

## ACCESS OF ARAB WOMEN TO HIGHER EDUCATION<sup>(1)</sup>

Higher education for Arab women started at the university level in 1925 when the American University of Beirut (AUB) accepted women students in its departments. Those who planned to study medicine, pharmacy or dentistry were directly enrolled in it, while those who chose other majors had to spend the freshman and sophomore years at the American Junior College for Girls (now Beirut University College) before their promotion to the junior year at AUB.

At about the same time, the French University of St. Joseph in Beirut started admitting women students. In 1928, the first woman student at that institution graduated with a pharmacy degree. In 1931, two women received the medical degree and two others were granted degrees in law.

The Syrian University in Damascus accepted women students in 1926. The Egyptian University decided to accept them in 1929 - 1930. Between 1930 and 1970 many universities established in other Arab countries, Iraq, Jordan and Kuwait, became co-educational, and women in North African states and the Arabian peninsula had access to higher education.

Statistics given by the author of the study indicate a sizable increase in the number of universities in the Arab World during the last thirty years. From 12 in 1950, their number reached 50 in 1980. They also indicate a wide geographic distribution, a steady growth in enrollment, along with diversification of fields and a relative rise in standards. The proportion of women in third level or higher education in the Arab world was, in 1977, 28% compared to that of men, while the world average is 41%.

For Arab women, the traditional fields of higher study were education and the humanities and, among the professions, the medical sciences. Statistical data of the UNESCO Yearbooks for the last 25-30 years regarding women's third level enrollment indicate a slight shift of emphasis towards science and science-related professions, specifically engineering and agriculture. One example is Egypt where the proportion of women students in science and science-related professions rose from 18% in 1955 to 29% in 1974.

Another example is Tunisia with a proportion of 40% in 1976 instead of 29% in 1965.

In Jordan the present priority need is in the field of education which attracts half of the women students. The situation is similar in Kuwait, while in Iraq there has been recently a dramatic increase in the field of foreign languages. In Egypt, a progressive step was made when the Institute of Religious Studies (Dar-ul-Ulum) and Al-Azhar University, traditionally reserved for men, were opened to women in 1953.

The participation of Arab women in outside employment has made remarkable progress, though not in all sectors and not at the same rate. In Egypt, women in professional and technical jobs increased from less than 50,000 in 1960 to nearly 1.5 million in 1976. In Iraq, 22,000 women were in employment in 1957, the figure rising to nearly 150,000 in 1978, (excluding the agricultural sector), representing a rise from 2 to 12%. However, the report for 1975-76 indicated that women constituted only 4% of the faculty at full professor level, 5% at each of the associate and assistant professor levels, 15% at instructor level and 31% at lower ranks.

In Algeria, where women actively participated in the struggle for independence, traditional customs forced them to «go back to the kitchen». In Tunisia, laws were enacted to protect the legal status of women based on the principle of sexual equality. In Kuwait, although more than half the students enrolled at the University of Kuwait are women, the impact of traditional factors forces women university graduates into very limited career aspirations.

On the whole, formal education has been an important factor in social change. This is particularly evident in the patterns of Arab family life, where a shift has occurred towards later marriage age for women, marriage by mutual consent and a nuclear family unit with fewer children and higher aspirations for the entire family.

The author concludes by saying that «higher education may be said to have taken root in the Arab world. However, its full impact on society and on the status of women cannot be assessed except in perspective. The experience is encouraging, but a longer span of time is needed for a definitive evaluation.»

(1) Monographs of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, No. 2, Arab Women and Education, Part I: «Access of Arab Women to Higher Education» by Edith A.S. Hanania, Beirut 1980.