

Education and Economic Needs Drive Arab Women to Join the Labour Force

The Arab world at present is witnessing the emergence of a working women's force. This influx of working women came as a result of an economic need that one bread winner cannot afford anymore to feed a family composed of five to six persons, on the average.

The mere fact that more women are joining the labour force, although in relative terms, has transformed many aspects of society: economically, socially and culturally. The change did not come easily nor cheaply. Arab women paid a heavy price to reach economic independence. Certainly the path they followed was not planted with roses, they waged a series of battles starting with the dropping of the veil, annulment of illiteracy, and convincing fathers, brothers and husbands to allow them to leave the house and work in offices and factories.

Wherever one goes in the Arab world, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, one can see women involved in economic activity. Agriculture and domestic services are still the predominant spheres. But many young women, single and married, are joining the long queues of light industry or operating electronic machines in banks, airline companies and offices. Yet, the overwhelming majority of Arab women are still idle, staying home and managing their households.

Arab working women on the average still earn less than men, and many experience subtle forms of discrimination in their effort to advance their positions as full-timers and to obtain equal pay. Few are the women who reach the level of leadership in both the public and private sectors. Arab governments in Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq name women ministers. But the real and final authority is still vested by the prime ministers who are men. Few are the women in the Arab world who chair board meetings of big companies and banks. The majority of women who work in corporations are on the lower managerial level, clerks, secretaries and tele-

phone and telex operators, though women earmarked for themselves a reputation as excellent teachers, nurses, and executive secretaries.

Arab women's contribution in professional life or career, can be found mostly in developing Arab societies where women have had a good educational background. This class of Arab women can be found largely among Lebanese, Egyptians, Palestinians and Tunisians, who have excelled as doctors, writers, social workers, journalists and college professors.

Women's achievement of high goals did not come without problems. Probably the most profound and widespread of women's problems is one that came hand in hand with greater opportunity in the job market to meet the conflicting demands of family and career. Conservatives and fundamentalists question whether there can be accommodation between home and work place, suggesting that perhaps there can only be a choice between the two. Many young educated women are challenging this judgement and are trying successfully to perform both requirements with the help of maids who are still available in the Arab world and the cooperation of either family members, like mothers-in-law and aunts who happen to live with them or close to them.

Women have a small percentage, not more than 5% or 10% of the new jobs created in the Arab economy. With more women seeking employment, old debates have been revived and matters once considered settled have become contentious issues.

One issue questions whether women who have children should be working at all. Another concerns the inequities women encounter and how they may be overcome.

The majority if not the totality of Arab women put their households and husbands first and have no wish to enter the job market, nor are they attracted by talk of equality and rights. It is only the better educated, and rather the elite - those interested in careers, liberal and radical women - who put up these debates. The majority abide by the rules of society and their upbringing, which taught them to accept being submissive to men. Arab society is still a patriarchal society.

Few educated women are beginning to have rising work aspirations and ambivalence towards motherhood, although the trend among educated middle class women now is to have less children than their mothers and grandmothers. Few are the ones who are dubious about marriage.

Like the rest of the world, women in the Arab world did not anticipate themselves in the labour market. As a result they were less prepared for better paying positions.

Other conditions women confront in the world of work, is better treatment, especially for pregnant women who need to be absent from work after delivery. The Lebanese Labour Law gives every working pregnant woman a paid maternity leave of absence for two months. Other Arab and non-Arab countries where this law does not apply explain why women work on part-time basis or seasonal periods. There are some companies and indeed communities that oppose employing married women.

There are also special provisions that govern women's working conditions in the Arab world. Except for nurses women are not allowed to work at night, or take jobs that require heavy physical duties. On the other hand women are under-represented in certain kinds of jobs such as members of parliament, ministers, ambassadors, judges, high administrative jobs in government, police force and army cadets.

Middle Eastern societies did not reach the level of development where all kinds of jobs are open to women whether they are applying for them or not. Only when women are presented with a range of opportunities will they be able to say that they have freely chosen the kind of work they want.

The economic crisis that the world is passing through, including the Arab world, has driven thousands of Arab women to work. A change of values of life in the Arab world is taking place. Economic needs, education and modernization are influencing both men and women to have identical interests and aspirations regarding work.

Certainly with more young women going to higher education, there will be more integration of jobs and a

greater representation in the wide range of occupations. Moreover, enrollments of women in professional programs portend further gains in the future. The Arab world is passing through a transitional period. Hence, the status of women and their economic contribution has to follow. Development goes in various circles, if there is progress in one sector progress has to follow in other sectors as well.

Time and time again, it has been proven that promotion of working women in the private sector proved more profitable and quicker than the public sector. Lebanese Labour Law pays married men a family allowance while a working widow who is the sole breadwinner is not entitled to these privileges. Arab working women in general settle for smaller pay, this is because better paying jobs were not open to them. Education and changing men's perception of their role in society as well as the economic need would lead ultimately to the growing presence of women in the job market.

There are basic changes in the character of work all over the world. The main problem that hinders Arab women's position is the problem of authority. Men refuse to work under women executives and take orders from a woman. The biggest obstacle to advancement of women in the Arab job market is the fact that men feel uncomfortable with working women. Women are considered by Arab men as outsiders if not intruders to work, the only sector where urban city dwelling women are moving up quickly is in the retail and fashion business. Perhaps because their clients are chiefly women. Almost most of the boutiques in Beirut, Damascus, Amman and Cairo are managed and owned by women.

Achievement of Arab women in the post-independence period is not yet complete, and has still a long way to go, but it is remarkable and should be given credit in promoting of women's status in education, culture and social development. No doubt they owe this improvement to themselves first and to enlightened leaders in some Arab countries by giving women their political rights - suffragettes - and hence promoted their economic and social integration in society.