An Interview with
CAWTAR's Executive Director
Soukeina Bouraoui

Myriam Sfeir: I would like to know more about your educational and family background?

Soukeina Bouraoui: I am Tunisian and was raised in a family that had a tolerant and relatively liberal vision with regards to women's rights. Given that I was the eldest, I had to set the example for my younger siblings. I was fortunate enough to receive a higher education at the time when most of my female colleagues were marrying, either willingly or unwillingly, and devoting their lives to their families. However, this did not stop me from marrying, having children and starting an academic career. I had to joggle between my various duties given that I was a career woman with a family and often feeling guilty in the process. This feeling is quite common among working women. Yet, with time and owing to my husband's open mindedness and understanding, I learned how to cope and better organize myself.

MS: When did you join CAWTAR and what is your current position?

SB: I joined CAWTAR in July 1999. Prior to that I was Director of the Center for Studies, Research, Documentation and Information on Women (CREDIF) from 1991 until 1997. I am currently Executive Director of CAWTAR.

MS: Where do you get your funding from?

SB: CAWTAR has a Board of Trustees whose members are either sponsors or fund raisers. It is sponsored by the League of Arab States, the Tunisian Government, the Arab Gulf Program for United Nations Development (AGFUND), the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund, and the European Union. The president of the board of trustees is HRH, Prince Talal Bin Abdul Aziz.

MS: What is your mission statement? What are the objectives of CAWTAR?

SB: Founding CAWTAR was a must essentially because the Arab world required a regional institution whose mandate

In 1993 the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR) was founded. CAWTAR, whose head office is in Tunis, is an independent international NGO operating regionally. CAWTAR collaborates with the government, other NGOs, research and documentation centers, the United Nations as well as regional and international institutions. It has two main missions namely conducting research and disseminating qualitative and quantitative information on Arab Women. Furthermore, CAWTAR produces academic reports on Arab women and the issues affecting them.

is scientific. Our aim is to make CAWTAR a reference center on gender issues in the Arab region. CAWTAR strives to improve Arab women's conditions by highlighting pressing concerns affecting them and disseminating information that will lead to consciousness raising. CAWTAR also calls for in-depth research into the gender question where it encourages governments and NGOs to introduce gender issues into policy and development programs. Moreover, it raises awareness on the importance of bringing women to the forefront. We are molding CAWTAR to become a center that aims at raising awareness among planners of the need to insure that women are brought into decision-making at all levels, and are able to contribute to the development process effectively. Last but not least, CAWTAR wishes to serve as a link between the different parties involved in promoting the improvement of women's status.

Our objective is to make CAWTAR a permanent resource center in the Arab World whose main mission is to promote gender advocacy and networking. Through networking CAWTAR will serve as an interface linking institutions working for the promotion of women be they governmental, non governmental, academic, media related, etc. CAWTAR aims to adopt a leading position in promoting and advocating priority themes in the Arab world.

MS: What are the focus areas currently favored?
SB: The focus areas currently favored are:
- devising research programs and studies on the role of Arab Women;
- founding a data bank and information center with the latest technological advances;
- creating a communication strategy that will enable the media to project an objective and non-stereotyped images of Arab women;
- founding new networks that aim at promoting women's status and sustaining already existing ones;
- signing agreements and conventions with various national, regional and international parties and working jointly with them

MS: What are the obstacles and challenges faced by CAWTAR?
SB: The obstacles stem from the national, regional and international frameworks in which women's issues are discussed. Indeed there is lack of understanding and vagueness when we talk about women's

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issues. Our role as we see it is to find the best possible way to teach women and gender issues without sacrificing our principles in the process. For example, when we talk of gender we take into account both men and women. In doing so, we are adopting a fair and equitable approach.

The real challenge is to eliminate auto censorship among women. In other words women should be able to talk openly about all the problems they face in society at large and in their societies in particular without any hindrances. Another challenge is to make men and women aware that national and international progress can only take place when both sexes are taken into consideration.

MS: What are your future plans?
SB: Among the main activities for 2000/2001 are
- producing two reports, one on globalization and women's economic conditions in the Arab region and the other on Arab adolescent girls;
- setting up two networks, one on globalization and women and the other on Arab adolescent girls. This network will serve as a forum for exchanging information and data with different NGO's, research centers, governmental bodies, media bodies and experts working on the subject at hand;
- forming a network of research and information centers working on Arab women's issues;
- founding a specialized documentation unit and developing CAWTAR's data base;
- exchanging information via the Net.