

Reviewing The Decade For Women In Arab Countries

The Decade 1975 - 1985 has been in the Arab World a period of tension and turmoil, following the 1967 disaster and the 1973 war. While a few Arab countries, like Egypt and Jordan, tried more or less successfully to remedy the devastating sequels of those events, other countries, like Syria, Libya, Yemen, reacted with violent upheavals which had their impact on the movement of women's liberation, started in the early part of the century.

Political revolutions, as factors of revolts against the past, may favor radical change in woman's status. In the Algerian war of liberation, in the Palestinian Liberation Organization, in the revolutionary Democratic Republic of Yemen, women shared with men the resistance operations and the struggle for independence. Yet those militant women complain that the Revolutions failed to satisfy their demands. Exception might be made regarding the Democratic Republic of Yemen where drastic changes in favor of women's status have recently occurred (See p. in this issue).

During this decade, some progress has been made in the field of women's political rights. In Jordan, Algeria and the Democratic Republic of Yemen, women have recently obtained the right to vote, while five other Arab countries had already enfranchised their women before the decade. In 1980, Jehan Sadat's intervention succeeded in raising the number of women to thirty in the Egyptian Parliament. In Algeria, the Parliament includes four women deputies. Several women have occupied ministerial positions in Egypt, Syria, Jordan and more recently in Tunisia and Algeria. Yet the contribution of politically active women to the feminist cause has been minimized by the fact that they belong to states dominated by one-party regimes. The right to vote has not been an effective tool in improving women's conditions, either because many of them do not put their right into practice or because their votes usually duplicate those of their male family members.

Education:

In the field of education, women have been

relatively successful, particularly on the higher level. The number of university women has steadily increased. In some countries, for example Kuwait, they out-number men (See **Al-Raida** No.23, p.10). But the rate of illiteracy among Arab women in general is still very high (around 80%), despite campaigns organized for the eradication of illiteracy in Kuwait and other progressive states.

They have also succeeded in entering all fields of employment including professions formerly monopolized by men in law, medicine, engineering, higher administrative work. Few of them however, occupy leadership positions. Their chances for promotion are highly limited.

Integration in development:

Women's general participation in development shows a noticeable rise between the years 1975 and 1980. From an average of 9%, the number of working women has risen to 25% in Lebanon, 20% in Democratic Republic of Yemen, 18% in Iraq, 15% in Jordan, 8.2% in Libya (**AL-Raida** No. 19, P. 14).

Women's Organizations:

Women's activity has doubled in the field of voluntary associations, welfare organizations and the like. Women's federations exist in almost all Arab countries. Women's societies have been active particularly in Egypt (Family Planning, Rural Pioneers), in Jordan (**Al-Raida** No. 8, p.10), in Bahrain where they enjoy the support of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (**Al-Raida** No. 20, p.10 and No.22, p.8).

Women's congresses and conferences succeeded in bringing together women from various Arab or foreign countries, as, for example, the International Congress of the General Federation for Iraqi Women in Baghdad, 1980; the Second Regional Conference of Women of the Gulf Countries, Kuwait 1981; the Arab Women's Conference in Amman, 1983. An important Seminar discussing the status of Arab women took place in Beirut, 1981, organized by the Center for Arab Unity Studies. Cooperation took a further international dimension when feminists from seven Arab countries contributed to the production of **Sisterhood is Global**, a book presenting the

status and demands of women in 70 countries.

As a result of cooperative work, studies about Arab women have multiplied: in Beirut (Institute for Women Studies in the Arab World), Cairo (Cairo University and Center for Women' Studies in Al-Azhar), Algeria (C.R.I.D.S.S.H), Iraq (Publications of the General Federation of Iraqi Women), Jordan (University of Jordan), Kuwait (Kuwait University, studies published in the **Journal of Social Sciences**).

Code for the Personal Status:

The claim for sexual equality in the code of the personal status has been the subject of serious studies in the Arab world. In Egypt, the claim was raised by leading figures like Dr. Muhammad Nuaihi of the American University in Cairo, Mrs. Amina El-Said, the well-known journalist and Dean of the Egyptian Journalists, (see **Al-Raida** No.29, pp.3 - 6), Dr. Nawal Saadawi, the renowned feminist

and author of several books on women's problems.

«We should remember» said the late Dr. Nuaihi in a lecture, «that laws regarding dealings between social groups are not fixed laws. They are side laws or branches that are subject to revision» (**Al-Raida** no.4, 1978). The following is an excerpt from a lecture by Amina El-Said: «The law giving a woman half of a man's share in inheritance, in return for his provision of her needs, was a gain at the time of its promulgation, but now it is a loss because reactionary forces are using that law as an excuse to lower the entire status of woman.» (**Al-Raida** No.10, 1979).

In Lebanon, the National Alliance of Lebanese Women presented on May 2, 1982, a document requiring the abolition of all forms of discrimination against women in legal rights.

The same call for abolition of sexism comes from Algeria and Morocco where women protest against

General Arab Women's Federation

The General Arab Women Federation was established on 12 December 1944, during the first meeting of women's delegates of the following Arab countries: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria.

Leading feminist of that time and president of the Union of Egyptian Women, **Huda Sha'rawi**^{*} was elected **its first president**.

On that first meeting the Union demanded women's economic independence and called for the creation of bureaus for the protection of mothers and children and implementation of social security in all Arab countries. It also demanded equal pay for men and women.

The **second meeting** of G.A.W.F. was held in Beirut in 1949, after the death of Ms. Sha'rawi. Lebanese feminist **Ibtihaj Kaddoura** was elected president and the Federation's headquarters moved to Beirut. In 1954 the **third meeting** of G.A.W.F.

called for the improvement of women's personal status laws. Final resolutions taken during this session demanded the abolition of polygamy, to give working women a fully paid maternity leave of six weeks and give widows the right of guardianship for their children after their husband's death. This meeting stressed the importance of rural women's role and asked for the creation of «cultural awareness» centers, health and social ones in rural areas as well as the distribution of government land to nonowner agriculturalists. The Federation also called for the improvement of the family's economic standard, the development of local crafts, the abolition of custom taxes between Arab countries, the implementation of compulsory education for all citizens and the recognition of the political rights of women. The **Fourth G.A.W.F. conference** was held in Syria in 1957. During this session Tunisia, Morocco and Sudan sent in delegates for the first time.

The Federation continued meeting regularly till 1975 during which women delegates from 12 Arab countries met in Iraq. In 1981, The permanent bureau of the G.A.W.F. met in Rabat, Morocco, to discuss the future of the Federation after the exclusion of Egypt from the Arab League. It was

* See **Al-Raida** No.5 P.2.

the discrepancy existing between the Constitution which stipulates for complete equality between the sexes and the applied law which refuse to recognize this equality (See elsewhere in this issue: «Le Droit et le Condition de la femme au Maroc»; also in No.26, p.3 of **Al-Raida**, «Sexual Equality, Constitution and Islamic Law in Algeria».

Conclusion:

- 1 – This brief survey gives us reason to believe that, if conditions permit, the forward march of Arab women will continue along the lines already followed.
- 2 – Considering the emphasis given by feminist leaders, in the more progressive countries, to the claim of sexual equality in the personal status laws, we may assume that it will not be long before this demand becomes a reality. Its realization will then be the key leading to the abolition of all other forms of discrimination,

namely in politics, in employment and in the labor code.

- 3 – We should remember, however, that progress and achievement require a peaceful atmosphere to insure their growth. In a region assaulted by the fever of violence and the mad rush for armament, torn up by internal dissensions, devastated by war, peace is an urgent need for reconstruction and for the implementation of decisions and laws already promulgated. Besides the destruction it has caused, war has greatly impeded women's liberation movement in Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Libya and other Arab countries. A larger proportion of refugees, illiterates and poor, are women. Violence against them is linked to the violence of war. The participation of Arab women in peace movements and conferences, locally or internationally, becomes an imperative task.

Rose Ghurayyib

decided to move the Federation's headquarters to Baghdad and **Manal Younes** president of the General Union of Iraqi Women was elected **General Secretary of G.A.W.F.**

A. Members:

- **The General Union of Jordanian Women.**
- **Union of United Arab Emirates Women.**
- **Democratic Union of Somali Women.**
- **General Union of Iraqi Women.**
- **Tunisian People's Women's Union.**
- **National Union of Moroccan Women.**
- **Union of Sudanese Women.**
- **Union of the Erithrean Woman.**
- **The Association of Mother and Child care in Bahrain.**
- **The Association of Omani Women.**
- **The Association of Yemeni Women.**
- **The Union of Lebanese Women.**
- **The Cultural Social Women's Association of Kuwait.**

B. G.A.W.F. Aims:

- Achieving Arab Unity and working towards the liberation of the occupied Arab territories.
- Informing world opinion on the status of Arab women and their role in their respective

societies.

- Working towards uniting the Arab Women's Movement on the international scene.
- Strengthening the spirit of cooperation between Arab women in the fields of social work, cultural activities, health prevention, family planning, child and mother care, concern for the elderly and the handicapped.
- Encouraging women's equal participation in the socialization and upbringing of children.
- Informing Arab women about their legal rights and encouraging them to demand it.
- Providing opportunities for women to continue their education and train them in various fields.
- Combatting discriminatory attitudes towards women.
- Involving women in society and demanding their participation in economic and social development.

References:

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For more information contact

**Mrs. Manal Younes, Editor G.A.W.F. Newsletter
Al Maghreb St. Bagdad, Irak.**