

Seminar on the "Arab Woman and Her Role in the Arab Unity Movement"

Organized by the Center For Arab Unity Studies⁽¹⁾, a seminar on the general topic of the Arab woman and her role in the Arab unity movement was held in Beirut, Lebanon on 21-24 September, 1981. Participants in the seminar included a mixed group of Arab scholars, academics, researchers and consultants to social projects, representing various cultural institutions and organizations in Arab countries.

Fifteen papers were read and each was commented upon by two or more of the participants, then generally discussed by the whole group. The papers revolved around three important items: First, a review of the historical background of the Arab woman; secondly, a brief analysis of her problems and needs, including the causes for her present inferior status, and, thirdly, strategic plans of cultural, educational and political reforms, aiming at a full integration of women in the process of national development.

It should be clear from this précis that the lectures and discussions were not limited to the political aspects of women's role as the general topic might suggest. Indeed, they covered the evolution of the Arab woman's status in history, the social structure and its impact on women's status, a comparative study of the personal and family status in the Maghreb states, women's image in the Arab cultural output (and in mass media), the influence of the "oil culture" on the status of women in the Gulf countries, the future of education in the Arab world (including its role in the evolution of woman's status), and a strategic policy for the integration of women in national development.

The general treatment of the various topics reflected a revolutionary attitude emphasizing a desire for radical change, as well as a certain effort toward an objective and factual handling of the subjects. The participants claimed complete equality of rights between the sexes, including those regarding personal status laws. The tendency to blame those in authority and to indulge in indictment, along with self-criticism, was more evident than a positive search for solutions.

This article will try to condense the contents of a majority of the papers presented, while a few of them will be summarized in separate articles.

Historical Background

In pre-Islamic days, the bedouin Arab woman was relatively more free than the city woman of later

periods, who gradually adopted the veil and was secluded in the harem. Arab women poets appeared in the Jahiliyya (pre-Islamic period) and in the semi-bedouin society of the Omayyad period. According to Dr. Ali Shalaq, who treated this topic, Islam laid the foundations of family and social laws which were elucidated by Muslim lawyers and remain until now the rule of conduct for Muslim society: The marriage contract; the Mahr or bride-price; divorce primarily a man's privilege; polygamy restricted to four wives; inheritance laws; responsibility of the male family members for the minors, the aged and the sick; and condemnation of celibacy. The veil was not instituted by the Koran, but by Muslim jurists who require that a woman's head and arms be covered, allowing only the face and hands to be shown. This form of dress is what the Iranians call the "chador" or "sheidor".

The woman in Islam was encouraged to seek knowledge like a man, but girls' schools in the Arab world did not exist until the middle of the nineteenth century. Family laws have undergone little change even though claims for further change have been presented by women's unions and leaders of thought in many parts of the Arab world. While some of the speakers rejected the theory that considers religious laws partly responsible for woman's inferior status, others attacked the rigid attitude of interpreters and jurists, and condemned the misuse of religion for political ends. On the other hand, they agreed that Arab history should be carefully investigated for the purpose of pointing out the achievements of prominent Arab women throughout the various periods of Arab supremacy.

Influence of the Social Structure

Halim Barakat, professor of sociology at the Lebanese University, discussed the role of the family organization in enslaving women and impeding the development of national unity. The system of domestic production, which for a long time prevailed in Arab lands, established not only the division of labor but also the restriction of women to household duties. Tribal division and clan loyalty contributed to general disruption. The practice of endogamous marriage, for the purpose of keeping the solidarity of the tribe, enforced

(1) P.O.B. 113-6001, Beirut, Lebanon.

the domination of tribal traditions which, again, confirmed male superiority. Another cause of women's enslavement was the emphasis placed on reproduction and fertility, particularly in rural and bedouin communities which greatly depend on male effort for protection and defense against an adverse physical and social environment.

Woman's Image in Mass Media

Woman's image in Egyptian mass media, as presented by Dr. Awatef-Abdul-Rahman from Egypt, seems to concentrate on her traditional role as wife, mother and housekeeper. It gives priority to questions of beauty, fashion, emotional problems and neglects the needs of working and rural women. The influence of family ties appears in the practice of nepotism in the choice of editors and other positions of influence, all of which lead to a lowering of the quality of work.

The same tendency appears, but on a wider scale, in the mass media of the Gulf countries where the traditional image of woman as wife, mother and housekeeper obliterates her image as student or employee. With the exception of one magazine, **Al-Azmina-al-Hadeetha (Modern Times)**, all the magazines address the urban woman in particular, emphasizing her traditional role and upholding the strict attachment to presently practiced religious traditions.

Woman's Image in Contemporary Fiction

In describing woman's image in contemporary Arab fiction, Dr. Lateefa-al-Zayyat (Egypt) showed the impact of class antagonism on woman's status. Pushed by jealousy, members of the working class and of the little bourgeoisie, crave intermarriage with the class of landlords and rulers on the ground that such an alliance would raise them to the rank of their superiors. Conquering one of their women symbolizes for them the conquest of the whole class. This type of relationship between classes can take a racial dimension which often exists between a dominated and a dominant race. It explains the desire of Egyptians to marry Turkish women with the idea that dominating a Turkish woman in bed symbolizes the domination of the whole Turkish race. In the story, "Season of Emigration to the North",⁽²⁾ by the Sudanese author, Al-Tayyeb Saleh, the hero Mustapha Said embodies the mentality of the oppressed becoming an oppressor. His desire to destroy his imperialistic rulers leads him

to torture and destroy his English wives or mistresses and, finally, to destroy himself. In the same story, the narrator who represents a younger and more tolerant generation, succeeds in adopting a more humane and moderate attitude. He thus evades the terrible fate of Mustapha Said.

Political Activity

Several papers dealt with woman's participation in political action. In the 19th century, woman's activity took the form of charity organizations. In the early twentieth, women took part in political demonstrations. Besides their verbal support of political claims, they asserted their right to education, and demanded the restriction of divorce as well as the abolition of the veil. According to Linda Matar, President of the "Lebanese League for Women's Rights", the Arab Women's Union was created in 1944 at a conference which revolved around the Zionist danger. In her paper, she indicated the negative influence of the socio-economic structure and of the political system on woman's cause. Political, economic and ideological contradictions in the Arab world are reflected in women's organizations which become tools of publicity for party politics and neglect their own demands regarding woman. She remarked that western-inspired ideas such as the approval of sexual freedom, struggle against the male sex, and dissociation of women's problems from those of men, did not succeed because they did not spring from local needs.

Najla N. Bashshur, from the Center for Arab Unity Studies, said that women have been active participants in recent political and nationalistic struggles in Algeria, Iraq, the PLO, South Yemen and elsewhere. Yet women's role in party leadership is insignificant. Dr. Hafiza Shoucair, from Tunis School of Law, pointed out that the women's organizations in the Maghreb states have been subordinated to the ruling political parties. Their function is to support the government without paying any attention to the women's needs. "Unless these organizations gain their independence from government control, they will be unable to produce any change", she said.

Woman and the Impact of Oil

Dr. Rumeihi, from Kuwait University, discussed the negative influence of oil on women's status. Increased wealth has contributed to the spread of luxury and extravagance among the rich. The Mahr (bride-price) has been raised, women are given to leisure and distaste of work, especially manual work. A new wave of traditionalism has invaded oil countries as a barrier against presumable revolts aiming the political ré-

(2) In Arabic: "Mawsim el-Hijra Ila-sh-Shamal".

gimes. In Saudi Arabia, complete separation of the sexes is required in schools and universities. To the speaker, women's participation in development is particularly needed as a partial solution to the problem of the preponderance of foreign workers in the oil countries.

Women's Legal Status in Maghreb: Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco

Dr. Hafiza Shoucair, from Tunis School of Law, made a comparative study of woman's legal status in Tunisia, Algeria and El-Maghreb (Morocco). She said that though the constitution in each country affirms equality of rights between the sexes, the personal status laws are far from applying this principle. Even when the law endorses this equality, courts are not always ready to put it into practice.

Unrestricted divorce is forbidden in all three countries. In Algeria certain contradictions exist. In El-Maghreb the law defines the cases that allow a woman to claim divorce. In Tunisia adequate compensation and alimony are required for the divorcée.

Inheritance laws: In the three countries a woman inherits half of a man's share. In Tunisia this law has undergone certain amendments.

Polygamy is absolutely forbidden in Tunisia, but is allowed in El-Maghreb as well as in Algeria, by permission from the judge.

In Algeria and El-Maghreb a Muslim woman has no right to marry a non-Muslim. In Tunisia, no restriction is made along this line, but religious courts refuse to recognize it.

The Mahr or bride-price is still required everywhere in the marriage contract. Some emancipated families, however, ignore it because it confirms woman's inequality with man. Dr. Shoucair approves its abolition, because it maintains woman's treatment as an object.

On the whole, in spite of the fact that Tunisian laws grant women certain advantages over those of the other two countries, equality of the sexes is not recognized. The law requires a woman to obey her husband, to obtain from him permission to travel and to work. Under all circumstances she is obliged to perform family duties and to serve her husband, children, and in-laws. Man is the sole provider of the family; the woman is free only to share in the expenses, or to withdraw her financial help.

Family status laws in other Arab countries were not discussed because most of them are being revised and have not taken a final shape. Mrs. Laure Mughazel, a Lebanese lawyer and feminist, mentioned the recent progressive amendments made to these laws in South Yemen, Iraq, and Egypt⁽³⁾. She said that the inequality of the sexes in the personal status laws is not only a flagrant violation of human dignity, but it is also a chief

obstacle to woman's participation in the political, social, economic and cultural development of her country.

Women's Education

The paper presented by Dr. Hisham Nashabeh, Dean of Education at the Maqassed Association in Lebanon, opened with a warning against looking backward and a call to concentrate on the future. "It is useless to lay on religion or on the cultural heritage the responsibility of the Arab woman's inferiority". It is true, he said, that women's education is still behind that of men, but encouraging signs are already in view: First, the growing interest of women in higher education; Secondly, their recent interest in science as a field of specialization; Thirdly, the decision of many of them to take up a profession; Fourthly, the growth of co-education in most Arab countries.

To Dr. Nashabeh, co-education has not been a problem and has met no opposition except in Saudi Arabia. He recommends the eradication of illiteracy in its various forms by means of informal or adult education, including the creation of cultural and recreational clubs, the elaboration of cultural programs and the use of mass media for educating the public. He advises teachers to study the modern techniques of audio-visual education and current means of renovating knowledge.

In commenting upon the lecture, Dr. Hamed Ammar, U.N. Regional Counselor to ECWA, stressed the importance of character building in the process of education, the necessity of developing a scientific approach, a realistic outlook and a human spirit in to-day's youth. The same idea was expressed in Dr. Rumeihi's paper when he warned against the negative results of biased, indoctrinated educational programs.

This is a brief and inadequate account of a seminar which succeeded in bringing together a group of Arab intellectuals who did not represent a single party or tendency, and yet were able to agree on one and the same ideal, namely the support of woman's right to freedom, education and work, on an equal basis with man, in legal, economic, social, and cultural fields.

The following points comprised the main areas of general agreement:

- a. Illiteracy as a chief cause of woman's underdevelopment.
- b. Danger of misusing religion for political ends.
- c. Failure of the Arab revolutionary movement to liberate women.
- d. Necessity of rehabilitating woman's role in Arab history.

For further information regarding this seminar, there is published elsewhere in this issue abstracts of papers dealing with the following topics: "Woman's participation in the Arab labor force" by Dr. Henri Azzam, "Strategic Plans for Woman's Integration in Development" by Dr. Nawal Saadawi. Other papers will subsequently receive equal attention.

(3) See Al-Raida, nov. 1980, vol. III no. 14, pp. 9 and 11.