

Women's Human Rights are Universal!

Fortunately, women's human rights have become an intrinsic item on world agendas, whatever and whoever the declared International Year may promote. United Nations committees, concerned institutions and feminist groups all over the world highlight women's human rights in the family and warrant for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

For instance, at its Twelfth Session, in January 1993, The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) examined the issues of women's human rights under the articles concerning nationality (article 9), legal capacity (article 15) and family laws (article 16) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Examination of women's human rights in the family discussed in CEDAW and IWRAW (International Women's Rights Action Watch) conferences in preparation for the International Year of the Family, brought forth various recommendations, of which the following are basic premises:(1)

- women's human rights under the Convention are a universal norm to which all countries and legal systems should adhere;
- protection of the family as a social unit should not be used to justify restrictions on the individual rights of family members;
- women are entitled to exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms within the family as well as within society;
- the definition of "family" should be expansive, to include the many kinds of family structures;
- the principle of legal capacity under Convention Article 15 is fundamental

to the exercise of all other rights, including those stated in article 9 and 16.

- the Convention should be used by governments and NGOs, as a practical tool for the protection and advancement of women.

Initially, one would wonder if the International Year of the Family, 1994, will promote women's emancipation or intensify submission to the roles of mother in the first place and wife in the second place, not to mention other avenues of domesticity. These fears would seem more justifiable in the Arab World than in the West, where the family is the dominant socio-economic unit. As such, society is likely to resist changes/reforms for women lest they endanger the family's cohesiveness, and consequently create anomie on a larger societal scale.

Hence, the debate over priorities, i.e. women's individual fulfillment on one hand, and the family's -- including all its members -- socio-cultural sustainability, on the other hand, come into play here. The majority of Arab women and men value the family over and above all other considerations. Various professional Arab women, who face the conflict of compensating between career and family, confirm priority to the family. (see Al-Raida #60, Winter 93, Cultural Dimensions to Women's Issues, Interview with Dr. Layla Nimah, Dean of Beirut University College; #57, Winter '92 -- Bouthaina Shaaban's article Middle East and Arab Women Speak.; #53 Spring 1991, Interview with Dr. Nisrine Ghaddar, the First Arab Women with a Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering from M.I.T).

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contribution to women will most likely be to push for better economic, legal, social, educational conditions for them, within the family. It is the strategy whereby progress is made by improving women's lot in the family as opposed to radicalizing the whole structure. Hence, the rally for women's human rights, worldwide, is a powerful advocate for change, especially when it comes to reforming domestic responsibilities.

The need for the elimination of discrimination and preservation of human rights in the family is imperative more than ever. The Arab world can no longer shun away under the pretext of unique religious and cultural characteristics. These do not contradict world wide causes and trends. It is worth noticing that more Arab women are receiving basic and higher education, their participation in the labor force is increasing, and they are experiencing gradual entrance into political offices in some of their countries. There is visible and growing awareness even in the Gulf states where women are restrained by explicit codes of behavior.

Once again, Al-Raida calls upon Arab countries, who have not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, of which Lebanon is one, to acknowledge women's human rights. Doing so does not jeopardize the family, quite to the contrary, it gives it added potency to deal with social and economic change.

(1) Source: IWRAW - Human Rights in the Family: Issues and Recommendations for Implementation, by Marsha A. Freeman, April 1993.

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