

An Overview of Women's Participation in Employers and Workers Organizations in an Era of Economic Restructuring of the Arab Region

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One important aspect of civil society is that which revolves around employer-worker relations as well as the extent to which workers or employers participate in economic policies or in the various issues related to their interests and concerns. This includes the laws and regulations governing the economy, workers rights, working conditions and relations and negotiations with the employers.

At first glance, we find that in the Arab region most employers and workers organizations are highly male dominated. The low female representation, particularly at decision making levels in important bodies of civil society acts as an obstacle to the advancement of gender equality issues and in improving the situation of women - both employers and workers. Important issues include equal pay, maternity leave, sexual harassment, family responsibilities and childcare. Low female representation also acts as an obstacle in removing age-old barriers that prohibit women from career advancement and subject them to indirect discrimination through what can be termed as 'cultural attitudes.'

The reasons for the weak representation of Arab women in employers and workers organizations are multiple but also interconnected. Partly, it is due to women's comparatively low labour force participation, in general and which in it self diminishes membership. Another reason is that both women who are either workers or employers may lack the awareness and the skills for organizing and improving negotiating capacity around their own specific needs and concerns. Finally, as a general trend, employers and workers organizations have weak capacities and the predominantly male leadership tends to exclude gender equality issues from the main agendas.

Therefore even when women have the awareness and the will to organize around their own needs, they will not resort to organizations where they see little chance

for change. Many do resort to NGOs that address such needs through separate businesswomen associations or NGOs that address women workers' rights and advocacy. Despite the importance of such separate organizations that deal with women's immediate needs, these separate venues in themselves in many ways exclude women from the mainstream of economic dialogue at the national levels.

Indeed global integration, economic liberalization and restructuring at national levels in many Arab countries are transforming the role of the state and work based relations. The main aim of the State is growth, on the one hand, and debt servicing on the other. Therefore the state is moving away from being the main employer, as national industries and facilities are being privatized. For employers the state is no longer providing subsidies or support for national industries. Therefore, employers find themselves having to play a more dynamic role particularly in terms of performance and productivity in the face of international competition and decreased government protection. Finally workers and workers organizations are facing decreased job security, retrenchment in some cases and again decreased government interference in terms of working conditions. The name of the game is now growth. Therefore economic policies revolve around ensuring this growth and having to keep up with international competition.

So what is the gender related impact on all of the above as far as the participation of women in worker/employer organizations? How do changing labour relations and economic restructuring affect women's participation in these organizations? Does the changing role of worker/employer organizations provide women members with new opportunities? The following is only a speculation on these opportunities/challenges and on whether women's representation is improving in employers and workers organizations in the Arab Region.

In fact the improvements in the representation of women employers in the region is remarkable. Between 1999 and 2001, new units/committees/forums have been established in the employers' organizations of the following countries: Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. This is in addition to the pre-existing ones in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. Businesswomen are also networking at regional and international levels with annual meetings and forums. Therefore, as self-organization around specific needs has become intensified it is still too early to determine the extent to which businesswomen are being represented or have the capability to influence mainstream economic policies. It is important to see to what extent established and influential business women associations will encourage younger and less influential women to start their businesses and become employers.

As for women's units/committees in workers organizations, though they have existed for quite some time in the region, unfortunately they have been characteristically weak. However, some improvements can be detected. The cases of the Palestinian, Yemeni, Tunisian and Kuwaiti workers organizations can be highlighted here as examples of concerted efforts to activate women's roles. However women's participation in Arab trade unions is almost always limited to

"women's issues." Women trade unionists rarely have the chance to participate in hard core issues that require collective bargaining agreements with employers and governments. Another problem is that many working women do not actually see the benefits of union membership and therefore, their membership remains low. This is creating a new challenge because economic liberalization such as export processing zones now exist where national labor codes are not always applicable, and women are more vulnerable to exploitation.

Despite the visible improvements in the representation of women in employers' and workers' organizations, challenges still exist. For example, the improvement in representation has not translated into decision making positions. It is only in the Omani Chamber of Commerce of Industry and the General Federation of Palestinian Trade Unions that women members are represented at the executive levels of these official bodies. Indeed there is yet a long way to go in order to mainstream gender concerns within worker/employer organizations. Finally, it is very important to add that such organizations will always be the backbone of the labour relations in any given country and that women's participation and membership will always be important.

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