

IWSAW Regional Conference

Why do women work?

What are the legal statutes regarding women's work?

What is the attitude of the family and the society towards women's work?

What hampers women's integration in development and what are the possible solutions for the existent problems?⁽¹⁾

These were some of the questions that the conference tried to answer through research and discussions.

The Conference on Planning for the Integration of Arab Women in Economic Development, organized by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World - Beirut University College, was held in Nicosia, Cyprus from June 24-29, 1985. Coordinating the conference was Dr. **Julinda Abu Nasr**, Director of the Institute, and Mrs. **Irini Lorfing**, Associate Researcher at the Institute.

Taking part in the presentations and discussions were eighteen Arab women researchers that came from ten Arab countries: North Africa, Egypt, Sudan, the Gulf and the Middle East. There were also prominent non-Arab contributors who took an active part in the discussions.

In her speech, Dr. **Julinda Abu Nasr** outlined the objectives of the conference as follows:

1. To provide a global view of the determinants and trends of women's economic productivity in the Arab region.
2. To produce substantial information which would help in planning for the full integration of Arab women in economic development.

Discussions in the conference revolved around four major areas namely: the Legal, the Economic, the Socio-cultural and Ideological, and the Educational contexts, in which substantial progress needs to be made. For each of these areas the group developed a set of recommendations and suggestions summarized as follows:

The Legal Context

Determining the legal codes that hamper women's integration in development, i.e. legislation in the Arab countries and their effect on women's participation in the field of public work.

It is recommended that governments:

- Guarantee constitutionally equality to workers of both sexes; and to forbid all forms of sexual discrimination.
- Ratify international and Arab agreements concerning the Arab working woman.
- Adopt national legislation in particular laws governing personal status, to conform to the principles of equality consecrated by most constitutions.
- Promote educational campaigns to inform women of their rights, and to encourage them to join unions.
- Dissociate in the labour code protective measures regarding women workers from protective legislation regarding children.
- Restrict, except in the case of maternity, measures designed for the specific protection of women.
- Allow the possibility of a parental leave in addition to maternity leave.

The Economic Context

Women have always been poorer in relation to men in disposable income and property ownership. United Nations data also points to an increase in the impoverishment of women in the next fifteen years unless specific measures are undertaken to remedy existing inequalities. Since the majority of the population in the Arab region is rural, support to the agricultural sector is a vital pre-requisite for the improvement of food production from rural areas and for the reduction of migration to urban areas.

The implementation of the following recommendations can provide women with the practical support they require:

- Encourage intra-regional funding for research on the economic role of women in and outside the household in Arab countries.
- Recognize small scale rural household agricultural and animal husbandry production as a legitimate concern for practical support by international,

(1) An-Nahar (Beirut), 20 July 1985. Article on the Nicosia Conference (in Arabic) by Rose Ghurayyib.

regional and national institutions.

- Identify and remove obstacles to women's employment through the provision of service and protective measures.

The Socio-cultural and Ideological Context

The Arab world is passing through a transitional stage. Therefore, planning for the mobilization of women's full participation in economic development should be viewed within the local, national and regional framework. In this period of transition, Arab women face a crisis of identity. Traditional values that have been fostered through the years do not always meet the demands imposed by contemporary social reality; emulating the West and imported models caused women to feel they were adopting an image alien to their own. It is important that Arab women be given the opportunity to choose their identity and set their own models.

The following recommendations were suggested:

- Abolish sex discrimination.
- Recognize women's full citizenship, not only de-Jure but de-Facto.
- Raise the consciousness of policy makers; planners: economic, social and political groups; women's organizations and labour unions regarding the following:

1. To inform citizens, particularly women, of their rights and urge them to exercise their rights especially at the political level.
2. To develop local and audio-visual programmes of quality to promote positive images of women.
3. To establish a network of concerned Arab researchers to conduct research, disseminate and exchange information and provide document services on issues concerning women. The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World could initiate such an activity.
4. To carry out and finance research studies on women within the historic, familial, socio-cultural, literary and art context; and to encourage cooperative studies in the region.

The Educational Context

A. Formal Education

Education plays a vital role in improving the status of women. The factors that hampered women's participation in national development were the lack of social awareness of the value and necessity of female education, the lack of long and short term planning concerning the educational needs of women, as well as the insufficient attendance at primary schools and the insufficiency of the teaching population.

It is recommended that governments:

- Provide women with the skills necessary to equalize their participation in economic development.
- Adopt the educational system suitable for the economic and social needs of each country.
- Encourage women's enrolment in all areas of specialization including the non-traditional fields (science, technology).

B. Non-formal Education

In the non-formal sector, attention was drawn to the high rate of female illiteracy and the lack of training in skills that would improve women's financial status.

Recommendations included an analysis of the changes required in the educational programme in the Arab world such as:

- To create and implement training programmes with the aid of audio-visual materials that do not contain any sex stereo-types.
- To offer training programmes (including in-service and on-the-job training), to serve the special needs of women through formal and voluntary organizations, thus increasing the productivity of women and improving their chances in upward mobility.

Conclusion

It is important to mention that this article is only a brief account of the conference, considering the large number of studies presented and the diversity of problems and recommendations discussed. The recommendations adopted by the conference members represent their efforts to have more effective future planning (both long and short term planning), and global solutions to the problems of Arab working women and their integration in development. Here, I find it convenient to quote Rose Ghurayyib, "the aim of integrating women in development is not only economic. It includes other forms of development: the physical, social, intellectual and spiritual. While we acknowledge the need for this integration, we should try, by every means, to arouse her interest in it and her liking for it".⁽²⁾

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More information and material on the Regional Conference could be obtained from **The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World**, Beirut University College. P.O.Box 13-5053 Beirut, Lebanon. Tel. 811968 Cable Address: BECOGE. Telex: 23389 LE.

(2) Rose Ghurayyib. Article on **Women's Integration in Development**.