

THE CHANGING ROLE OF ARAB WOMEN

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In introducing her paper, Dr. Huda Zurayk differentiates between traditional societies, in which woman's role is restricted to the function of child rearing and housekeeping, and developed societies where women participate strongly in many areas that were previously closed to them. In Arab countries which have different stages of development, it is not possible to speak either of a uniform role or of a uniform change in the role of Arab women today. The ultimate objective sought by Dr. Zurayk is «to present statistical evidence within a theoretical framework that describes the direction and rate of change in the role of Arab Women and to indicate some implications for policy innovations.»

Though statistical information in this paper dates from 1975, it is still valid in 1981 and the conclusions are still up-to-date.

According to the author, traditional culture restricting women to household duties is still dominant in most Arab countries. Therefore we may consider the labor force participation of Arab women to be the major proof of their changing role in society. Contributions to voluntary services and cultural activities, though they increase a woman's sense of self-fulfillment, do not give her the independence provided by a wage-earning activity.

To be effective and progressive, woman's participation in the labour force needs the help of education which increases her work potential, changes her aspirations and her values regarding proper modes of behavior in society. In other words, education coupled with work, should serve to build in woman a balanced and integrated personality.

Urbanization is another factor associated with the development process. By allowing the family to break away from certain traditions connected with rural life, it gives women some independence in their decisions. The more expensive life-style in the city produces economic pressure on the family which induces the woman to seek employment outside the home.

Education as an indicator of change

Besides the change it effects in woman's personality, education affects her mode of behavior by raising the marriage age and negatively influencing the fertility of married women. Women are thus left with a larger amount of leisure time before marriage and during their

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married life which can be devoted to productive work outside the home.

Female education as an indicator of change in the Arab world is still far behind the desired level. Statistics taken between 1970 and 1976 indicate that the majority of adult females were illiterate in almost all Arab countries. They also give evidence of disparities among them in the status of women, ranging from 45 percent female illiteracy in Jordan and Lebanon to around 98 percent in Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

It is important to observe, however, that an increase in female enrolment rates in all age groups occurred between 1970 and 1975, particularly for countries with very low enrolment rates. This is indicative of a trend which should continue and accelerate, to produce an adult Arab woman better able to participate in development.

Fertility

The high value of children in Arab culture has contributed to a historically high level of fertility in the Arab countries. Two indicators of the level of fertility, the crude birth rate and the total fertility rate, indicate a continuing pattern of high fertility in the ECWA region today. Other findings: 1) little variation exists in the fertility rates among the Arab countries in spite of the disparity among them in terms of the illiteracy rates of the adult female population. 2) A clear rising trend in the mean age of marriage of those with decreasing levels of illiteracy. 3) A negative trend in fertility as the level of education of the woman rises.

However, even though some Arab women are showing lower levels of fertility, the family size in Arab society is still generally large, leaving the Arab woman with a relatively short portion of her life span that can be devoted to productive labour outside the home.

Urbanization

Statistics made in 1975 show that, with the exception of Oman, Saudi Arabia and the two Yemens, a substantial percentage of the population in each of the Arab countries in the ECWA region are residing in urban areas. Urban living, as already stated, contributes to beneficial changes in social organization. However, when it means a massive emigration from rural areas to urban ones, it is apt to disturb the demographic equilibrium by diminishing the number of active population in rural districts and creating problems of overpopulation in urban ones. For this reason, migration into towns should be subjected to state control.

Economic Structure

Agriculture is still a large sector in the populous Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria and Yemen.

Jordan and Lebanon, on the other hand, are shown to have developed large service sectors, as have the oil-rich countries of the Arab Gulf.

The work of women in traditional agriculture is undertaken mostly as part of family labour and does not usually provide them with the independence gained in a wage-earning job.

Labour Force Participation

Figures reveal very low female activity rates in comparison to male activity rates in Arab countries. It is interesting to note that activity rates of women are highest in Lebanon, the country with one of the highest literacy rates, the lowest level of fertility and an economic structure favouring the service and industry sectors.

In countries that have moved away from a purely agricultural economy, the labour force participation of women seems to concentrate on the service sector, i.e. on teaching, nursing and domestic service.

Dr. Zurayk thinks that the low degree of female labour participation is due to two important factors: 1) social organization patterns and social values which have not responded adequately to changes occurring in Arab countries, since they strongly favour maintaining the traditional role of the woman as wife and mother. 2) The fact that most Arab women today, including educated women, are not psychologically prepared to actively assume the responsibilities of the new place that could be open for them in society. They seem to be unaware of the demands which a developing country imposes on its population, requiring the contribution of every adult member of society, including women, to speed up the development process.

In conclusion, the author mentions the main factors that would help the Arab woman fulfill her double role in home and society. They are:

1. The elimination of illiteracy prevailing to a high degree among women.
2. Increasing female school enrolment at every level and promoting quality education.
3. Social thinkers among both men and women should present to the community the need to develop the social values that allow women to fulfill themselves and achieve self-realization for their own good and for the good of the community.
4. The communication media should be encouraged to project positive supportive images relevant to the working woman's life.
5. Governments should repeal all legislation that discriminates against women, be it in the laws of personal status, civic life and employment or in laws affecting other aspects of individual and social living.
6. Legislation should take into consideration the needs of the working mother and allow her certain concessions that help her fulfill her double role as housewife and participator in general development.