

Women's Rights Group Lobbies for First Woman Secretary General at the UN

In its five year history, Equality Now, a small human rights organization, has made much noise over the kinds of violations of women's freedom that other groups sidestep to avoid interfering with 'culture': female genital mutilation; selling children to pimps, factory owners or elderly bridegrooms; the imprisonment of rape victims — some as young as nine — on charges of adultery; the entitlement of men to murder female relatives who 'dishonor' the family. Now the organization has launched a campaign to bring a woman Secretary General to the United Nations, blowing a gust of fresh air into the smoke-filled room of the Security Council. Equality Now has proposed six candidates, two each from Africa, Asia, and Europe. [These] candidates share a characteristic that would give nightmares to legions of career diplomats: Each woman has vigorously taken on the messy, contentious issues that make clear the global implications of local crises....While the UN has incorporated the notion of territorial rotation in the selection of Secretary General, only occasional pious murmurs broach the subject of gender rotation....As for those who complain about the lack of women with inside-track UN experience (only five percent of the 185 permanent representatives assigned to the UN are women), there's the example of Dag Hammarskjöld. Easily the most effective Secretary General in UN history, he was a virtual unknown to the Security Council. There are two reasons to support Equality Now's initiative. The first is simply that women deserve this level of recognition. The second is that electing a woman Secretary General

would profoundly change the notion of how groups of people are represented at the UN. Right now the principal means of defining commonalities of interest is national. But the global economy has radically altered the place of women, figuratively and literally. Women's share in the labor force is booming worldwide, yet women are considerably more destitute than they were twenty years ago. In rural areas, the number living in poverty has nearly doubled, with women constituting at least 60 percent of the world's one billion rural poor. And as more women leave their own countries to find work, there is a skyrocketing trend of physical and sexual violence against them. These expatriates have little or no means of redress. Women's social and economic subordination is clearly reflected in enormous inequities in education and health: two-thirds of the world's illiterate people are women, and this year's UNICEF Progress of the Nations report states that more than 15 million women a year suffer 'the untreated and uncared-for consequences of injuries arising during pregnancy and child-birth.' The toll of injury, disability and death, says the report, 'is arguably the most neglected health problem in the world'....Right now the world's largest constituency needs a voice at the top. Equality Now's challenge should propel the UN to abandon its traditional etiquette and pick a majority candidate. "

Margaret Spillane, writing in The Nation, October 21, 1996, page 5-6.

Women's Rights: Universal or Relative?

"The debate over women's human rights raises complex issues of policy and judgment in relation to the prevailing cultural, economic, and political conditions, particularly in societies where historical change has generated contradictory world views competing for the definition and implementation of rights. An important function of the modernization process has been to problematize the normal criteria of judgment, including the criterion of culture, as exemplified by the debate between proponents of universalism and relativism in the contemporary discourse on women's human rights. The Beijing Conference provided a transparent venue where competing coalitions of governmental and non-governmental delegations, each composed of members drawn from across religious and cultural lines, struggled to achieve ascendancy for one or the other concept in the Platform and other comple-

mentary documents. The Platform shows clearly that the international rights movement is ethically and philosophically geared to the moral conviction that men and women possess rights by virtue of their humanity. Human rights, in essence, are not accidents of social status, economic class, culture, nationality, religion, race, or gender. Curtailment of rights, therefore, may not be justified or even viewed as normal, on account of tradition, custom, or historical background. It follows that governments are obligated to rectify breaches of rights whenever and wherever they occur."

Mahnaz Afkhami, "Universality and Relativism in the Beijing Platform for Action", in The Newsletter of the Association for Women in Development, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 1.

Observations on the 1995 Women's Book Fair in Cairo

"November 1995 marked the debut of the first ever Arab Women's Book Fair....What could a Western observer expect of such an historic event? Government censorship of the allowable books? Indifference on the part of the public? The morals police at the door, as in Saudi Arabia, to check that women were properly covered in a modest fashion? Scuffles at the exhibits between Islamists and secularists? No, none of the above....Ferial Ghazoul, one of the judges in the fair's literary prize-giving, pointed out that literacy rates all over the Arab world have been climbing for the last forty years. 'Women are being educated with men, and they are writing and reading, just as men are doing'....Dr. Selma Khadra al-Jayyusi, Palestinian critic and poet, in her keynote opening address asserted firmly that 'the one positive thing that has happened in the Arab world in the late 20th century has been the emergence of women, in all areas of life, but especially in literature.' A few distinguished gentlemen rose pointedly and left the auditorium. But Dr. Jayyusi continued, bemoaning the way men have 'abused the Arabic language by creating incredible numbers of synonyms for flattery and hypocrisy.' A few more men left. Yet most of the 400-plus audience stayed, an audience of men as well as women, old and young."

Elizabeth Warlock Fernea, writing in The Middle East Women's Studies Review, Vol. XI, No. 1.

Domestic Violence in Palestine

"Wife-beating has become widespread in the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank, according to women's rights activist Nama Haloul and Dr. Iyad Es-Sarraj, a psychiatrist living in Gaza. Interviewed for an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Dr. Sarraj asserts that throughout the Israeli occupation men have been beaten by soldiers, and that they in turn go home and beat their wives or children. Nama Haloul says that women are stronger against beatings from the IDF soldiers than the men, because they are used to it. She says that hundreds of women have complained about being beaten at home to the Union of Women Workers. A veteran in the struggle for Palestinian independence, Haloul also says that the fundamentalists have no concern for women and will send them back home after the struggle if they accede to power."

Reported in The Women's Watch, a publication of the International Women's Rights Action Watch

Inside Perspective on Saudi Women

"The perception common outside Saudi Arabia is that Saudi women live totally restricted lives, largely outside of the public domain. The position of women, however, has changed radically in the last thirty years and Saudi women make an important contribution to the economic and social development of their country....Saudi women are able to work in three main sectors: education, health and banking. But women are also found in other sectors, such as the media and social welfare. Within education, women work in schools and colleges for women and girls, staffed entirely by women....Coming from Britain, it is strange to step inside a women-only institution. In many ways, however, it is thought-provoking because without men, there can be no sex stereotyping of jobs. Women are managing universities and doing everything inside of them from lecturing to maintenance of equipment. Once inside the gates of their own institutions, Saudi women unveil and I met many highly educated and highly committed professional women."

Ann Keeling, Consultant, writing in The Network Newsletter (No. 9/1996), a publication of The British Council

Muslim, Female and Refugee: A Rapidly Growing Category

"What is little known is that 80 percent of today's world-wide refugee population are Muslims. Thus, we felt that there was a need to sensitize Muslim governments, the international community, as well as NGOs, to the particular needs, resources and aspirations of Muslim women....Therefore, in collaboration with the Islamic Relief Organization in Saudi Arabia in 1994, we convened a conference on Uprooted Muslim Women. That conference had a wide outreach to Muslim refugee women themselves and it was amazing to see the faces of the refugee women from the Islamic world....The recommendations that came out of the conference were due to the contribution of refugee women themselves, so they do reflect the actual needs and aspirations of refugee women....The greatest causes of mass displacement are war, ethnic and religious conflict, tribal custom and mass deprivation of human rights. But the undeniable root cause is the non-functioning of the world's political, economic and social structures. When we help refugee women, we are just aiding refugees. We are not attacking the real causes of their suffering. How can we bring about change? We invite all concerned people to join us, not only to support refugee women but to work with us in order to create ways to achieve peace in which social justice and mutual respect has meaning. The culture of peace should replace the day-to-day culture of violence which is causing so much suffering to humanity."

From an interview with Ms. Homayra Etemad, an Afghan refugee and Muslim woman who chairs the International NGO Working Group on Refugee Women.