

Fact Sheet 6: Women of the Middle East

"The human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. The full and equal participation of women in the political, civil, economic, social and cultural life, at the nation, regional and international levels, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex are priority objectives of the international community."

The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action Part I, Paragraph 18 UN Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, 14-25 June '93 (from the Arab Association for Human Rights website)

Background

At the beginning of the 21st century, citizens of western, democratic societies take the rights of women for granted.

While women around the globe enjoy the same rights as the male citizens of their societies, the UN, international organizations and local human rights NGO's are constantly pressuring the regimes in Arab states to improve the state of human rights, and women's rights in particular. According to UN data, women make up only 3.4% of the Arab parliaments, 13% in neighboring Israel and 11.4% in the rest of the world.

Iranian Maryam Namazie, the chairman of the International Federation of Iranian Refugees and Immigrants Council (IFIRIC), recently addressed this problem. "Burqua-clad and veiled women and girls, beheadings, stoning to death, floggings, child sexual abuse in the name of marriage and sexual apartheid are only the most brutal and visible aspects of women's rightlessness and third class citizen status in the Middle East." (Islam, Secularism and Women in the Middle East Conference, Middle East Centre for Women's Studies and Medusa, London, March 18, 2002)

Participation in Government

The lack of female participation is noticeable throughout Arab/Islamic states in the Middle East and Northern Africa. The difference is most marked when contrasted with Israel – the only democracy in the Middle East - that also has a sizeable Arab minority with democratic rights. In the last few years Israel has seen record numbers of women move into decision-making positions. Sixteen out of 120 members of the Knesset are women, including three ministers and two deputy ministers. Three women now serve as justices on the Supreme Court and 36 are district court judges. The State Attorney is also a woman. Golda Meir was Israel's fourth prime minister – and only the second female prime minister in the world. (The Advancement of the Status of Women, R. Werczberger, Research and Information Center, The Knesset, Israel, 2001)

Unfortunately, in the Arab world, women are still struggling to be acknowledged.

- ✧ Saudi Arabian Parliament Chairman Sheik Muhammed bin Ibrahim bin Jbeir has stated: "Appointing women as parliament members is out of the question. Nobody even thinks about it because the issues Parliament deals with are public matters under the responsibility of men." (*Al-Hayat*, London, October 25, 1999)
- ✧ And in the Jordanian Times, Senator Sheik Abd Al-Baki Gamo, was quoted saying: "Whether we like it or not, women in Islam are not equal to men in several aspects." (*The Jordanian Times*, November 30, 1999)

The Shari'a and the rights of Arab women

In most Arab countries, the Shari'a, or Islamic law, defines the rules of traditional social behaviour. Under this law, women are considered inferior to men, and are therefore discriminated against with regard to personal rights and freedoms. The Shari'a contains the rules by which a Muslim society is organized and governed. Muslims agree that the Qur'an is the basis of the Shari'a and that its specific provisions are to be observed.

Education

In Arab countries, 55% of the women can neither read nor write. (*The Arab Human Development Report*, UN Development Program, 2002, NY: UN, 2002)

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In Israel, however, there is no educational gap between Jewish men and women and only a slight gap among non-Jewish groups -- and this gap is rapidly closing. Women earn 57% of all academic degrees offered in Israel. And 46% of the State's doctoral students are women. In 2000, Israel's Parliament adopted an amendment to the Security Service Law, opening all military professions to women.

Where is the Gender Equity?

The Arab Human Development Report, published by Arab researchers from the UN Development Program, concluded that out of seven regions of the world, Arab countries had the lowest freedom score for women. (Arab Human Development Report 2002, NY:UN, 2002)

By ignoring gender-based violence or by granting lenient punishments to perpetrators of crimes against women, the state reinforces women's exclusion from the rights of citizenship. ("Women's Rights to Nationality", MACMAG Gender Linking and Information Project website, February 2003)

In March 2001, a Tanzim activist living in Bethlehem brutally raped a young Palestinian refugee. As part of an attempt by Tanzim and Fatah to keep the matter silent, the man agreed to marry the girl. However, he divorced her a week later and soon afterwards, she was murdered by her brothers for dishonouring her family. The activist was arrested and later released by Palestinian authorities. The scandal caused a local uproar and elicited Palestinian criticism. But the whole matter was carefully hidden from international scrutiny. (Rape, Murder and Obstruction of Justice Scandal in Bethlehem, Ref. # 3719/1, Office of Faisal Husseini, Orient House, Jerusalem, Incoming mail 0134/017, April 2, 2001)

Today, laws restricting women's rights remain in force in almost every Arab country:

- ✗ In Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Jordan, Morocco, Oman and Yemen, married women must have their husbands' written permission to travel abroad. (US State Department, Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1999)
- ✗ In Saudi Arabia's Shari'a court, the testimony of one man equals that of two women (Ibid)
- ✗ Morocco excuses the murder or injury of a wife who is caught in the act of committing adultery; yet women in the similar situation are severely punished for harming their husbands (Ibid)

In 1991, Israel enacted the Domestic Violence Prevention Law empowering family courts to use protective orders against violent spouses. And in 1998, Israel adopted the comprehensive Sexual Harassment Prevention Law that defines sexual harassment and makes it a cause of a civil suit against the perpetrator and his employer. (The Advancement of the Status of Women in Israel, R. Werczberger, Research and Information Center, The Knesset, Israel, 2001)

Conclusion

At the beginning of the 21st century there are still millions of women in the Arab Middle East who do not have the most fundamental human rights – the very values and expectations that are woven into the fabric of other modern societies, including Israel. These women deserve the rights that women in Western countries enjoy and take for granted. The exploitation must stop and women everywhere must have the opportunity to live freely and safely. Freedom is the first step away from desperation. And once desperation is gone, there is hope in the possibilities of the future.

The Prism Group is a non-governmental organization, founded in 2002 to help clarify issues dealing with the Middle East. The Prism Group is dedicated to presenting a spectrum of viewpoints, promoting a better understanding of the political and social realities in the region.