the framework of ‘the heritage of the Arab–Islamic civilization’, a phrase we shall come across again and again in the course of this book.

The second most striking thing about the ESCWA recommendations was the dedication of a whole section to the family. Other regions mentioned the family, but not to the extent that ESCWA did. The ESCWA report underlined that ‘Constitutions, charters, and legislation in the region have asserted the role of the family as the nucleus of social organization in Arab societies. It is necessary, therefore, to make available to the family the economic, social, cultural and psychological conditions that would ensure its stability and satisfy its needs’ (p.46).

The Arab family, then, was at the core of Arab society, and there was a clear determination to preserve it, but not, in theory at least, at the expense of women’s role in society. This section of the ESCWA recommendations supported ‘the right of women to choose their roles in and out of the family’ and considered ‘family responsibilities as developmental activities’ (p.46). A paragraph in another section, however, accorded ‘priority to the work of women who devote their time to family and home affairs and hence ensure the continuity of generations, the cultivation of values and the transmittal of knowledge and expertise from one generation to another’ (p.43). This indicated that there might, in reality, be a difference between theory and practice.

In the other sections of the ESCWA report, the approach was similar to that of other regions. The recommendations emphasised the need to ensure women’s ‘participation in decision making . . . and in the benefits produced

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by development' (p.41). It proposed reviewing labour laws and taking the necessary measures to provide women with guidance on their rights. The recommendations on education proposed the review of 'school curricula, teaching methods and textbooks to provide boys and girls with a common culture . . . This review should also be directed towards correcting the traditional stereotyped image of women' (p.44). The recommendations on the role of the media urged the development of 'an alternative image of women that stresses the productive aspects of women's work instead of women's consumption activities' (p.46).

Thus, there was a clear awareness at the regional level of what remained to be done for women. In some instances, the thinking behind the ESCWA report seemed to be quite revolutionary. However, while the recommendations were laudable, the actual extent to which they could be implemented was in fact circumscribed by the cultural framework that had been drawn up at the start.

### **The Convention's rocky road**

The difference between government theory and practice is also sharply illustrated through a look at another Decade activity, the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. This was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 18 December 1979; it entered into force on 3 September 1981 when 20 countries ratified it. The 30-article convention sets out the internationally accepted principles on equal rights for women. It becomes legally binding on the states that sign it, although they can attach reservations to certain articles they do not intend to abide by.

Of the Arab states, Egypt had ratified the Convention by 13 June 1985, Democratic Yemen had acceded to it, and Tunisia and Jordan had signed it. As for reservations, Democratic Yemen, for instance, said it would not be bound by the article 'relating to the settlement of disputes which may arise concerning the application or interpretation of the Convention' (UN, 1985g, p.7).

Egypt had more serious reservations. It took exception to 'article 9, paragraph 2, concerning the granting of women of equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children' (p.7). The Egyptian statement explained, 'It is clear that the child's acquisition of his father's nationality is the procedure most suitable for the child and that this does not infringe upon the principle of equality between men and women, since it is the custom for a woman to agree, on marrying an alien, that her children shall be of the father's nationality' (p.7).

Another serious reservation was to article 16, 'concerning the equality of men and women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations

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during marriage and upon its dissolution. This must be without prejudice to the Islamic Sharia provisions whereby women are accorded rights equivalent to those of their spouses so as to ensure a just balance between them. This is out of respect for the sanctity deriving from firm religious beliefs which govern marital relations in Egypt and which may not be called in question' (p.7). The Egyptian statement explained that, because the husband was obliged to support the wife financially and to make payment in case of divorce, whereas the wife had no such obligation, 'the Sharia therefore restricts the wife's rights to divorce by making it contingent on a judge's ruling, whereas no such restriction is laid down in the case of the husband' (p.7).

Thus, it can be seen that, on the one hand, women were entitled to full equality with men since Egypt had ratified the Convention. On the other hand, when it came to the detailed application of the Convention, the women's rights were restricted on grounds that no one 'may call in question'. The cultural framework described above meant that Arab women could be equal outside the home but not within it.

The Arab states were not unique in their approach to the Convention. Some world governments did not sign at all, and many others took their time about signing and attached detailed reservations once they had signed. By 13 June 1985, neither the US nor the UK, which had signed the Convention, had yet ratified it. When the UK eventually ratified it, it did so with several pages of reservations, a move criticised by British women's groups that had hoped for unconditional ratification.

Some states which signed the Convention attached so many reservations that they made a nonsense of the whole exercise, and were taken to task by other countries. For example, three signatory countries, Bangladesh (a non-Arab Muslim country), and Jamaica and Mauritius (both non-Arab and non-Muslim countries) attached such comprehensive reservations to the Convention that Mexico took it upon itself to protest. 'These reservations', the Mexican government declared, 'if implemented, would inevitably result in discrimination against women by reason of their sex, contrary to the entire intent of the Convention' (p.13).

**Change at the grassroots level**

The ambivalence of world governments on the question of the human rights of women, as outlined above, would probably have held up progress indefinitely, had it not been for the activism of women at the grassroots level. The development of the political will for change at this level was apparent during the meetings of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that took place alongside the official UN conferences during the Decade. It was at the NGO meetings that the most interesting debates on women's

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issues were conducted. Indeed, it was initially as a result of NGO lobbying that the UN conferences were held at all.

The NGO meetings were open to all, and were organised so that anyone could hold a workshop on any topic that concerned them. Some 14,000 women from all over the world converged on Nairobi to attend the NGO meeting Forum 85 – about 5,000 more than at the mid-Decade conference in Copenhagen in 1980, and 9,000 more than at the start of the Decade conference in Mexico in 1975. They participated in or organised workshops on law, society, religion, health, education, work, politics and many other subjects.

More women from the Third World participated in the Nairobi Forum than previously, and there was a noticeably active and energetic Arab representation. Some of the world's women taking part in the Forum were 'hardline' feminists or Marxists; thousands were not. They simply shared a determination to change the status quo on their roles as women, which made even the political conservatives among them social radicals. Thus, they could be said to pose as much of a challenge to the political and economic establishment worldwide as, say, communism poses to capitalism, and vice versa.

Perhaps the most striking thing about Forum 85 was the extent to which an understanding had grown up between women from the First (the Western bloc), the Second (the Eastern bloc) and the Third (the 'developing' nations) Worlds. There seemed to be a clearer understanding in the West that the problems women faced because of their sex could not be isolated from the problems they faced as a result of military occupation, apartheid or famine. At the same time, there was a stronger feeling in the Third World that women should not wait for a solution to political and economic problems to achieve their human rights.

Those taking part in the Forum could not help being carried away by the sheer energy and creativity expressed; it was difficult to imagine that the impetus of the Decade would not carry women forward. But there was some pessimism as well. The feeling that women now had 'enough rights' was, according to some participants, being expressed more frequently in government circles. Projects to integrate women in development were beginning to be seen as a pretext to raise funding from international agencies. There were fears that the rest of the century might see a backlash that would reverse the advances made in the position of women around the world.

### **Tough times ahead**

In the Arab world, there is no doubt that the process of 'integrating women in development' – the catchphrase of the 1970s and 1980s – has produced

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mixed results. Arab women's involvement in the modern work sector remains limited and their entitlement to equality under the law remains ambivalent. Naturally, the reasons are complex, and will be elaborated during the course of this book. The first major reason is that the debate on women's role in society is taking place within the framework of the 'Arab-Islamic heritage'. As was noted earlier, this has resulted in a somewhat schizophrenic approach, which both encourages women to join in the process of development as equal partners and holds them back in their place as secondary actors within the family context. This dilemma will take time to resolve, because the debate on the role of women in society is caught up in the larger debate on the role of religion in society. Men and women from all walks of life are taking part in this intense debate, which will be covered in chapters 1 and 2.

The second major reason is that the process of development itself has been a poorly defined and ill-executed venture in the Arab world, as in other parts of the Third World. The efforts of the Arab nation states to produce and distribute wealth, health and education have not been particularly successful, partly because of inexperience, and partly because of apathy, since the majority of the people have been excluded from the decision-making process. Thus, those who argue that the opportunity for education and work in the modern sector will of itself liberate women's capacities ignore the fact that the capacity of Arab society as a whole is largely unliberated. Having started out in second place, women have further to go to catch up, but fewer opportunities to do so.

The partial successes and the failures of Arab development since independence will be examined in chapters 3, 4 and 5. Here, it will be argued that it is not enough to blame 'the Arab-Islamic heritage' for the fact that women's involvement in the modern sector has been limited. Other factors must also be taken into account in examining how far women have been integrated in the development process: economic need, opportunities for women in the workforce, and their ability to carry out the task. Chapter 3 will give an overview of Arab women at work; chapters 4 and 5 will further clarify the point by focussing on Jordan and the Gulf states as case studies.

What power do Arab women have at their disposal to bring about appropriate change and to achieve equality? This is the focus of chapter 6, for, as was noted in a UN document presented at Nairobi, 'success will depend in large measure upon whether or not women can unite to help each other to change their poor material circumstances and secondary status and to obtain the time, energy and experience required to participate in political life' (UN, 1985d, p.21).

To sum up, this book seeks to explain why Arab women are not yet fully involved in the modern sector by showing how the question of the role of

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women in society is inextricably linked to the issue of the role of religion in society, and how both are tied up with the quest for national political and economic independence and development. The Arab world is caught up in the struggle to solve all of these major questions at one and the same time. If the Arabs are to survive as a cultural group and to develop independent political and economic unity, they must solve these questions quickly, although this means achieving within decades what other societies have taken centuries to accomplish. The task is so enormous that, at times, the goal seems to be out of reach.



**Chapter 1****The great family law debate**

The problem of women in the Arab world is that we don't know our legal rights – and that's very dangerous. If you don't know your rights you can't protect yourself. One reason why women don't know their rights is because they have not participated in the process of making law or enacting legislation.

*Badriya al-Awadhi, Kuwaiti lawyer*

Rarely a day went by, in the 1970s and 1980s, when an Arab newspaper or magazine appeared without an article on a 'first Arab woman' who had successfully entered a new field. Sample headlines ran like this: 'The first woman broadcaster in Qatar' (who joined the staff in the early days of Qatar radio in 1970, and who soon became head of section); 'The youngest deputy in the Tunisian parliament' (who was elected in the early 1980s); 'The first Kuwaiti woman publisher' (who began publishing political, general interest and sports magazines in 1970); 'The first Jordanian woman pilot' (who was reportedly the first woman in the world to pilot a Tristar); 'The first Sudanese woman marine biologist'; 'The first Egyptian woman film director'; 'The first Arab woman earth satellite station manager'.

The pride and respect with which these Arab women were welcomed into the professional world was not restricted to the press. Any amazement that greeted their success was more likely to be expressed by non-Arabs than by Arabs. As the Jordanian pilot, Taghreed Akashah, said, her Arab colleagues 'simply accepted me as one of them. In fact, I am much more likely to hear comments from the German or American pilots working for [the Jordanian airline] than from the Arab personnel' (TME, 1980, p.50).

The ease with which Arab women enter the professions, often climbing to the top of the ladder, is partly due to the respect that they carry with them from the private domain of the family to the public domain of work for wages. Of course, the professions are the most problem-free area for working women worldwide, as their colleagues are more likely to be well-educated and liberal in outlook. In addition, the number of women involved in the modern sector is still small in the Arab world, so that they are not yet much of a threat to those already in place. Nevertheless, the traditional

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respect that Arab women enjoy in society should not be under-estimated, and it has practical value in that it is respect not only for a woman's person but also for her ability to do the job.

Indeed, when it comes to Arab society, it is important not to interpret the lower profile women still have in the public sphere as meaning that they lack respect and power. This was noted by the sociologist Nadia Haggag Youssef, who defined 'women's status' as having two different components:

the *rights* given to women and the *respect* given to them. Confusion ensues because the two distinct factors are erroneously used interchangeably, when in reality they are often inversely correlated. Thus, women receive great respect in certain societies that give them few rights; they receive equality of rights in societies in which they compete with men but have relatively low respect. (1978, p.76)

Interestingly, the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi arrived at a somewhat similar conclusion, although by different means, in her book *Beyond the Veil*. Mernissi wrote,

At a deeper level than laws and official policy, the Muslim social order views the female as a potent aggressive individual whose power can, if not tamed and curbed, corrode the social order. It is very likely that in the long run, such a view will facilitate women's integration into the networks of decision-making and power. One of the main obstacles Western women have been dealing with is their society's view of women as passive inferior beings. (1981, p.108)

**A slow pace of change**

While Arab women receive respect and encouragement when they are embarking on new careers, there is some resistance to this becoming a permanent feature of Arab society, partly because of the impact this would have on the family. Not only is the number of women involved in the modern sector small, but there is one piece of information that stands out in most of the writing on Arab women: the Arab region, often incorporated into the Middle East, or the Muslim world in the literature, appears to have the lowest women's labour force participation rates (economically active women over 15 as a percentage of all women over 15) of any region in the world.

For example, a report in 1980 estimated that

women's reported labor force participation rates in the 1970s are highest in Africa (45.8) and Asia (42.9) and lowest in the Middle East (11.4) with Latin America (26.8) falling midway between. All regions have experienced a rise in the rates of labor force participation since the 1960s with the largest proportionate increase being reported for the Middle East (53%). (ICRW, 1980, p.9)