

UNESCO Conference in Beirut

Sponsored by the Regional Office for Education in the Arab states, a Seminar for women leaders responsible for the training of rural Arab women, was held at the UNESCO Center, Sports City Avenue, Beirut, 28 October – 7 November 1980. Besides the U.N. delegates and representatives of the Regional Office for Education in the Arab states, the participants included delegates of women's educational institutions and social centers in Lebanon, Sudan, Tunis, Somalia, Jordan, Syria, Palestine. The coordinator of the Seminar was Dr. Nabil Dajani, who shared with Dr. Suad Ismail, director of the U.N. Regional Office, and Miss Yasmine Zahran, representative of the Unesco General Headquarters, the presentation of the Seminar and its objectives.

The speakers, representing various Lebanese, Jordanian and Palestinian research groups, developed the general aim of the seminar which is "the creation of awareness among rural women regarding their responsibilities and the development of their aptitude for further participation in rural development." The lectures revolved around the following points :

1. Importance of the rural sector, which covers about 70% of the Arab countries.
2. Necessity of training and encouraging local leadership for the handling of rural problems.
3. Complete eradication of illiteracy, an urgent task,
4. Equal rights for both men and women in both rural and urban districts.
5. Renovation and development of methods of rural education,

Regarding methods used in rural education, Dr. Munir Khoury, professor of sociology at Beirut University College, recommended the "Community Development Method" which stresses a purely local basis of developmental activity, is free from pre-conceived ideas, gives priority to the most pressing needs, encourages self-help and independent initiative, requires the mobilization of all existing human potentials and, finally, allows resorting to foreign help only after all local possibilities have been exhausted.

A scientific definition of rural cooperatives and of the role they should play in rural development was presented by Mr. Habib Zumut, regional advisor for the development of cooperatives in the International Labor Organization. Woman's role in cooperative activity has been highly

limited. To promote it, the speaker proposed besides an active campaign against illiteracy, a revision of training programs in cooperative work.

Mrs. Anissa Najjar, president of the "Village Welfare Association" in Lebanon, described the ways by which this association has been trying to answer the needs of the village women: sharing in the revival of local crafts, encouraging women to practice money-earning activities, informing them about their legal rights, and emphasizing their potentials. The schools created by the association train students to do the work of "rural pioneers" who contribute to spread awareness, education and health care techniques in their own districts. Each graduate has to "remove" the illiteracy of at least one person in her village.

The family as a social unit was the topic treated by Mr. Toufic Osseiran, secretary of the Family-Planning Association in Lebanon, who asserted that the family has been and should remain the chief pillar of society. Those who support free sexual union, help to undermine it. Against this wave, he recommended a modernized preparation of women for their role, based on progressive Western ideas, provided it is free from blind imitation and distorted information.

What educational measures should be used to enhance woman's integration in development? In answering this question, Dr. Munir Bashour from the Department of Education, American University of Beirut, proposed what he called a macro-approach followed by a micro-approach to the subject. The first comes from above. It requires the high authorities in the Arab World to elaborate a new code of personal status laws **giving women complete equality with men**. Special efforts must be made to implement the laws and to ensure the development of skills which the implementation necessitates. The micro-approach comes from below. It means the development of local awareness of the actual needs and a genuine desire to meet them. It also means the rise of spontaneous social leadership replacing the routine official employment.

The final lecture, given by Dr. Ilham Kallab Bsat from the Lebanese University, on "Rural Development in Arab Countries and Woman's Contribution to It", condensed the various discussions and recommendations into five points : 1) Democratic training in which both sexes have an equal share, 2) Modernization of training methods, 3) Adaptation of methods to local needs, 4) Integration of the training, and 5) Its continuity.