

Critical Notes Regarding Women's Role in Development⁽¹⁾

Most studies regarding women in the Arab world deal with such questions as the number of working women, the ratios of educated and illiterate women, women's health, maternity centers, child welfare centers and the like. Studies may also cover women's share in the labor force but the results of these studies are usually misleading because they do not include housekeepers, part-time workers and rural women whose work in fields and farms is considered part of their family duties.

The following notes try to call attention to conditions impeding woman's work in Syria, a topic usually neglected by researchers.

1. Scarcity of day - nurseries for children of working women.

In Syria, the government provides day-care centers for 20% of the state-employed women. In private sectors, less than 10% of the working women are provided with day-care centers for their children. These centers are largely concentrated in the capital and are almost non-existent in the provinces.

2. Unemployment

According to data collected in 1978, the percentage of women looking for work in Syria was 12% as compared to 15% in Lebanon and 23% in Tunis. Recent studies on women seem to neglect the problems and causes of their unemployment.

In encouraging women's integration in development the following basic question should be asked: what principles should guide us in our projects? For example, is it of prime importance to organize training courses for women in sewing, typing, domestic work, accounting, music, decoration and local crafts? These activities may be useful to housekeepers but they have little productive value. Priority in women's training must be given to more productive projects, such as modern poultry-raising, care of greenhouses, manufacture of house furniture, construction and repair of electronic devices and the like.

3. Women's Image in Mass Media

Television films often represent women either as slaves in rulers' palaces, entertainers and court intriguers or idle creatures given to luxury and corruption.

Industrial firms exploit television for advertising their beauty products, furs and luxurious

cars, which lure people into spending their earnings on unnecessary items.

Television producers should be pressured to present varied programs, consisting of sketches, plays, fiction and serial stories, whose function is not only to entertain but also to inform and instruct people, to help them give up stereotypes and adopt a new way of life.

4. Women's Education

There is a general complaint about the high rate of women's illiteracy in the Arab world. In spite of the growing number of girls in elementary schools, the number of drop-outs who leave school before finishing elementary education is very large and creates an element of worry. If we take Syria as an example, we are told that between 1970 and 1979 the number of illiterate women increased by 83,000. In 1970-1979, about 100,000 women attended literacy classes, but in that period, fewer than 62,000 completed the courses.

5. Lack of Educational Planning

The publication of figures indicating an increase in the number of schools and students is not enough to prove educational progress. More important is an evaluation of the educational level, a study of the quality of teachers, the adequacy of their training, their capacity for work and for growth in their profession. It is generally observed that young people, become teachers only as a last resort, that most teachers complain of heavy schedules and low salaries and that they use their free hours in additional paid work instead of taking part in cultural activities.

At Damascus University, the number of enrolled students in the first year is relatively large but only 10 to 20 percent of that number graduate. Many of the graduates find no employment or are employed in jobs which do not relate to their majors. Out of 74 students who graduated from the social science department, 24 were female; out of these 24 only two are employed in jobs related to their major.

(1) Summary of a talk presented by Dr. Khodr Zakariyya at a panel held in Tunis, 21-28 November 1982, published in *Dirasat Arabiyya*, no. 5, year 19, March.