

Women, Employment and Development in the Arab World⁽¹⁾

Female economic inactivity represents a major means by which a large proportion of Arab society is deprived of a basic need.

An increase in female employment opportunities results in a widening of social and economic options for women, enabling them to have greater economic independence, stronger and more rounded personalities and better appreciation and comprehension of reality.

In spite of these advantages, Arab women have played an extremely small role in the economically active labor force. Their activity rates are one third to one fifth the magnitude of female activity rates in Africa, Latin America and the Far East. Why?

1. The Purdah system which usually requires women to be veiled, is still practiced in many Arab and Moslem countries. This condition restricts women's appearance in public and their participation in development. Moreover, it limits any opportunity for education. Female illiteracy rates in Arab countries are among the highest in the world, higher than in Latin America and the Far East, reaching in many cases over 70 percent.

2. The high value of children in Arab culture, a trait inherited from tribal life, has contributed to the appreciation of early marriage and the insistence on a high level of fertility, thus preventing the wife from devoting any portion of her time to work outside the house.

3. Another motive for woman's seclusion and veiling is the idea that this condition is a safeguard of her virtue. Public opinion condemns woman's working outside her home because it endangers her chastity and threatens the "family honor."

4. The poverty which still prevails in many Arab countries is an obstacle to girls' education and work. Parents who may be willing to educate their daughters are compelled by poor economic conditions to limit their expenditure to the education of their male children, leaving the females illiterate.

Factors Contributing to the Increase of Female Employment

First among these factors is the eradication of illiteracy and the spread of education for both men and women. Fertility seems to be inversely related to the educational attainment of couples. Advanced education spurs women's

ambition to prepare for and occupy career jobs and to abandon traditional home employment such as sewing, embroidery, farming and underpaid employment like elementary or secondary school teaching, nursing and widwifery.

Work before marriage encourages a woman to continue it after marriage, while those who try to acquire working experience after marriage find it difficult to succeed.

Other factors encouraging female labor are the existence of adequate child care centers and flexible working hours allowing women to work part-time when necessary.

Influence of Economic Structure

Industrialization and urbanization tend to favor women's participation in development because urban life encourages education and breaking away from tradition. The high cost of living in towns obliges women to become money-earners and share in supporting the family.

On the other hand, rural life covers the largest portions of Arab countries, allowing women's wide participation in agricultural activity (30-50) percent, but it has the disadvantage of encouraging high fertility and of depriving women of wages because their contribution is then considered as part of their housework.

Influence of Male Migration

Lately the increasing migration of young men from rural to urban areas or to the oil-rich countries of the Arab East has made the agricultural sector increasingly dependent on women in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. Employers are finding it more convenient to employ women without running the risk of having them migrate after being trained on the job, for the more lucrative offers of work in the oil countries.

Conclusions

To encourage women's participation in development the following policy proposals are given:

1. Besides wiping out illiteracy, constitutions and laws should stipulate full equality between men and women with regard to their rights and obligations.

2. Arab countries should be urged to ratify the ILO conventions relating to conditions of work, protection of workers, motherhood and equality of remuneration, if they have not already ratified them.

3. Rural women should be more fully integrated by permitting them to own agricultural land and to share in the wages received by their husbands in case they share in rural work.

4. Non-traditional employment for women, in the field of social services and public administration, should be encouraged, while traditional occupations such as teaching and nursing should be better remunerated and offer adequate training and promotion opportunities.

5. Oriental men should start giving more time to housework and child rearing in an effort to reduce the double burden of their working wives.

6. Finally, the provision of nurseries and child care centers is a necessary measure, not only to help working mothers but also to share with parents and guardians the important task of rearing and socializing the new generation.

1. Condensed from a lecture by Henry Azzam, manpower regional advisor, International Labor Organization, Beirut, in the Women's Institute Lecture Services, BUC, May 24, 1979.