

Factors Affecting the Arab Woman's Role in Rural Development

This is the title of a study made by the "Third Technical Periodic Conference of the Arab Rural Engineers Union", held in Baghdad, 14-20 March, 1977, and published by the "General Union of Iraqi Women", Secretariat of Studies & Research.

The introduction points out the important role that the Arab woman could play in rural development. Though her participation is relatively low in general economic activity, exception should be made of the rural sector where her participation in 1971 reached a proportion of 40.6%. Yet the rural woman suffers from various forms of injustice. Besides illiteracy, which according to 1970 statistics reached 85,7 % among women against 60 % among men, the rural women workers are deprived of regular salaries except those who perform seasonal work during a part of the year and whose proportion does not exceed 2,5 % of the whole.

Educational & Social Status

If the percentage of illiteracy among Arab women was 85,7 % in 1970, it would be safe to conclude that this percentage is higher among rural women, i.e. at least 95%

Social upbringing tends to create in the rural woman an inferiority complex, preventing her from the opportunity to grow or to take personal decisions. Restrictive stereotypes impose a distribution of roles and responsibilities on the basis of sexual discrimination or class distinction without regard to preparation and personal ability.

Health Conditions

The backward health conditions are shown by the high rate of infant mortality as compared with that recorded in more developed countries. It is clear that the fragility of the child results from conditions of malnutrition and inadequate health services offered to the mother during pregnancy, nursing and other stages of child care.

Recommendations

The study suggests:

First:

The creation of an Arab central statistical organization, connected with the Arab League, (or as a part of the Arab Organization for Rural Development), whose function would be the unification of rural statistical systems in the Arab World, and the collection of reports & studies

concerning the Arab countries and contributing to their general welfare. This central organization could also serve as a link between these countries and the international organizations interested in collecting statistics about them.

This statistical framework would also have among its functions:

- 1) Studying the human element in agriculture, its size, its level of training and achievement.
- 2) Working out a technical definition of rural areas including the districts whose economy rests primarily on agriculture.
- 3) Evaluating woman's participation in rural production and the loss she incurs from being deprived of wages.

Second: Improvement of the administrative system. The rural sector is greatly handicapped by various deficiencies existing in the producing rural frameworks and the central administrative bodies.

One major deficiency comes from inadequate training and experience among the experts and technicians of the sector, leading them to adopt educational programs borrowed from western countries whose status and problems are different from ours.

This fact necessitates frequent meetings and conferences for a revision or change of the unsuitable programs.

The "Union of Arab Rural Engineers" should play a major role in this respect.

Third: The Rural Woman's role. Professional organizations, social groups, and administrative bodies are invited to prepare studies concerning the rural woman and emphasizing the role she should play in the developmental process.

Rural administrators and other responsible officers should cooperate for the promotion of the rural woman and the furthering of her interests. As an example, we may mention the application of her right to join the municipal councils.

General campaigns could be organized by state officers and social leaders for the purpose of eliminating illiteracy and fulfilling the U.N. plan which fixed the year 1985 as a deadline for the complete eradication of female illiteracy in the world. This plan naturally implies the Arab countries' adherence to it and their obligation to carry it out.

Professional organizations, social groups and particularly women's unions and rural organizations should endeavor to insure the adequate representation of women in their legislative bodies, at all stages of leadership.