

## Women in the Arab World

The Book *Women in the Arab World*\* is an important reference on the position of Arab Women in different societies. It presents eight studies by women specialists from Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya-Arab Jamiyah, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Sudan. In this book, Arab women social scientists look at the state of research of women in their region and the way in which future research could be made more relevant to the concerns and needs of women in the region. The recommendations in the studies call for research to be undertaken by women specialists of the region themselves in a manner that reflects the complexities of social reality and the situation of women of different social categories. Research should serve to enhance knowledge of the situation of women and should have as one of its principal objectives the improvement of their status.

One of the chapters of the book is on «Survey of Research on Women in the Arab Gulf Region» by *Farida Allaghi* and *Aisha Almana*. The following is an excerpt of this chapter, noting that the Gulf region includes the following Arab countries: Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Oman. These countries share similar historical, cultural, social, religious, economic and political conditions.

### Research priorities and needs for the study of women in the Gulf

Different methods exist for establishing priorities to carry out research about Gulf women. To emphasize answers to questions that have been neglected is just one of these priorities. Many of the questions which come out of the studies are cited in regard to issues and

problems and constitute a list of researchable questions. This list does not constitute a definitive list of all research priorities and needs applicable to Gulf women. It should also be pointed out that each Gulf country must develop its own priorities as far as the ordering and content of the following specific priorities and needs are concerned:

— Studies reviewed reveal that conflict exists in the region about traditional role expectations and actual life experience. Research should explore how newly-educated and emancipated women in the region are at odds with their roles, and how people subsequently perceive women who deviate from their expected behaviour. Studies pertaining to the cultural restrictions upon women would pinpoint these restrictions and provide steps to overcome them and bring about positive change.

— Research should explore whether or not the rapid socio-economic changes which are sweeping the region have fundamentally affected the status of women in different geographical locations and social classes, especially with regard to the division of labour, decision-making power within the household, and increased choice opportunities.

— Research related to Gulf women and, in turn, the Arab world, must seek explanations about how a balance can be achieved between continuity of certain roles, values, and traditions that are considered 'good', and change of others which impede progress and improvement.

— Country profile studies should be directed to encourage and develop empirical assessment of the different roles of women in different geographical locations. These studies should also concentrate on the collection of demographic data on rural and bedouin women, which are still largely lacking. Such studies should help in designing action programmes through which women can actively participate in solving the problems of the family, community, and the nation.

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— The reviewed studies reveal a total lack of data and information about rural and bedouin women. Research should focus on such variables as the type of work performed by bedouin and rural women and men outside the household. Findings from this kind of research will indicate which tasks are performed by women in the agricultural sector and within the tribal communities. It also will show what kinds of skills women already have, allowing plans to be developed to build upon and refine the existing skills. These kinds of studies will also encourage planners to recognize the vital roles which rural women play in the agricultural sector and the bedouin women perform in the tribes.

— Research pertaining to infrastructure building (roads, water, electricity, health, education) should go hand-in-hand with projects pertaining to women, especially in the remote rural and nomadic areas. Other researchers in other parts of the world have shown that if this does not happen, any effort directed towards women, without the supporting infrastructure, will be doomed to failure.

— Research related to Gulf women should explain regularities, variations and interdependence of social, psychological, cultural and demographic variables. It should also list the indicators chosen to describe the overall situation of all women in all social classes and geographical locations.

— Research should focus on the felt needs of women themselves. The projects designed to benefit women will be accepted if they address locally-perceived needs.

#### **Suggested solutions to major obstacles facing Gulf women**

Although more problems were discussed in the studies reviewed than solutions proposed, some researchers have suggested a few solutions. Perhaps some are superficial, reformist, or vague, but others are meaningful, radical and specific. Several studies have

emphasized the need for fighting illiteracy among women in the Gulf as a primary solution to the various problems they face. The BNSU\*\* study calls for co-education in order to overcome the psychological obstacles between the sexes. The only paper that proposes the introduction of women's studies in the educational system in the Gulf was by BNSU. The paper states that 'women's studies will teach both females and male students about the real potentials of women and help correct wrong and stereotyped ideas about women's primary roles and responsibilities'. *Altagheb* suggests that educational policies should be planned to encourage more women to join scientific and vocational fields and not continue to be concentrated in the fields of humanities and social sciences. *Al-Rimehi* states very specifically that 'education for both sexes is the major solution for providing better life for the Gulf individual'. *Shilling* indicates that programmes to alter women's self-image, expand their options, and motivate them to improve themselves can help overcome the obstacles faced by Kuwaiti women.

*Al-Rimehi* and *Taki* both indicate that women in the Gulf must consider their liberation as a national liberation. If the obstacles that women face should ever be solved, their problems should not be dealt with in isolation from all sources of exploitation that dominate the Gulf region. *Musa*, *Al-Rimehi*, *Almana* and *Algadi* suggest the need for providing women with equal opportunities in the job market. *Musa* indicates that one major solution in overcoming the obstacles that women face in the job market is appointing them to different jobs according to their skills, educational backgrounds and capabilities and not according to their sex.

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(\*\*) The Bahraini National Student Union (BNSU) study, «Women in Bahrain and the Arabian Gulf».