

The Arab Woman's Participation in the Labor Force⁽¹⁾

Introduction

The integration of the Arab woman in the development process depends primarily on her participation in economic production and on the extent of her sharing in the labor force. Her paid work outside the home has a political and social significance in addition to its economic value. It puts her in a position of strength and gives her the right to share in man's political, social, and economic rights as she shares in his duties and obligations.

To evaluate the significance of her participation in the labor force one should remember: First, that the number of women in the Arab world is 80-90 million out of a total of 160-180 million. At least, 40 million women are of working age; Secondly, the developing Arab world is in bad need of all its working force, including women, particularly in the oil countries which suffer from a shortage of local workers.

Rate of Arab Women's Participation in the Labor Force

The general average of female workers in Arab countries is 9%, while in other developing countries it is 26%. In Africa the average reaches 39%; in Asia, 47%. In developed countries of Europe and America, the proportion of women workers is between 32% and 37%.

During the last five years, 1975-1980, however, statistics presented to the Mid-Decade Conference at Copenhagen showed a rise in the average number of Arab women workers among more active developing countries, to 25% in Lebanon, 18% in Iraq, 15% in Jordan, and 8.2% in Libya.

Distinction must be made here between woman's paid work in industry and in the services sector and her free participation in rural work. The latter is considered as part of her family duties, and thus reaches high proportions: 66% in Iraq, 69.8% in Jordan, 92% in Somalia, 87% in Sudan, 87% in North Yemen.

The larger share of women's work is taken up by the services sector: Domestic service, teaching, nursing, secretarial work. Women have a low participation in the industrial sector and an insignificant role in leadership positions.

Household duties, in which they all have to share, whether they are married or celibate, absorb all or a large part of their time. These duties like rural work, receive, no remuneration and ironically are not considered as real work.

Attitudes Toward Woman's Work

An investigation project, made in 1975 pertaining to the Arab world, showed three attitudes toward woman's work: First, the conservative or reactionary attitude which condemned women's work outside the home; Secondly, the tolerant attitude which admitted a relative freedom for woman and allowed her to work within certain conditions; Thirdly, the liberal attitude representing those who believed in the equality of the sexes.

Seventy percent of the respondents were in favor of women's work, provided it would be limited to teaching or government positions.

The majority considered housework more important than employment.

Woman's Education: How It Affects Her Attitude Towards Work

The Arab world was the first region in the Third World to reduce the proportion of illiteracy among its men during the sixties and early seventies but it has been the last to bring about this reduction among women. The proportion of illiteracy among adult Arab women was 85% in 1970 versus 60% in other developing countries.

Women's education in the Arab world has been following a slow pace, especially at the upper level. The enrollment of girls has achieved, since 1975, an increase of 38%, 33% and 28% respectively in the first three primary classes but the number of drop-outs among them has increased in the same proportion. Discrimination between girls and boys regarding

(1) Condensed from a study presented by Dr. Henry Azzam, ILO adviser, at the Conference organized by the Center for Arab Unity Studies, mentioned elsewhere in this issue.

opportunities for education is more noticeable in rural districts.

The enrollment of girl students is in inverse proportion to the class level. However a certain progress has been made on the university level when the proportion of university students in Arab countries rose from 24% in 1971 to 28% in 1976. In Kuwait it reached 63%, and in Qatar 67%, but only 5% of the graduates are engaged in professional activities.

Surprisingly, vocational training is equally limited. Only 4-15% of Arab women receive vocational training, which is generally restricted to sewing, teaching, nursing and secretarial work.

Various causes lie behind this condition. Society is apprehensive regarding woman's education and vocational training because they seem to threaten her traditional role for early marriage and fertility. Woman's upbringing directs her towards homemaking. Thus, education is considered a pastime and work is temporary. Therefore, if a woman is conditioned to lack strength and faith in herself, her life revolves around the male members of her family.

Economic Development Creates New Needs

Recent economic development in the region has created new professions, industrialization has made new demands on woman's work in Arab countries. Emigration of young men from less privileged regions to the oil countries has obliged women to replace men as household providers.

To encourage woman's involvement in labor, the following aids are necessary:

First, the government should create a favorable atmosphere for woman's integration in development through: Utilization of mass media; preparation of statistics and reports about it; providing equipment and human cadres for the planning and execution of laws; amending the labor code and the laws regarding maternity leaves in favor of women.

Secondly, joint efforts among industrialists, government and syndicates should succeed in creating nurseries and kindergartens for the children of working women; also they should encourage return to work by women after the expiration of maternity leave. In some cases, women's work could be organized in a way that allows its rotation between two of them, thus allowing them to benefit from a part time job which does not interfere with their household duties. In many cases, the father's and the children's sharing in housework permits the mother to keep her double task of housekeeper and career woman.

Thirdly, the syndicates' role in solving the working woman's problems should concentrate on two things: Helping her to occupy leadership roles; and, putting an end to discrimination against her in matters of salary and promotion.