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### Session III:

## Empowerment of Women in Sociocultural Context

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Ms. Maha Kaddoura

First I want to thank you for your presence and to thank the organizers for inviting me to this interesting forum because it deals with a very interesting subject.

Now, it is common knowledge that women represent half of society, which means that society's progress is related to that of women, and vice versa. In fact, the social development of women, including higher studies, is important since educated women are symbolic of the nation as a whole. If women could have their fair share of global care and appropriate education, they would really participate in developing their narrow environments while also fulfilling their duties and entering the wider world, which would expect a lot from them. Women have lived for a long time confined to the home and held hostage by old traditions — although we have to remember that at a certain time in the past women were a very important economic element of society. The wife of the Prophet Mohammad was a business woman and the Prophet Mohammad worked for her. Thus, we should remember that in former times we were active economically and not believe what we hear now from, for example, the Taliban, who say that girls shouldn't go to school or women shouldn't go to work, or something that totally contradicts religion and Islam.

Women have participated in destroying ignorance in their societies while they have also been the innocent victims of ignorance. In some societies women have been con-

sidered an unavoidable evil, a matter that no legislation or religion admits. The three monotheistic religions put women — not the women here, but rather the woman as mother — on a pedestal, indeed a very high pedestal. A Jew can not be a Jew without a Jewish mother; the mother of Jesus, and consequently the mother of Christianity, is the Virgin Mary; and when the Prophet Mohammad was asked who his most beloved person is, he repeated: "My mother, my mother, my mother."

We know from these examples how important the roles of women and mothers are. Nowadays, women are involved in all educational fields — even though they are still suffering in some backward societies — and rational people can not argue over the necessity of educating women if they are to be part of building a virtuous generation that is of benefit to their nation and humanity. As many of the modern sociologists, such as Frederick Le Play, say: "The family is the main hive, the main cell of society. Therefore, a society can not grow unless its hives unite, cooperate and are ready to work and produce competent individuals." Only an educated and cultivated woman can undertake the mission of organizing, strengthening and bonding this hive and not neglecting the spirit of the family. This woman has understood life, studied the behavior of society, and observed its past and present and looks optimistically toward its future, at last appreciating the mission her nation is expecting her to fulfill.

I'm reading a very interesting book about Francine Gomez, the head of Waterman. While she was the one who saved the company from bankruptcy, in her book Gomez testifies: "I don't know what to consider myself; outside the home I was a successful business woman with a brilliant career ahead of me. I ran a good business and did a good job." However, when it came to her family, Gomez admits that she failed as a homemaker: "My husband left me because I didn't have enough time to spend with him. My two children also left for the same reason."

The life of this woman raises a very important topic: the roles of women inside and outside the home. An intelligent woman would, of course, establish an equilibrium between the "private" and the "public." At the same time, I remember a friend I met in South Africa. She was a physician and told me that during this stage in her life she had decided to spend four days at home and three days in her clinic. She knew that in the future she could go to her clinic six days a week, and she was sure that later on when her children grew up, it would be too late for her to see more of them. I think this is an example of good equilibrium between the "private" and the "public" sphere for women.

An educated woman is the most precious jewel that can be offered to the nation for building the future. However, the problem today lies with the space in which the educated woman works. Many cultural and social factors have affected women negatively, despite scientific research and development. Too often we see educational institutions pushing girls into work that is considered more proper for them than for boys, as if they were born to practice some profession that may even be inappropriate for or inferior to them. This happens despite the fact that a woman is no less competent than a man in her ability to comprehend various fields of education. They are alike. Women should have the right to enjoy life's freedom, to get an education and to work.

A study was carried out in the United States about self-confidence; it talks about how low self-confidence is a very big problem for both men and women and how to increase it. The best ways are through education and social or work-related achievement. Women get over



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this problem through education. Educated women represent the hope of expanding our cultures, societies and economies. An educated woman can interact with her peers and contribute positively to life. She can influence others directly through advising, informing and encouraging. Educated women make social changes and improvements through spreading democracy and emphasizing the human side in their relations with people in society. Active women can work for a more peaceful nation as well as contribute analytical logic and patience to their country. They can be very good negotiators and activists in the humanitarian field. They can be activists for democracy and humanism.

Lastly, if a virtuous generation depends on virtuous women and their ability to spread progress and refinement, a corrupted generation stems from corrupted women since the behavior of people is the result of their education. Nothing is better than educated women for building nations and developed societies on all levels. A virtuous woman is a virtuous generation.

### Endnotes

\*The Kaddoura Foundation helps mothers who are heads of households in Palestine and the Palestinian camps.