



Yemen:

A Consecrate Interest in Women Research and Studies

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Introduction

The Yemen Republic: A vision that was shared among the Southerners and the Northerners for years until that 1990 Aden May day when the dream became a reality. Now unified, Yemen is the most populous country on the Arabian Peninsula with 15,915,000 citizens of which 7,943 thousand are male and 7,972 thousand are female according to a 1996 census.

With approximately half of its population being female, it is understandable why Yemen takes a rooted interest in the issues and concerns of women. This interest manifested itself in many forms in the community not the least of which is the establishment of research and study centers dedicated solely to women related matters and the creation of specialized factions within universities for advancing the status of women and education specialists in the same field.

Two such establishments demand particular attention and a closer look considering their contributions to the Yemeni society and women in particular. Notwithstanding their achievements, what makes them quite unique is their location, one being situated within the Adeni community and the other within the Sana'ai community.

The Republic of Yemen is considered to be one of the most education oriented societies in the Arab world. With several privately funded universities and three government-owned ones, as many as 97,190 Yemenis attend the public universities of which 16,752 are female according to the 1996 census. In addition, Yemen benefits from foreign educational and training experts thus introducing the country to diverse models and educational schemes and granting the society high level standards in educational and training experience, not to mention the fields of theoretical and empirical research.

A- The University of Aden, Foundation and Development

Aden was the capital of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen until 1990, when the two Yemens merged and it became the country's economic capital. Located on the Northwest shore of the Gulf of Aden, about 160 km east of

the Bab el-Mandeb, it is the country's principal port. It is also one of the country's two major cities embracing women studies centers. Embodying around 441,880 inhabitants, the region saw it both essential and beneficial to erect a center dedicated to women's issues. This came about in the form of a research and studies center within the University of Aden, the major university of the region.

On September 10, 1975, law No. 22 ratifying the founding of the University of Aden was passed. The university was founded with the main aim of providing the country with the manpower needed to raise the economic, social, educational and developmental levels, as well as to augment the educational opportunities for the growing secondary school graduates.

With education, agriculture, economics and administration forming the nucleus of the University, it now comprises fifteen faculties- six of those are dedicated to education, and the rest to agricultural sciences, economics and administration, medicine, law, engineering, arts, and oil and minerals- and ten scientific centers providing training, consultancy studies and other services to citizens as well as government and private institutions.

In chronological order of establishment they are: Yemeni Research and Studies, the Computer Center, the Continuing Education Center, the Language Center, University Consultancy Center, Center for British, American and Translation Studies, Center for Environmental Studies and Sciences, Science and Technology Center, Agriculture Constanacy Center, and the Women Studies and Research Center.

The Women Studies and Research Center

The establishment of the Center was dictated by the objectives that directed the work at the University.

Built to train quality cadres in various specializations, to develop knowledge through research, to satisfy the needs of the society and the requirements of the development plans, and to contribute towards the development of the society

and promote national unity, the administration recognized it as pivotal to have a unit dedicated to the cause of the tender constituency of the Yemeni citizenry.

In recognition of its role in service of the local community, it was finally decided that establishing a Women Studies and Research Center could not be further delayed. Thus came about the Center in 1998 to join the other equally important centers that make up the organizational framework of the University. Although the Center's main interest lies in the problems facing women in general and Yemeni women in particular, it seeks to approach these problems within a general analysis framework of the social roles of the two sexes alike. It does so through extensive research and applied studies, practical training offered in the form of short courses, and legal and economic consultations offered to the society at large as well as solidifying the Center's information bases.

1. The Center's Objectives

As every establishment is created with a focus which directs its work and shapes its efforts, the Women Studies and Research Center has at its core three directives that assure its course. First and foremost, the Center is interested in conducting and carrying out strategic research and studies. These are aimed at locating the roots of the existing problems of women in the society and proposing solutions and remedies for them. Through analysis and studies done on a regular basis, the Center ensures that the information gathered is up-to-date and that the problems are dealt with before they become too damaging.

In addition to preparing women to meet the challenges that face them in their social, political, professional and personal lives, the Center's second guiding principles is offering training to women and enhancing their capabilities in the political and economic fields. Although it is necessary to educate women, it is equally necessary to develop their leadership qualities and enhance their political and economic understanding of the world around them.

Participation in the process of building up academic and scientific establishments as well as creating and maintaining relations with the national government and non-governmental organization is another essential objective of the Center. While it is important to build up the capacities of the members of the Center, it is equally important, and essential, to build up the capacities of the University and the society at large. Far from being a self-sufficient and self-contained entity, the Center is a platform for shaping a more aware and more concerned society.

A final end towards which the Center progresses is inventory observation and classifying data information particular to women. This objective forms one of the core responsibilities of the Center. Given its nature as a research and study center, it is natural that the Center be interested in gathering information. Once gathered, this information needs to be

properly archived and adequately displayed, and when it is publicized, it is in a position to serve both the members of the University and the community.

2. Fields of Interest

Although the Center is first and foremost interested in researching and studying matters relating to women, there are particular fields of interest that demand special attention and primary focus.

Reflecting on Yemeni women's participation in the political life and decision making tops the list of interests of the Center. With women around the world gaining more and more leeway into the political sphere and demanding more decision-making opportunities, it is understandable that the Center direct its energies to study how this reflects on Yemeni women and how they compare to other women around the world.

If women's role in the political and decision-making spheres is important, their role in the fields of development and production is equally important. This is why the Center has devoted some of its resources to investigate this role and document it. With health issues gaining momentum worldwide, the center focuses on ways in which Yemeni women could have access to health education, cultural and social services. Conducting studies of this type allows the Center to form a better picture of the status of women and thus be better able to propose alternatives and solutions to the problems being faced. It also allows it to be a more reliable mirror of the reality of things and thus a more indispensable unit in the society.

Examining the participation of Yemeni women in science and technology is a further priority of the Center. With science and technology traditionally reserved for the males of any society and with the increased schooling of women in all the society, it is vital to maintain how this reflects on changing the established status quo. Since women cannot possibly ignore their household responsibilities, the Center finds it substantive to study family conditions and the different pressures faced by the family during periods of economic, social and political change.

Relating the obstacles that impede more participation on the part of women in the different fields as well as proposing ways to cope with these obstacles, form the last area of particular interest that the Center focuses upon.

The center encourages an inventory of collections and translation of research and studies linked with women's affairs in the Arab world and the world at large to form a basis for a library specialized in women's affairs.

3. Organizational Structure of the Center

The Center is considered to have an independent status within the larger framework of the University of Aden whereby it is directly linked to the Presidency of the

University and is governed by its laws, rules and regulations. The organizational structure of the Center is constituted of seven directorates.

At the head of the hierarchy of the Center is the Administrative Council of the Center. This is followed by the Executive Director from which the Deputy Executive Director branches. From thereon four independent departments branch, each administered by a separate head and responsible for different sets of tasks and priorities. These are the Department of Training, Legal and Economic Consultation, the Department of Documentation and Information, the Department of Financial and Administrative Affairs, and the Department of Research and Applied Studies. All these then constitute the Head of Voluntary Research Groups which is at the lowest end of the hierarchy.

Thus established and organized, the Center caters to the well-being of women both on the national and regional levels. It is the pride of the University of Aden and a center for interest and attraction to those attached to matters pertaining to women. With memberships in international organizations including the Arab University Union, the Islamic University Union and the International Union of Universities, the University of Aden hopes to press forward with its focus on women making the Center a bigger success than it already is.

B- University of Sana'a, Foundation and Development

Following the unification of the earlier states, Sana'a became the political capital of the country. The city, which lies 2,350 m above sea level in western Yemen, is a road junction and market center for coffee and fruits. Sana'a retains most of its traditional Islamic character with one of the most breathtaking landmarks of the region being the Great Mosque of the 7th century. With as many as 1,851,858 inhabitants, Sana'a has retained its status as the political and religious center of Yemen since the first century AD. This unique standing that it enjoys gives a unique status to its most important university, the University of Sana'a.

The Empirical Research and Women's Studies Center

Two abortive attempts to establish an academic concentration in Women's studies at the University did not dissuade efforts that it could be done. Rather, these attempts gave vigorous impetus to implant this seed within the University which ultimately brought the Center for Empirical Research and Women's Studies into being. The Center is considered a hallmark of a new true beginning of objective scientific knowledge concerning the realities of Yemeni women. It is also considered the grass-root for defining the problems women face and drawing out solutions and retributions.

1. Creation and Development

In January 1994, a Unit for Social Research and Women's Studies was established at the University. This Unit was under the auspices of the Sociology Department and not a

separate entity by itself. With the funding of the Royal Netherlands Embassy, the Unit prospered with course offerings leading both to a Master's degree in Social Research and Women's Studies and a graduate level Diploma in the field. Not only was the Unit pioneer on women's studies in Yemen, it also marked the birth of the first academic program of its kind fully integrated within a national university system anywhere in the Arab world.

With an eye to develop a cadre of highly skilled and motivated social researchers in women's issue and to document and analyze the situation and participation of women in the society, the University kept close watch on the Unit's development and saw to it that it did in fact develop. And indeed it did. In 1995 the Unit was officially upgraded and reconstituted as a Center for Empirical Research and Women's Studies. Now the Unit was detached from the Sociology Department becoming an independent, degree-granting Faculty within the University.

2. Academic Curriculum and Regional and International Partnerships

With continued financial support from the Netherlands and new, though limited funding, from other international agencies, women's studies at the University of Sana'a developed an academic curriculum offering courses on selected subjects. The topics of focus, carefully selected to reflect the particular needs and conditions of the country with research methodology and gender theories woven into the lectures, cover six areas of interest. With women as their primary focus, the courses relate to development, law, media, education, language and literature, and Islam.

Not only does the Center by itself represent a standpoint in the University, it also stands as an enticement for other disciplines to incorporate gender issues into their own courses. Thus the Center has succeeded not only in itself but also as part of a greater whole to raise awareness to the existence of women's issues, to their importance and to their relevance to and inseparability from other disciplines and considerations. With its regional orientations, international student and faculty body with scholars and academicians coming from such countries as Jordan, Iraq, the US and the Netherlands, links to the national and international development community in Yemen, and partnerships with other universities in Europe and the Arab world (such as the close and active partnerships with the University of Tilburg in the Netherlands and with al-Hassan University in Rabat, Morocco), the Center for Empirical Research and Women's Studies has forged deep and mutually beneficial connections between Sana'a University and the world beyond.

3. The Center's Journal, Dirasat Niswayah

In addition to extending educational formations in women's issues, the Center offers insights into the status of women through the publishing of a journal on women's studies entitled *Dirasat Niswayah*.

The Journal is bilingual, in Arabic and English, and is intended to provide a channel for publishing outputs of the Center researchers as well as best papers and theses produced by its students. It is published twice a year with issue zero having come out in October 1998.

4. The Documentation Center

Moreover, and to further enhance partnerships with universities elsewhere in the Arab world, the Center for Empirical Research and Women's Studies has developed its own documentation center. Complete with up-to-date equipment and Internet facilities as well as library resources including books, articles and periodicals related to the field of women, the Documentation Center established links with similar documentation centers in al-Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates. Under the auspices of



the Arab Council for Child Development, the Documentation Center resources are available to all members of the University irrespective of their faculty enrollment.

5. Encountered Problems

Although the experience of establishing a Center such as this seems free of problems, the reality of things is different. There were in fact several problems that the Center faced during its founding years, some continue into the present.

One of the most pressing and pertinent problems that has faced the Center since its inception was the linguistic obstacle. Given that the majority of the sources on women's matters are in English and that Yemen is foremost an Arab country, high levels of English competency were demanded of both the faculty and the students in the field. This was not an easy task to achieve since language deficiencies abound among the members of the Center, and special funding had to be allocated to combat them. Now additional English courses are required for students of the Center, and upgrading the faculty's English proficiency is a top priority.

Not only is the linguistic obstacle manifested in the need for an excellent command of English, but also in the vital need for translation from English to Arabic and vice versa. Adopting a consistent method of Arabisation was one way in which the Center attempted to overcome the pressing

need to make available all compiled information to the Yemeni public at large and the students of the Center in particular. The Center's Journal aids in diffusing this developed vocabulary across the country and the Arab world as well as helping in exposing the problems encountered in Yemen to outside non-Arabic speaking countries.

6. Reasons For Success

It is believed that one of the greatest surprises about the Center is that "it exists and thrives, fully integrated into the national university, in one of the most conservative Islamic societies in the world today." Where other universities failed, the University of Sana'a succeeded for three basic reasons.

Because the Center was first established as an applied branch of the Sociology Department at the University, it was given enough time to ground itself and establish a solid background. This is considered to be one of the main reasons that made the Center the success it now is and that gave it the sense of permanence it is thought to enjoy.

The maintaining of a strong focus on empirical research is believed to have drawn out the success of the Center. Being rooted in experimental and field research work the Center kept close to what really mattered to Yemeni women and thus did not lose focus or direction. This is considered to be greatly germane to the prosperity of the Center and its success not only in the view of the Yemeni society, but also of partner universities

and donors.

Finally, the fact that the Center, through its focus, curriculum and activities, was able to attract and retain funds both for itself and the university at large was attractive to the administration of the University. This gave it extra instigation both to maintain and develop the Center making it the accomplishment it now is.

In the years since its establishment, the Center has achieved various notable attainments in areas ranging from institutionalization and international recognition, to regionalization, human resource development, Arabisation, documentation, and national and international outreach. What makes the Center so particular and successful is the fact that it derives, and will continue to derive its focus and direction from the realities and priorities of women in Yemen and the Arab world. The Center is now in a position to influence issues and concerns of greater relevance to the local and regional environment and to contribute in an indispensable way to the international dialogue on gender issues.

To learn more about Yemen, the University of Aden and the University of Sana'a as well as their related women research and studies centers refer to the following web-site <http://www.y.net.ye> or contact the Center for Empirical Research and Women's Studies at: research@y.net.ye