



## Women Centers In

# Jordan

By Abir Hamdar

During the past decade, Jordan has witnessed a rise in the number of centers and programs that cater to the needs of women in various sectors of society including economy, health, education and politics. Not only have these institutions enhanced, developed and increased public awareness regarding women's issues, they have also achieved much in terms of implementing and executing strategies. In 1974, Jordanian women were given the right to vote and the right to run for general elections. In 1980 the government signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and this was later ratified by parliament in 1992. According to UNICEF's 1997 Progress of Nations, women in Jordan make up 6% of top level government positions, while the regional average for the Middle East and North Africa is 2% and the world average is 7%. The labor sector has also undergone a marked improvement. Statistics show that the participation of women in the labor force has more than doubled rising from 7.7% in 1979 to 15% in 1993. This number increased to 16%, according to the Population Charter of 1994. In the maternal and child health service, the percentage of women who received neonatal care rose from 58% during 1978-1983 to 89% during 1992-1996. Also, the percentage of women who gave birth under medical supervision rose to 93% during 1992-1996. Even life expectancy of women increased from 64% in 1980 to 70% in 1994. But that is not all.

In a 1996 Geneva speech, HRH Princess Basma Bint Talal - an advocate of women's rights and head of some of these centers - said that literacy among women in Jordan exceeded 80%, adding that there are as many girls as boys in primary and secondary education. Princess Basma also said that almost one third of all females in the higher age group category (18-23 years old) are in higher education or have completed it. This is one of the top figures of women's participation in higher education anywhere in the world. Yet, all of this would not have been made possible without the intensive efforts of members of the various women's committees and through their public campaigns, publications, studies, conferences and workshops. In short, the women's movement in Jordan has opened the way and is still aiming for more. Today, Jordan is home to a number of centers that work towards further increasing women's status and role in society. Below is a list of some of these major and minor centers as well as their objectives, responsibilities and activities. The list is based on the date each center or committee was established. (Statistics taken from the Hashemite Royal Court of Jordan. Last Update in Aug. 1999.)

Jordanian Women's Union (JWU), established in 1945 Headed by director Asma Khodor, is a non-governmental organization that advocates women's and children's rights, political awareness and poverty alleviation. Located in the capital Amman and with representatives dispersed across

the country. JWU has several objectives and responsibilities. These include: alleviating all forms of discrimination and oppression against women (honor crimes, physical abuse); enhancing and developing their status in society (alleviating illiteracy); providing the training required to care for a family; and supporting women's right to motherhood. The Union also works towards increasing women's knowledge in areas such as law, politics and culture. According to the Unions rules and regulations, any Jordanian woman is eligible to membership as long as she is above 18, supports the laws of the organization and helps in its numerous activities. Since its creation, the JWU has been organizing conferences, workshops and campaigns to promote women's issues. For instance, it was very active in



campaigns concerned with women and the family as well as in advocating the implementation of a law that permits women the right to travel without prior permission from male relatives. It was also one of many centers to participate in the Fourth Women World Conference in Beijing, China. Tel: 568-7037, Fax: 568-7061, Email: JWU@go.com.jo

The Business and Professional Women's Club (BPWC), was established in 1976. The National Federation, in cooperation with the Noor Al Hussein Foundation, started small business counseling which offered business advice and financial support for women entrepreneurs. It also offered a legal consultative service office and an information and documentation center for women's studies. The BPWC's programs, which cater to the personal and professional needs of working women from all segments of life, include hot-lines, service centers for small businesses, free legal aid and technical training for women. The club's activities are not restricted to women, since men too actively participate in BPWC's programs and events, particularly in seminars, lectures and training courses. Queen Noor is the Honorary President of the National Federation of BPWC and Rasha Barguti is the director. The center is located in the capital Amman. Tel 551-1647, Fax: 553-0093, The Royal Palace, Email: bpwcamm@go.com.jo

The General Federation of Jordanian Women (GFJW) was established in 1981. GFJW is a national non-governmental organization of women's associations and societies that works towards enhancing the status of women in different domains. These include improving her status in the political, economic and social field. The Federation's membership includes over 80 societies, committees and headquarters in each of the 12 governorates all of which mobilize women's efforts to play an effective role in political decision-making. Not only does the Federation offer educational opportunities and guidance in family welfare and health, it also advocates legislative reform favoring women and initiates income-generating activities in collaboration with other non-governmental organizations. GFJW has also established a National Information Center for Women

which contains a research unit, an interactive library with audio-visual aids and access to the Internet, as well as a consultation and information department. The latter provides researchers with information on national, regional and international organizations concerned with women's affairs. Queen Noor was the Honorary President of the Federation but after the death of His Majesty King Hussein, she gave up the presidency of some of the national organizations, in order to devote more time to the rest. She remains the Honorary President of the Business and Professional Women's Club (see above). P.O. Box 9796 and 921687, Jabel El-Hussain Amman. Fax: 962-6-694-810. Tel: 00962-6-66-68-97 Email: nicw@gfjw.index.com.jo

The Jordanian National Committee For Women (JNCW) was established in 1992. The JNCW is the highest policy making body for women in Jordan and is hosted by The Queen Alia Fund For Social Development (QAF). It is located in the capital Amman, presided over by Princess Basma Bint Talal and directed by Hiam Kalimat. The committee also includes representatives from public and private bodies concerned with women's issues. A major priority in the work of this committee has been the drawing up of a National Strategy for Women in Jordan. Thousands of women across Jordan contributed to this strategy and are now involved in it. This strategy was also the outcome of various studies, meetings and seminars conducted throughout the kingdom, and its main principles are building on the provisions of the Jordanian constitution, the Jordanian National Charter as well as Islamic values and principles of human rights. (The National Strategy for women aims to improve women's status, involve them in the national development and economics activities, promote their legal status and increase their participation in decision-making processes.) JNCW's main objectives are: amending legislations obstructing women's participation in development, and enacting new legislations that guarantee their full participation; unifying the efforts of organizations working on women's issues; coordinating programs that aim to provide care for women; evaluating these programs and following up their implementation. The committee also works towards creating public awareness regarding the importance of women's roles and their status in the progress of the Jordanian society, increasing their participation in development and creating job opportunities for them in the public arena. So far, JNCW has been one of the major centers struggling for the promotion of the status of women in Jordan. In 1993, the committee held three seminars in the central, northern and southern parts of the country to ensure participation in the drawing up of a National Strategy for Women. As a result, the strategy was endorsed by the government, thus providing the central point towards which all national efforts would lead. During 1994, JNCW formed several technical committees to prepare short and medium term programs of action. Also in 1994 JNCW, in collaboration with ESCWA, organized a workshop entitled "Workshop on the Tentative Plan of Action Based on the Jordan National Report of the Beijing Conference." In 1995



a seminar entitled "The Role of Women in the Development of Human Settlements," was held. This seminar centered around the Arab Declaration of Human Settlements. The committee has participated in over 15 seminars, workshops and training courses that deal with women's issues. 962-6-825241, Fax 962-6-827350 P.O. Box 5118 Amman 11183 Jordan. E-mail: qaf@amra.nic.gov.jo and asma@nol.com.jo

Jordanian National Forum For Women (JNFW) was established in 1995. The JNFW is governed by a Higher Council chaired by HRH Princess Basma and has a current membership of more than 120,000 women. The forum consists of representatives of the committees of each of Jordan's twelve governorates as well as other women leaders. These representatives are elected nationally every four years and serve on the Higher Council. In general, the council is involved in determining the policies of the forum while the committees set the plans of each governorate. These plans are later implemented by the co-ordinators who are spread in headquarters around the country. The co-ordinators provide a "meeting place for the women of the governorates and provide free consultative services." Thus, the main objective of JNFW is spreading awareness among Jordanian women of the content of the National Strategy which was ratified in 1993. (See JNCW for more information on the National Strategy.) JNFW aims at raising awareness on health, education, culture, legislature, economy and politics. It also works towards increasing awareness among women regarding their rights and responsibilities in accordance with Islam, the Jordanian Constitution and the National Charter. But the list of objectives does not end. JNFW also seeks to help Jordanian women realize their potentials, increase their participation in development at various levels and provide them with opportunities that gets them involved in decision-making, or in forming pressure groups that influence decision makers. In addition to these main objectives, JNFW has a list of activities it has been implementing and advocating. These activities are training programs that improve the skills of rural women, the ability to campaign for judicial amendments and organize meetings with local MPs to discuss women's issues. Needless to say, JNFW has been very active in achieving the goals it has set for itself. For instance, in 1995 the forum lobbied for the participation of women in the municipal council elections. Thus, for the first time in Jordanian history twelve women ran for the elections, ten were elected – nine as council members and one as mayor. Also in September of the same year, ten representatives of the committees attended the Fourth World Conference on Women in China and were able to recount their experiences and the progress they have achieved so far. At present, the main aim of JNFW is to change legislation affecting women, and increase women's democratic institution of the country.

Princess Basma's Women's Resource Center (PBWRC) was established on March 8, 1996 on the occasion of International Women's Day. It is a support mechanism for policy makers and women's groups in Jordan. Located at

the Queen Zein Al Sharaf Complex for Development, the center supports women's groups, youth groups or anyone who is active or interested in women's issues in Jordan. Not only does it have access to national training facilities and the expertise of the staff of Queen Alia Fund For Social Development, it also helps individuals and groups identify needs, plan activities, gain access to technical assistance, and create interactive relationships nationally. According to a speech by director of PBWRC, Farah Daghistani, the aim of the center is to "enhance the roles of existing national institutions, through its own function, hence complimenting the overall machinery of the advancement of women." (quoted in PBWRC *Quarterly Newsletter*, Issue 1, 1997.) Other aims include: assessing women's needs by gathering and analyzing information; enhancing effective policies concerning women's issues by providing decision makers with reliable information; raising public awareness on women's issues; increasing the participation of women in the development process and promoting discussion on women's problems. This is made possible through education, awareness materials, campaigns, workshops, seminars and research. Furthermore, creative, recreational and cultural activities that focus on what's happening in Jordan have been part of the activities that the center makes use of to succeed in its mission. In addition, the committee has implemented a number of specific programs. Top on the list is "Women in Decision Making," which – as the title suggests – is a program that increases the role of women in decision making through enactment of skills and raising awareness of their rights. In general, this program targets professional women, young women in schools and universities, candidates for municipal and parliamentary elections as well as community leaders. Another program which the center offers is "Women In Development." The latter aims to integrate women into the substantial development process by increasing their awareness of issues such as income, health, education and poverty. Finally, "Policy Project," aims at involving women groups in promotion work at the community level. The project, which was implemented in co-operation with The Center For Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) involves training workshops. In terms of research related activities, PBWRC also has a Research and Studies Unit which works towards establishing permanent devices for data compilation in each of Jordan's governorates. Qualitative research that provides up-to-date information on the true status of women in Jordan is the unit's top priority. These information are used for needs assessment, program evaluation and monitoring. One of the many studies this unit has been involved in is a study for the Development and Employment Fund (this was part of a project to alleviate poverty.) PBWRC has been true to its words. It has organized various activities including seminars and lectures. For instance, it has hosted a seminar in which students from the Jordan University for Women, Philadelphia University and Al-Isra University discussed with members of the press topics ranging from stereotypes in the media, to social issues, to career opportunities for women in the press. But that is not all. In 1995 and in con-

junction with the British Embassy and the British Council, PBWRC also held a 5-day workshop entitled "Women's Political Participation," that included 65 women participants. Also, a workshop on the topic of leadership and reproductive health, which was funded by UNFPA, was held in the governorates to target rural women. A workshop on starting one's business was also held. Target groups in this workshop included representatives from the Ministries of Social Development and Agriculture, QAF and JNFW. Tel: 505-2431, Fax: 505-8199 Email: PBWC@cns.gov.jo

The Sisterhood Is Global Institute/Jordan (SIGI/J) was established in 1998. SIGI is a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It seeks to deepen the understanding of women's rights at the local, national and regional levels and has members in 70 countries. Jordan hosts one of SIGI's offices and resource centers which is located in the capital



Amman and headed by coordinator Asma Khader. The center was established to bridge the gap in "information technology and knowledge accessibility between women in the industrialized countries and the Muslim world." In general, SIGI's objectives are as follows: Informing women of the basic rights guaranteed to them under international human rights conventions and empowering them to attain those rights; increasing public awareness and concern about human rights abuses committed against women; facilitating the direct participation of women from the Global South in international debates concerning their rights; encouraging women from all cultures, religions, races, classes, ages, and abilities to work together to define and achieve common goals; facilitating research and providing training models for women from the developing world in the areas of human rights education, communication and leadership. So far, SIGI/J has been working towards its objective. It has been providing Jordanian women active in human rights causes and other interested women training for and access to the internet and other communication technologies as well as courses on using computers and internet, to aid them in research and basic interactive teaching and learning skills. SIGI/J has hired support staff and purchased communication technology tools and made them available to representatives working on issues pertaining to women. The SIGI/J resource center has also provided access to human rights documents and networks, and research materials concerned with violations, strategies and advocacy. These documents are open to the public. Finally, SIGI/J office is developing criteria for a data bank on women's human rights information. This information includes who's who in women, articles, bibliographies and lists of organizations and projects regarding women in Jordan and the Arab world. 5 Nadim Al-Mallah Street, Jebel El-Lweibdeh, Amman, Jordan. Tel/Fax: 962-6-462-3773. Email: sigi@firstnet.com.jo

Jordan University: At the start of the 1999-2000 semester, the University of Jordan started a new masters program in Women's Studies which presented a unique opportunity for students to explore and understand women's issues. The program - the first of its kind in a local university - was launched in cooperation with the Women's Studies center at Britain York University and is "an independent entity," from the university's faculties of humanities or sciences." According to the program's administrative supervisor, Raghida Shreim, Arab women's affairs are scattered in various fields, and the new program provides a cross-road for those interests to meet, (quoted in *Jordan Times*, March 2, 2000.) It is also an attempt to create objective awareness regarding women's issues and looking at their specific problems, as well as coming up with possible solutions. Thus, the courses the program offers are: Gender Issues (defines gender and the main contemporary issues related to it); Women in Politics (highlights the meaning of power, politics and its relation to gender, and evaluates women's status in different positions); Women and Development (tackles theories of development related to women and analyzes women's role in implementing strategies); Women in History (a detailed historical view of women from all parts of the world); Women in Literature (analyzes the image of women in world literature with special emphasis on the literature of the Islamic world); Women's Health (discusses the health needs of women of all ages). Other courses include: The Psychology of Women, Women and the Law and Women in Society. Professors teaching the courses have both the academic and practical experience required to enable them to shed light on the above issues. Even though the courses are mainly theoretical, students are still encouraged to find ways to apply them locally. So far, the program has made a modest success. Already five males and twenty-nine females have been enrolled. Since the program "does not aim at cornering men, rather, ensuring men are not enemies of women," (Jordan Times.) it has caught the interest of both sexes. P.O BOX 11943, Fax: 5355599, Tel: 5355000 (Ext: 3153, 3157, 3159).

#### A Historical Overview:

The first women society was established in Jordan in 1944 under the name of the "Women Solidarity Society." The society, which had no headquarters and held its meetings in members' houses, played a major role in relief work for Palestinian refugees. In 1945, "The Women Federation Society" was founded as part of the Arab Women Federation and aimed at improving the status of women in society. In 1949, the two women societies merged into one, under a new name, the "Jordanian Hashemite Women Society." The 1950s in Jordan was considered the decade of voluntary movement which led to the establishment of the Union of Voluntary Societies in 1959. In 1950 the "Young Women's Christian Association" (YWCA), was founded to serve all women regardless of social, religious or racial affiliation. In 1952, the "League to Defend Women's Rights" was founded to raise Jordanian women's awareness of their political role and the need to defend



their socio-economic rights. In 1954, the first Arab Women Federation in the Kingdom was announced which aimed at eradicating illiteracy, building ties between Arab women and women of the world, advancing peace, and promoting women's political rights.

The Young Women's Association (YMWA) was established in 1972. YMWA is a non-profit organization that was created under the patronage of Her Royal Highness Princess Sarvath El Hassan, who is also its president. Almost 200 persons work at the organization: 150 are paid staff and 45 are volunteers. Also 75% of the staff are women. According to Khadijeh Siraj, executive committee of YMWA, the aim of the organization is to provide community services and training in education, and to set up centers that cater to Jordanians from all segments of society, especially the socially disadvantaged and intellectually disabled. Today, and after 28 years of intensive work, YMWA has been true to its mission. It has set up several educational centers and institutions and has contributed to the training of qualified individuals. These centers are: YMWA Center for Special Education, which was founded

in 1974 and was the first institution to satisfy the educational and vocational needs of mentally disabled students and provide training to over 175 students from an early age. According to Siraj, the pre-vocational training section includes wood work, weaving, ceramics, and domestic sciences. Another achievement of YMWA is the Princess Sarvath Community College which was established in 1980 and which, according to Siraj, offers a two-year academic program for young women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. In the year 2000, and along with the New Brunswick Community College, it won the Canadian International Development Agency's Award of Excellence. YMWA also established a Sheltered Workshop in 1987 in the Amman Industrial Estate for the mentally disabled graduates of the center for Special education. The workshop is recognized as a region model by the International Labor Organization (ILO). Finally, in 1995 YMWA created the National Center for Learning Difficulties whose aim is to train teachers in the field of learning difficulties, promote public awareness on learning difficulties and offer diagnostic/remedial services to learning disabled children.

# Forthcoming

## Arab Women and Politics