

## Arab Women and the Women's Decade

In July 1985, a **World Conference to «Review and Appraise the Achievements of the UNITED NATION DECADE FOR WOMEN»** will be held in Nairobi, Kenya. Parallel to this conference, an **NGO Forum 85**, to assess the progress made during the decade and develop strategies, will also take place in Nairobi.

Arab women, like their sisters, will participate in both events, as government delegates or representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGO's). They and other participants will debate the decade's main themes of **«Development, Equality and Peace»** and the subthemes of **«Education, Employment and Health»**. They will talk about their hopes, achievements and shortcomings in the last ten years and learn from others' experiences.

But concerned women who cannot go to Nairobi can still share in these exciting events by adopting certain strategies, as suggested by the International Women's Tribune Centre<sup>(1)</sup>:

- By coordinating events, such as a **meeting of all women's groups** in their country or exhibitions of the work and achievement of their women.
- By organizing **letter writing, petition writing** or **audio-cassette campaigns** to voice their concerns in the media and to their country's delegation at Nairobi.

- By asking one of their delegates to the World Conference in Kenya to report back on issues debated there.
- By evaluating the progress made by women in specific fields during the Decade and publishing the results in newsletters, journals or books.

In this issue of *Al-Raida*, Rose Ghurayyib succinctly outlines the progress of Arab women in the fields of Political Rights, Education, Integration in Development, Women's Organizations and Personal Status Law (see. p. 7 - 9).

We have chosen to focus on the subject of **«Women and Legal Equality»** because of the importance of law as a tool for social change and because of the fact that the battles of many Arab feminists have been waged in this field.

We have included a **dossier on the Women's Decade** to refresh our memories and that of our readers about the major highlights of the past ten years and in order to evaluate where we were, and plan where we want to go. For if there are conclusions to be drawn about the major achievements of Arab women in the past decade they should go beyond simple stereotyped explanations.

Take **employment**, for example: Researcher Barbara Ibrahim<sup>(2)</sup> states that before the mid 1970's Arab Women's absence from formal employment





was blamed on «patriarchal authority,» «segregation of the sexes,» or «the conservatism of Islam.» However since the mid 70's researchers have been applying more sophisticated models to test labor force participation. Cultural factors are only one element among an array of economic, social and beaureaucratic structures that shape employment patterns, she declares.

The same principle applies in the area of **development** where feminists have previously insisted on integrating women in the development process whereas new research findings from Third World Countries are demonstrating empirically that the integration of women in development does not necessarily take into account their well being nor their special needs. Further, some Arab researchers have even come to challenge the assumptions that there is a positive correlation between «education,» «women's labor force participation,» and «development.»<sup>(3)</sup>

In another area of controversy, while some Arab feminists believe they have to learn from the experience of women in other societies, others criticise those who copy **models of Western feminism**. As Fatma Oussedik points out: «All feminist issues are viewed in Algeria, as in many other developing countries, as an alignment with occidental Europe - that is, seen as undermining the nationalistic will.»<sup>(4)</sup> These issues are also seen as a rejection of traditional values and cultures, which so

many Arab (men and women) are so proud of.

Thus it is in this atmosphere of push and pull between traditionalism and westernization that Arab women sailed through this decade sometimes through very rough seas. But if there has been a single striking attribute to these past turbulent years, it has been the opportunity to learn from each other (Arab and Western Feminists alike) and from our own mistakes. For we believe it is the knowledge that we women have acquired during the past that should help us implement new ideas and devise new strategies that will lead us intelligently and effectively into the 21st Century.

**Wafa' Stephan**

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#### References:

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- (1) Decade Update, No. 2, September 1984, p.4.
- (2) Barbara Ibrahim (Ford Foundation), **Arab Women and Industrial Employment: Some Issues for Discussion**. Paper presented at the Ayia Napa Workshop in Cyprus (May 21 - 23, 1984) organized by IWSAW.
- (3) Read Ashraf Hassouna's article «Education for Women - For What?» in **Cairo Papers in Social Science**, Vol.5, Monograph One, December 1977, pp. 49 - 54.
- (4) Fatma Oussedik, **Algeria. The Day - to - Day Struggle in Sisterhood is Global**, Robin Morgan (ed.). Anchor Books, New York, 1984, pp. 47 - 49.