

Arab Women's Contribution to Development^(☆)

The popular western media image of the typical Arab women has changed little in decades. According to the «fiction» these heavily veiled figures are seen but rarely heard as they scurry through the corridors of opulent eastern palaces. The legend records that these women have no rights and opinions. When - in the privacy of the perfumed boudoir - they cast off veil and chador, a sexy Shehrazade emerges, whose main aim in life is to please her man. The absurd myth that grew from roots set in harems of Ottoman sultans centuries ago - and even then was far from typical - refuses to go away. The truth is, if there ever was a «typical» Arab woman this person no longer exists⁽¹⁾.

Prior to the discovery of oil and the consequent economic boom of Gulf states, women were the acting heads of the household. While the men went away for fishing and pearling, women fed the children, built the houses from mud, weaved threads and sew the family's clothing and fed the herds⁽²⁾. In agricultural areas like Egypt and Yemen, women worked with men in the field. In conflicts such as the Struggle for independence in Algeria, the besieged refugee camps in Lebanon and the Palestinian intifada, «we saw that the hand which rocks the cradle also cradles the rock»⁽³⁾.

Today, more than ever before, the Arab world is experiencing social, economic and political changes such as the unification of the two Yemens, the women's protest in Algeria, Egypt, and notably Saudi Arabia, and last but not least the impact of the war in the Gulf.

Noticeably, women are eager to play an active role, rather than a marginal one, in development. Arab women are not just recently participating in development. They have always been a part of development, ranging from keeping the family fed and clothed, enter-

ing the economic mainstream to participation in national struggles.

Hence, the nature of work is changing and the forms of production are different from what they were. New technologies have substituted the market for home-made forms of subsistence. Women are tackling new educational levels and new professions which extend beyond the traditionally acceptable occupations for the female gender such as nursing and teaching. Women are executives in leading banks and finance houses in the Kuwaiti stock exchange, in Arab government offices and embassies around the world. Omani women are serving in the local police⁽⁴⁾.

Nevertheless, traditions persist. Arab women express an attachment to traditions in their lives. Wafa Al-Rasheed, a dynamic young executive at the Kuwaiti stock exchange is willing to give up her job and career should it interfere with the well-being of her family.

«For centuries, women have organized their lives in this way. Men have a way of making their work sound



Illustration from *The Tribune*,
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more important. Women perform all domestic and maternal duties and many hold down a full-time job, yet without making a fuss». explains Egyptian feminist and writer Leila Badr⁽⁵⁾.

These changes contribute to a «new shift in emphasis from treating women as marginal or complimentary in the working of Arab society, to one that sees women and their activities as integral constituents of the system»⁽⁶⁾.

Yet, women are still facing hardships despite mobility. A large proportion of Arab women remain illiterate. Parents in rural areas are still reluctant to educate their daughters lest they aspire to work rather than get married. Employers lay off women before men and women earn less than men, i.e. 25% less in Egypt and 15% in Jordan.

Consequently, one of the major challenges to Arab women is to ensure that they do not lose ground, says Leila Badr.

A conference on Arab women's contribution to development sponsored by the United Nation's Development Programme (UNDP) in co-operation with Arab League states and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), was held in Cairo in the summer of 1990. The conference focused on the participation of women as an essential human resource⁽⁷⁾. At the conference, Leila Badr stressed that «it is time Arab women's efforts were recognized, we have been full partners in the region's development right down the line». Dr. Mohamed Nour, UNDP's Regional Director for Arab States pointed out that the role of women in planning and implementing development is usually neglected and overlooked. Consequently, Dr. Nour, proposed a slogan for women's contribution and participation in development in the 1990s. «NO WOMEN, NO DEVELOPMENT». ●

(☆) Extracts from: Pat Lancaster, «Arab Women - Meeting the Challenges of the 1990s», *The Middle East*, August 1990, issue # 190.

(1) Ibid.

(2) Rose Ghurayyib, *Adwa' Aala Al-Haraka Al-Nisa'iyah Al-Mouaasirah*, Beirut: Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1988.

(3) Lancaster, Ibid.

(4) Ibid.

(5) Ibid.

(6) Amal Rassam, «Towards a Theoretical Framework for the Study of Women in the Arab World.» *Women in the Arab World*, UNESCO, 1985, p. 123.

(7) Lancaster, Ibid.