

## Women and The Environment in The Arab World

A decade ago, nobody really worried about the environment, except for a few concerned environmentalists. Their repeated warnings against global warming, the various forms of pollution, the slow extinctions of rare species, health hazards and other environmental problems went without much notice. Global awareness rose only when the danger became real and the consequences were tangibly felt.

The Arab world is no exception. Concern for the environment grew as a result of the ecological disaster and the smoke pollution culminated by the Gulf war. In the Gulf, air and water pollution are, understandably, the most urgent concerns at this time. Consequently, preserving the environment is over and above all other considerations, mostly in the area worse hit (Kuwait). Other regions which did not feel the direct impact of the pollution pay less attention to environmental problems and their effects on people.

Likewise, in Lebanon, environmental awareness rose after the fighting stopped. Thus, people woke from the war to find themselves surrounded by a variety of pollutants. Hence, compounded efforts, publicity, and cleanups are being undertaken by environmentalists and concerned associations. (1)

However, acknowledging the role of women in this matter remains relatively limited in the region, keeping in mind variations between the various countries and the respective degrees of women's participation in national development. Nevertheless, generally speaking, it

would seem that the Arab World has not come around to realizing that **women are the real managers of local environmental resources.** (2). Hopefully, the efforts which are being made to preserve the environment will grow to include a more active and effective role for women at decision-making levels.

The part women play in population-environment issues has been little studied, and more generally, empirical studies of the community use of resources and the impact of environmental degradation on dependent populations are few and far between (3). Hence, most of the research remained largely technical and only recently did researchers and humanitarian organizations begin to concentrate on the social implications of environmental problems.

The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) (4) conducted a number of studies in the area of "Environment, Sustainable Development and Social Change." The research included case studies investigating traditional resource management system (in Africa and Latin America) and environmental activism.

For instance, based on preliminary observations, UNRISD reports that (a) collective action to resist the implementation of environmentally destructive development projects is rarely triggered primarily by an overriding concern to preserve the environment in its existing state, but rather hinges on the lack of sufficient benefits from such projects accruing to local communities. This fact does

not imply that the traditional communities are insensitive to the aesthetic niceties of the surroundings, but rather that they have a desire to survive, and to improve their living levels and consumption levels if possible. (b) The current researches also suggest that the success of environmental movements is often due to their ability to form coalitions with regional, national or international groups which have similar interests, and to publicize their grievances and their cause.

It would seem that the natural trend of things is in reverse. First comes the cause of damage, i.e. an action [war in the case of the Arab World, and technology in the case of the western world (5)] which is independent in itself. It is followed by the aftermath and, thus, hysterical efforts to curtail the destruction and deterioration. Then everybody goes back to business, as usual, and leaves the residue to the consumers of which women form the bulk

Fortunately, there is a growing realization, worldwide, that women are the first to suffer from environmental deterioration and lack of development. For this reason, women appear to be more concerned than men about the state of the Earth and the fate of future generations (6). Women can play special and important roles not only in Environmental protection, but also in conservation and the effective management of different resources

This issue of *Al-Raida* aims at reporting conditions as well as corrective measures for preserving the environment, not only in the Arab World and the Middle East, but on a