



WEST ASIA

*Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Israel,
Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman,
Palestinian Territories (West Bank and Gaza),
Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria,
United, Arab Emirates, Yemen*

WEST ASIA

Post-Beijing, More Open Debate on Women's Human Rights

During the last decade, women's rights in the West Asia region have been greatly affected by global geo-politics. The results of political, economic and religious power struggles have been felt by the millions of women throughout the region. While governments negotiated women's issues in domestic and international arenas, women's rights groups in West Asia stepped up their efforts to hold governments accountable for commitments made in national legislation and international instruments, such as the Beijing Platform for Action.

By the end of the decade, one major positive development emerged throughout the region in the form of increased dialogue between the state and civil society. An unprecedented increase in education for women and new avenues of information through internet technology have been some of the most positive influences on advancing women's rights in the region. Women's groups in West Asia have successfully added gender equality as a permanent agenda item in national policy debates, even though the level of actual progress varies from country to country.

At the same time, the continuation and expansion of military occupation in the region, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and U.S. invasion of Iraq, has made women's human rights discourse more difficult for local groups. Today, one of the challenges facing women's rights groups in West Asia is to work harder to ensure that their continued advocacy for gender equality in Arab countries does not equate with supporting Western military agendas. Women's rights advocates assert that their demands stem from the reality of their day-to-day lives, regardless of its correspondence to the new global agendas and political reform initiatives.

In this context, women's rights groups find themselves working at three levels simultaneously: to educate women in their country about access to, and denial of, basic human rights by their governments.; to lobby national governments to implement international standards of women's human rights protections in all fields of life for women; and to highlight to the international community that women in West Asia should not be seen as 'victims' waiting for the West to rescue them, but instead as women who are fighting for their rights as equal citizens and working against patriarchal and historical injustices.

Overview of the Region

The countries reviewed in this section make up the Gulf Arabian Peninsula and Levant regions, namely Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestinian Territories (West Bank and Gaza), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Yemen. For the purposes of this report, these countries are also referred to as 'the Arab region'.¹

The overall population of the 13 countries reviewed in this report is estimated at over 190 million. The region has a centuries-old tribal, cultural and religious common heritage that ties its people together.

In addition to what they have in common, each of these countries also has unique cultural identities, institutions, dialects, music and traditions. This region is the birthplace of the three monotheistic major religions and has been a center point of the world's major armed conflicts in ancient and modern history. The Arab-Israeli dispute is one of the world's longest-running armed conflicts and it generates great outcry and emotions throughout the region. The modern world's most dangerous war is also being fought in this region in Iraq. Some of the world's largest oil reserves are also located in this region, and have been a source of blessing and burdens for its people for decades.

Extremist politics in the name of religion are gaining strength in the region. Seven of the 13 countries under review are monarchies as well as some of the richest economies in the world. The political systems in 10 of the 13 countries are highly repressive, excluding large sections of society from participating in the limited political activities that do take place. Political parties are not allowed by the regimes in most countries, which operate under one party systems backed by the military.

Freedom of association and freedom of expression are also severely restricted in most countries. Civil society and NGOs often operate in hostile environments created by oppressive laws, funding restrictions and interference by the state. National TV and radio stations are owned, controlled and politicized by the governments. In recent years, however, public access to information has increased tremendously with easy access to the Internet and satellite TV and regional news networks.

The judiciary is not independent, modern or free of corruption in many countries. Legal systems are based on a complex mix of religious, post-colonial, customary or secular laws. Parallel legal systems also operate throughout the region, undermining the rule of law. Public life and educational systems are gender segregated.

Over 60 percent of the population in the six Gulf States consists of immigrant workers, including a large number of female domestic workers. These migrant workers are excluded from most civil, political, economic and social rights' protections that the local population may have.

Women's political participation and representation has only slightly improved. Although women make up 50 percent of the population, they are still underrepresented in decision-making, moneymaking and political leadership. Despite highly impressive gains in access to education during the last 20 years, the region still ranks lowest in the world for women's access to equal employment and political participation. Millions of women in West Asia have to fight legal battles to exercise their right to equal citizenship rights. The only two countries in the world today where special laws have been enacted to make it illegal for women to run for office and vote due to their gender are Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Until recently, only a few of civil society groups in West Asia identified their work as 'women's human rights', and those that did could not work openly. The concept of coordination and networking for human rights

work at the regional level was politically and logistically problematic. Arab governments were hostile to the idea of human rights advocacy in their countries and did not encourage or facilitate NGO movements.

In 1982, the organizers of the first 'Arab civil society conference on human rights',

could not get permission to hold it in any Arab City from any Arab government in the region and subsequently had to hold their meeting in Cyprus. But governments have slowly come to accept the work of human rights groups at local and regional levels. A Human Rights Charter was just adopted by

Box 35. Women Working for the Protection of Human Rights in Israel

Israel's civil society—including women's grassroots organizations, women's organizations for peace, and human rights organizations that work for the protection of human rights of Israelis as well as Palestinians in the Palestinian Occupied Territories—knows that there is much active opposition to the occupation and the continuance of the current situation, whereby the human rights of both Palestinians and Israelis are violated, on a daily basis, in the Israeli-Palestinian armed conflict.

The Project for the Implementation in Israel of Security Council Resolution 1325, initiated by the grassroots organization Isha L'Isha-Haifa Feminist Center, works to include women from different backgrounds and sectors of society, and to encourage them to take part in formal and informal negotiations and discussions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

By using the concepts and framework that were introduced in Resolution 1325, the project aims to raise public awareness of the gender perspective regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its impact on women in the region by focusing on several strategies: distributing the translation of Resolution 1325 to national, regional and local NGOs involved in decision-making processes; campaigning to raise public awareness through public relations work, networking and coalition work, advertisements and media coverage; monitoring and documenting the way the conflict affects the lives of women and girls; legal activism to promote the participation of women and bring a gender perspective to both formal and informal peace processes; and advocating for and defending women's rights as human rights for Israeli and Palestinian women, from violations caused by the conflict and the occupation, in Israel and in the occupied territories.

Women are almost completely absent from the official negotiations that Israel has held with the Palestinians, such as the Oslo Accords between 1991-2000, as well as recent negotiations, including the Road-Map and the Geneva Accords. This situation derives from the minimal representation of women in general at decision-making

levels in Israeli politics. The reason for this is based on several factors. Firstly, the central perception of a constant security threat, in which military and security needs stand foremost in national priorities. Secondly, the army and the security services, specifically the Ministries of Defense, the Foreign Ministry and the Government, promote only men to the highest level positions. Thirdly, there is a strong focus on the traditional gender approach towards women, especially mothers, in Israeli society and a cultural division between the private (the home) sphere and the public sphere; the private sphere is regarded as the female one, while the public sphere is reserved for and controlled by males.

A current initiative drafted by all current Israeli women Members of Parliament proposes that every Israeli commission or team involved in conflict resolution and/or resolving a national crisis, would under law, be required to have a quota of at least 25 percent women. However, the proposed law was drafted without a gender perspective as it does not discuss or stress the importance of representing the specific needs and interests of women and girls through the process of conflict resolution. Rather, it presents itself as resolving the issue of women's equal representation. This law has few chances of passing the three-fold preliminary voting stages in Parliament, to become a binding law.

In the Israeli Parliament today, the number of elected women stands at 15 percent. There is no legislation to ensure a higher representation or quota of women. There are no structures in place to ensure the participation and inclusion of many different voices of women in politics, including Palestinian women who are Israeli citizens. Women do not take part in many central and powerful official bodies and institutions that deal strictly with issues of security and foreign affairs.

The judiciary and its related bodies—investigators, prosecutors and judges—in both civil and military courts, when dealing with cases in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, are not trained to address gender violence and women's issues. This includes

their handling of cases of indecent assault, sexual harassment and all other forms of violence against women derived from the situation of conflict. This also includes cases of violations committed by Israeli soldiers against Palestinian women in the occupied territories.

Issues and decisions related to security and armaments are surrounded with great secrecy in governmental and military forums where very few women, if any, have an active decision-making role. (cont. on p. 218)

One of the most secret and non-regulated issues is whether or not there are nuclear weapons in Israel. There is no legislation, or official records open to the public, with regard to this question. If there are nuclear weapons, it is not clear who makes critical decisions on this matter.

Since October 2000, the Israeli army has made several incursions into Palestinian territories, and is considered by some as having used extensive and extreme force. Another by-product since the outburst of the Second Palestinian Intifada in 2000 is its effect on everyday situations—as in the bombing of coffee shops or buses. The government's, and later the business sector's response was to position armed guards at the entrance of every building, public institution, transport station and café. This situation, in which so many civilians now serve as armed guards, has created new phenomena. Suddenly there are arms readily available and in the hands of so many citizens (almost all of them males). Many of them are from the most disadvantaged, poorest populations in the Israeli society; we have recently seen an alarming increase in the number of murders of women by men in Israel.

A barrier to promoting non-violent forms of conflict resolution is the feeling that there is a constant threat to national and personal security. This, in turn, is a result of the daily fear of Palestinian terror attacks. Israeli military responses and retributions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories together have caused the deaths of hundreds of Israeli civilians and thousands of Palestinian civilians. The constant feelings of insecurity have also been

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Human Rights in Israel

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supported and nurtured by official Israeli positions during the past four years of the armed conflict.

Since 2000, Israel has refused to negotiate with the Palestinians. Israel chooses to take unilateral steps rather than engage in dialogue. Some examples are: closing off Israeli borders to the passage of Palestinian workers into Israel; building a massive and costly Defense Barrier (separation wall) between Israeli and Palestinian territory; specifically violating the human rights of those who live along the route of the barrier including denying them access to their land and water; as well as other steps, such as the numerous Israeli guarded checkpoints between Palestinian land and Israel, which make it difficult to move and to exercise other basic human rights, such as education, and health.

We also note that Palestinian women and girls are the most vulnerable in society and suffer most from the occupation. They cannot exercise their human right to medical treatment, including pregnancy care

and treatment, safe births and freedom from sexual harassment that has been reported to occur to them at checkpoints by Israeli soldiers and police. They also cannot exercise their right to marry Palestinian men who are citizens of Israel and move to Israel due to regulations of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which refuses to recognize unification of families and the acceptance of Palestinian civilians from the Occupied Territories. Palestinian women political prisoners suffer from many violations of their civil and political rights while in prison, including the right to visitation by their families and children.

Many feminist and women's grassroots NGOs, women's peace organizations and the Women's Coalition for a Just Peace (comprised of a number of groups) are vocal and active in Israel. Many of them are working to maintain a dialogue with Palestinian women, seeking solutions and formulas that might lead to a just peace agreement, advocating for ending the Israeli occupation over the Palestinian territory and demilitarizing Israeli society, and doing work to raise

public awareness to the suffering of Palestinian civilians and to defend their human rights.

None of the organizations, nor any of their activities, are either funded or supported by the government.

In the past four years of the Intifada, it has become difficult to move between Israel and the Occupied Territories, as one must pass through Israeli checkpoints. The authorities are not supportive of any initiatives that involve women from both sides meeting for dialogue or for reasons other than direct humanitarian aid.

At the same time, women's organizations campaigning for peace report hostilities from the Israeli authorities against them during peace demonstrations, including repeated and unrestrained

police violence that caused physical injury to women activists.

The women and girls in the refugee camps in the Palestinian Occupied Territories do not receive any special protection, assistance or training from Israel, but receive assistance from international and UN bodies such as the International Red Cross and the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

Israel provides protection to people, among them Israeli women citizens, living in the settlements in the Palestinian Occupied Territories in the West Bank and the Gaza strip. As Israeli citizens, they receive the protection of the Israeli law and Israeli authorities; specifically, they receive security protection for their daily lives. The Israeli Army is guarding settlements on a day-to-day basis, and settlers are also guarding themselves by carrying weapons. Moreover, Israel has provided the settlements with other infrastructures to ease their lives, and to further separate them from the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories. One example is an entire system of highways and roads that only settlers and other Israelis use on a daily basis. The roads bypass Palestinian villages and are regarded as "safer."

In 2004, the Israeli government made a decision to withdraw from the Gaza Strip, and to remove all Israeli citizens, settlers and their families who now live there. The unilateral withdrawal from Gaza is supposed to begin in the summer of 2005. The program is being disputed by some of the settlers, who do not want to leave their homes on ideological grounds, but also because of lack of adequate financial government compensation. The plan, however, does not contain any provisions that discuss or emphasize the specific needs of women and girls during the expected evacuation and their needs during their relocation inside Israel.

Adapted from a speech by Dana Myrtenbaum, Legal Advisor, Isha L'Isha ("Woman to Woman")- Haifa Feminist Center; submitted to the UN Commission on the Status of Women for Beijing + 10.



Women in Black vigils started in Israel, 1988 and have spread to other regions.

the Arab League in 2004.

In the Arab region, the governments associate the concept of human rights with the rights of ethnic minorities and women and these are viewed as threatening the state's control over its population. Therefore, stronger and discriminatory legal and social restrictions are perpetuated against these two social groups. The patriarchal culture is also hostile to women's human rights, and gender equality is viewed as a serious threat to existing social structures and the status quo.

Arab governments have strongly opposed the UN Declaration on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders. Increases in human rights activities by local or regional groups is seen as a security threat to authoritarian regimes. A great amount of financial and human resources are spent annually by the governments to monitor and disrupt the work of independent human rights groups in most countries in the region.

Despite all these obstacles, a number of human rights organizations have been established in the Arab region in the last two decades and are working for the promotion and protection of human rights, calling on their governments to ratify and implement international human rights conventions and standards locally. Yemen has had the largest increase in established human rights organizations—from two in 1992 to 70 in 2005. In Bahrain the number of human rights organizations has only increased from two in 1995 to five in 2005. The number of human rights NGOs in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon is increasing, but they face continued surveillance by the state security agencies. In other countries in the region, independent human rights groups are not allowed to function legally and freely, and any attempts to hold public meetings on human rights usually result in imprisonment of civil society organizers. One such incident occurred in 2004, when the Government of Bahrain closed down the Bahrain Human Rights Center and sentenced its director to one year in prison.

While the governments in several countries—including Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Yemen—have established official Human Rights Commissions, these are not independent and do not fulfill the requirements of the Paris Principles that call for the establishment of independent human rights commissions in every country.

Since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the gaps between human rights organizations and women's rights NGOs have decreased in small but significant ways. Although the public face of almost all

human rights organizations in West Asia is still primarily masculine, women's rights activists have been increasingly recognized. There are strong coalitions of human rights and women's rights NGOs now working in Arab countries such as Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen.

Historically the mainstream, male dominated human rights NGOs in West Asia have focused primarily on civil and political rights, particularly the rights of political prisoners. This focus has often cast them more as "political movements." Women's human rights groups on the other hand have focused on both women's civil and political rights and their economic, social and cultural rights while also supporting the work of mainstream human rights organizations. It is only in the last five years that human rights groups have begun to incorporate gender issues in their civil and political rights advocacy and to view economic, social and cultural rights as human rights.

After 1995, the Arab region witnessed a proliferation of women's groups in response to government commitments to the Beijing Platform for Action. Women's rights groups have also been organizing on regional and subregional levels to follow up on the recommendations of the Platform.

The initial agenda of women's groups was to review the laws and policies that discriminate against women and to call for revisions that would ensure rights protections for women. They also demanded genuine political participation and socio-economic empowerment. Today there are hundreds of women's rights NGOs working with diverse agendas. The challenges they face include institutional capacity building, their exclusive dependence on foreign funding, lack of support from society and their own government and the rise of religious fundamentalism.

National groups have also successfully created regional networks that focus on women's human rights issues and support advocacy efforts at the regional levels. These networks provide support to local groups and call attention to regional issues such as human rights violations against Palestinian women and the war in Iraq.

CEDAW Compliance

The Arab region's acceptance of international standards on women's rights has improved tremendously since the Beijing conference. In a remarkable achievement, seven more countries in the region have ratified CEDAW, albeit with reservations. The fact that a key standard of public commitment

Box 36. CEDAW Ratification Status

Before 4th World Conference on Women, 1995:

Egypt	1981
Yemen	1984
Iraq	1986
Jordan	1992

Ratification additions between 1995 and 2005:

Kuwait	1996
Lebanon	1997
Saudi Arabia	2000
Bahrain	2002
Syria	2003
UAE	2004

The two exceptions in the region are:

- a) Palestinian Territories (West Bank and Gaza) cannot ratify unless there is a state. Although the Palestinian Authority has not ratified CEDAW, the national machinery on women incorporates CEDAW into its work, public education and policy implementation.
- b) Oman and Qatar have not yet ratified CEDAW.

Source: Arab Countries Parties to CEDAW (as of July 2004), Center for Women of the United Nations Economic Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCAW), Lebanon.

on women's rights has been accepted at the highest political level in so many countries is a very positive step. A great deal of credit goes to the relentless work of Arab women's rights groups who have campaigned tirelessly for CEDAW ratification.

Actual compliance with CEDAW remains a work in progress, however. While some countries have made impressive development, including Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen and the Gulf States, much work still needs to be done to realize CEDAW and ensure women's rights locally.

National Law

The Constitutions of Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Syria and Yemen stipulate "equal rights and duties for male and female citizens." The third draft Constitution of the Palestinian Authority ensures gender equality and categorically states that "no one shall be discriminated on the basis of sex or race." The constitutions of Kuwait and United Arab Emirates and the Basic Law of Saudi Arabia do not spec-

Box 37. Male Prisoners Can Vote in Saudi Arabia, but not Women Citizens

“The Saudis start today, Tuesday, registration on the election lists in preparation for municipal voting due in 2005 in the first elections in the history of the kingdom, in which women are not permitted to take part.

“The elections will start from the 10th of February and will be held on three stages, the last of which will be on April 21. Half the members of the 178 municipal council will be elected in 13 areas in the Kingdom, while the Saudi Government will appoint the other members. The Director of Prisons in Riyadh area, Lt. Gen. Ali al-Qahtani, said in statements that the prisoners will be able to cast their votes.

“For his part, Prince Abdul Aziz Bin Muhammad al-Muqarran, the Secretary of Riyadh city, said that women do not have the right to vote or nominate themselves for the elections but their participation in the next elections in four years will be discussed. He ruled out the existence of foreign observers in these elections. Riyadh municipality announced it has allocated 140 offices in schools, sport clubs and universities to register the voters in an operation that is expected to last until December 22nd.”

Source: arabicnews.com—November 23, 2004.

ify equal constitutional rights for men and women as citizens.

However, in all of the 13 Arab countries, women continue to face sex discrimination, particularly with respect to family laws and personal status codes. The laws of these countries contradict their own constitutions when it comes to equal treatment of all citizens in the penal, criminal, citizenship/nationality and electoral laws. Arab women are also denied the right to file legal complaints to challenge gender-based discrimination in law and government policies.

Discriminatory nationality laws cause great hardships for millions of women in the region. In the Gulf countries for example (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, UAE), a native citizen woman has to give up her own nationality if she marries a man who is not from the Gulf states. Male citizens in the Gulf countries do not face this gender-based discrimination. In the non-Gulf states, a woman does not

have to give up her own nationality, but if she marries a non-citizen, she cannot transfer her nationality to her foreign husband or the children from that marriage. Men in all Arab countries are allowed to transfer their nationality rights to their spouse and children.

One of most debatable issues in the personal status laws in the Arab region is the unilateral right of a husband to divorce his wife. Women cannot get a divorce without petitioning the court and providing specific reasons. It is extremely difficult for women to get divorced since most courts accept only a few issues as valid, such as abandonment, mental illness, sexual impotence and hatred. Men are not required to give any reasons. Women often do not seek divorce due to the years of litigation and fear of losing custody of children and alimony. Even in the relatively progressive divorce laws of Egypt, women have to forgo all rights to alimony and family assets from the marriage. In Bahrain, women are still fighting to get a personal status law.

Although serious and systematic legal discrimination against women still exists—in laws, court systems, government policies and practices of state agencies—some positive steps have been taken to advance women’s legal rights during the last 10 years. First, with the ratification of CEDAW and continued advocacy by Arab women demanding legal reforms, laws related to women have become subject to more public scrutiny in many countries. Women’s rights groups and governments have also organized several national and regional workshops to discuss legal discrimination against women.

During the last 10 years, women won the right to vote in Bahrain, Oman and Qatar. Parliamentary debates have also taken place on women’s legal rights in many countries. In Kuwait, legislators have debated women’s right to vote for years, and although women still do not have the right, the debate has intensified recently. Women are not allowed to vote in Saudi Arabia.

After more than a decade of advocacy and legal battles, women’s right to divorce has been granted in Egypt and Jordan, and women’s nationality rights have been expanded in Bahrain, Egypt and Lebanon. Women’s rights groups have increased their demands for revisions in the family law and personal status codes that deny women equal rights in marriage, divorce, inheritance and custody of children. Also, in recent years, discussions about the problems and discriminatory nature of family laws have become more widespread in the Arab media. In addition, a number of governments have started to re-

view and revise these discriminatory laws.

In 2003, women’s rights groups in Morocco won a long legal battle when a progressive family law was adopted that ensures women’s equal status in the family. This development has encouraged women’s advocacy throughout the Arab region. For example, women’s rights advocates in Bahrain have increased their demands for a family code. Bahraini women are working in collaboration with Moroccan women to benefit from their experience. Currently, there are initiatives to draft a model personal status law that could be used in all Arab countries to enhance legal protections and best practices for protecting women’s rights. Several NGOs are working on this model law with a view to present a draft to the 22 member States of the Arab League.

Some of the most controversial issues that continue to reinforce women’s inferior legal status in Arab countries include husbands’ right to demand obedience from their wives and the practice of polygamy. Laws that allow fathers to legally marry off their daughters as early as 12 or 13 years of age and the legal requirements for adult Muslim women to have a male guardian to validate her marriage also continue to perpetuate discriminatory treatment of women.

The lack of equal treatment under the law for Arab women affects all aspects of their lives, and the fact that there are still numerous laws that do not consider women equal citizen guarantees inferior social status. Women in many countries continue to have legal and procedural restrictions on their right to work and travel. In Saudi Arabia, women cannot obtain national identity cards in their own name and male family members can also stop women from applying for such documentation. Married women cannot apply for travel documents without their husband’s permission.

Patriarchal social attitudes and abuse are reinforced by this atmosphere of legal inequality, which gives rise to social norms and cultural practices that discriminate against women. For example, even though there are no written laws that require immigration authorities to stop women from traveling abroad without their husband’s or male guardian’s permission, airport police in some countries routinely allow husbands to stop their wives from leaving. Similarly, there are no written laws to stop women from leaving prison after finishing their sentence, but in practice prison officials in some Arab countries do not allow women prisoners to leave unless a male family member comes to get

them. Many Arab women continue to stay in prison years after finishing their sentence.

Public Awareness

The Beijing Conference galvanized the women's movement in the Arab region as in other parts of the world. A large number of women's groups that participated in the conference came back energized to work on the 12 Critical Areas of Concern at the local level. The networks and linkages they made at Beijing also helped to connect women with other groups across the region and internationally, which enabled local women's groups to provide more information to women.

Public awareness about women's human rights has increased during the last 10 years, due both to the increased advocacy by women's rights groups and more media interest in women's issues. In addition, as Arab governments have ratified CEDAW, they have allowed more public debates about women's status. A number of countries have also held both regional and national level meetings about the need to improve women's status.

In several Arab countries, support for women's rights has also increased at the highest political levels with the appointments of first ladies to top-level offices dealing with women's issues in the country. In Jordan, Queen Rania Al-Abdulla has led national campaigns to stop violence against women. In Egypt, Susan Mubarak, the wife of President Mubarak, heads the National Council on Women and has also led several advocacy initiatives for the rights of women and children—at the national level to reform family laws and to ban female genital mutilation, and at the regional level to support the rights of Palestinian women. Sheikha Fatima Bint Mubarak of UAE has led initiatives to increase women's access to higher education and economic empowerment.

Although these state-sponsored high level initiatives by first ladies do not challenge legal inequalities and discriminatory laws against women (except in the case of Egypt), they have nevertheless helped to highlight the problems women face in their countries and to increase the education and health budget allocations.

During the last decade, public awareness about women's rights has also increased with the expansion of freedom of information, especially through increased public access to new sources of information through its Internet and satellite TV and regional news networks. A number of websites have emerged that provide rights-based information on women and fill a critical gap in women's

Box 38. Women in Yemen Stop Discriminatory Law

A major success story comes from Yemen, where women's rights groups successfully blocked a new law from taking effect that would have added to women's inferior legal status. In 2000, a male parliamentarian proposed an article in the "Law of Prosecution and Procedures" in the Yemeni Parliament that would have allowed husbands to confine their wives to a "House of Obedience" if the women left their marital homes. This law, which still exists in some Arab countries, allows a husband to petition the court that his wife has shown disobedience by leaving their married home without the husband's permission and that the court should help him bring her back so that he can confine her to the "House of Obedience." The husband is required to rent a separate home to keep his wife in until she becomes obedient. The court then sends the police to bring the wife to that house.

After this new article was proposed and debated in the Yemeni Parliament, another male parliamentarian from the Islamic Islah party informed women's rights groups and encouraged them to mobilize opposition against it before it became law in 30 days.

Women's rights groups immediately mobilized a nationwide campaign in the media, calling on the people of Yemen to stop this denigrating law. Human rights NGOs, writers, journalists, intellectuals, parliamentarians and lawyers supported this call and signed petitions and letters asking the President to veto the law. Women's rights groups reached out to all sectors of Yemeni society and traveled throughout the country to bring the issue to public attention through seminars, public meetings, letters to editors and meetings with community leaders.

As a result of the timely and effective advocacy of Yemeni women's groups, the article was finally removed from the proposed law and all efforts to put it back were discouraged by other parliamentarians and government officials.

Source: Ashaqa'eq - Sisters' Arab Forum for Human Rights, Sana'a, Yemen.

rights information. For example, a popular website in Jordan called amanjordan.org received over 14 million hits in its first year.

Arab Women Connect, a regional network for public awareness about women's rights was launched in 2000 by women's organizations in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Qatar, UAE and Yemen. It is the first region-wide network to present statistics, analytical reports, news and features highlighting controversial issues about women's rights and gender-based discrimination. It has also launched a website, arabwomenconnect.org, that facilitates rights-based information about women's issues.

The number of publications about women's rights has increased since 1995. A large number of new studies, articles, research papers and magazines have been published in local languages in all Arab countries. In addition, regional and international institutions that have highlighted the issue of women's rights have also published landmark publications. The 2002 Arab Human Development Report by the United Nations, which was written and prepared by Arab intellectuals, presents a highly valuable critique of women's situation and identifies the lack of gender equality as one of the three main deficits in the region's development. Although the Arab governments were not very pleased with this report, civil society, writers, the media, intellectuals and academics welcomed it as a useful analysis. However, they did express concern about the shortcomings of the report, namely the absence of reference to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Public discussions in newspapers about women's rights have also increased during the last 10 years despite constraints on journalists. With the establishment of 24-hour Arabic news channels that can be viewed all over the region, the door for highlighting the treatment of women has also opened. The *Al Jazeera* and Arab News TV channels regularly broadcast bold programs about women's rights issues, including call-in shows. This is an unprecedented development in terms of the advancement of public awareness in the Arab region.

The capacity of women's groups to create awareness about controversial issues has expanded as more and more groups are able to highlight the earlier tabooed issues such as marital violence or discrimination against women in the name of religion. Although women's groups still cannot hold national level public meetings to critique gender based discrimination in countries like Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Syria, the

The linkages developed among women's groups at the Beijing conference garnered international attention that helped women in West Asia strengthen their advocacy efforts.

situation has improved in the other Arab countries and women have been able to hold landmark gatherings.

In Egypt, women's rights groups, as well as human rights and civil society organizations, have successfully taken action on the repressive laws on NGOs by challenging government's ban on the women's rights NGO, New Women Research Center. The closure of the NGO's office was protested by civil society groups through out the country, and after over three years of legal battle the NGO was allowed by a court to function and the Government was ordered to register it.

In 2003, a regional consultative body of NGOs was established at the UN Economic and Social Commission for West Asia that would allow Arab NGOs to have consultative status for regional level meetings of the UN. However, at this time only governments have the authority to nominate national NGOs for consultative status and the number of women's rights NGOs is lower than charitable and social work groups. The first session of the consultative body was held in Beirut in March 2003 and 92 participants represented Arab and regional NGOs. This forum has also been very useful to enable a large number of Arab women's groups to participate in the regional preparatory meeting for the Arab region that was held in Beirut in July 2004 to review the Arab region's performance in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action in preparation for Beijing +10. The meeting was attended by hundreds of Arab women NGO participants.

Violence Against Women

Until the 1990s, violence against women was an unspoken problem in West Asia, a taboo subject that was not discussed in public, media or civil society gatherings as openly as it is today. Public information was not easily available and women's groups did not have access to mechanisms that would allow substantial interaction with their governments and call attention to this issue in a meaningful way.

However, with the adoption of the UN

Declaration on Elimination of Violence Against Women (1994) and with the linkages developed among women's groups at the Beijing conference, this problem gained international attention that also helped women's rights advocates in West Asia to strengthen their advocacy efforts. With the appointment of a UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women by the UN Commission on Human Rights in 1994, annual reports were issued that helped the world community have a better understanding of the causes and consequences of this problem. The Special Rapporteur encouraged women's rights advocates in all parts of the world to send information about the various forms of violence that women face in the home, the family, the community and at the hands of both state and non-state actors.

Women's rights groups in Jordan worked for over 10 years to highlight the problem of violence against women in the name of culture and religion, and explained the phenomenon of "honor" killings in which women are killed by male family members if they are suspected of immoral behavior. Women lawyers and women journalists in Jordan highlighted the lack of state protection for women victims of family violence, and Jordanian groups like Mizan Law Group for Human Rights, among others, demanded that laws should be enacted to protect women from such violence. Due to their continued advocacy, this issue was supported at the highest political level in Jordan and the Government drafted a bill recommending strict penalties for men who commit such crimes. However, this bill was rejected in the Jordanian Parliament twice despite government efforts. Although the bill did not pass, a number of positive steps have been taken, including establishment of a shelter and supporting services for women victims of violence.

In Egypt, women's rights groups led by the National Council for Population took action against the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), culminating in a law banning the practice in 2004. The campaigns also prompted the Government of Egypt to start

public education campaigns on national TV and radio to increase awareness about the danger of FGM to women's physical and mental health. Egyptian groups continue to advocate for a law against domestic violence and have established shelters and hotlines.

During the last 10 years, awareness about the subject of violence against women has gradually increased. Women's groups throughout the region have organized hundreds of workshops, awareness campaigns, rallies and educational seminars to discuss the problem of violence against women in their communities and to hold governments accountable for failing to protect women from violence both in and outside the home. These efforts have helped people to recognize the issue as a problem and have increased the possibility of solutions.

The Gulf countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates and have remained closed to the issue of violence against women, particularly domestic violence, which remains a taboo subject both socially and legally. While the media elsewhere in the region has increased coverage of the negative impact of violence against women, the media in Gulf countries still censors the issue. There are no independent women's human rights groups in the Gulf countries that are working to combat violence against women. During 2002, women's groups in Bahrain were denied permission by the local Government to organize a national conference on domestic violence.

There are no clear laws in any West Asian country that protect women from violence inside their homes. The problem is further compounded by the presence of gender-biased laws that not only discriminate against women, but also support reducing penalties for their male abusers. In almost all West Asian countries, males accused of violence against women receive lesser punishments if the male takes a plea of hurting the woman to save the family honor. In Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, if a man who rapes a woman agrees to marry his victim, the courts will either reduce his sentence or free him altogether. The female victim in most cases has no choice but to say yes to marriage with her rapist due to the shame and stigma attached to rape in society.

Women's rights groups have started to work together to combat violence. The establishment of a shelter for women victims of violence in Egypt encouraged women in Yemen to also start one. A regional resource center on combating violence against women is now open in Jordan. Regional conferences

have been organized by groups such as Alliance for Arab Women in Egypt and Sisters Arab Forum for Human Rights in Yemen on violence against women in prison. In 1997, women's groups in Lebanon organized public hearings, providing an opportunity to survivors of violence to testify about the violations committed against them. Mock court hearings were held to provide a platform for discussion about the prevalence of violence against women and strategies to overcome it.

Despite modest improvements, serious challenges remain. First, women's groups do not have the full capacity, legal authority and resources to work on the issue of violence effectively. They lack capacity due to the fact that the number of women's organizations working on this issue remains very low in each country and the few existing groups cannot handle the enormous number of cases. There is an urgent need to help establish more groups to work on this issue. Women's groups are also not allowed to work freely and independently on this issue, facing problems in registering and receiving grants to work locally. Additionally, NGOs cannot work effectively because laws do not recognize domestic violence as a crime. Women do not have access to justice and face tremendous obstacles reporting crimes against them without jeopardizing their social status. Police are not trained to support women in cases of violence and the court systems are not free from bias against women victims.

PEACE AND SECURITY

The Arab region has struggled for peace for many decades. The region has some of the longest land disputes and security conflicts in the world, which have devastated the lives of millions of civilians including women. A large number of refugees and displaced persons live in this region, and Arab women continue to face the brunt of the hardships caused by the death of family members, or as refugees and displaced persons.

The Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories continues to be a major peace and security issue in the region, with severe impacts on the political, economic and social lives of people in all the countries involved in this historic conflict. The on-going security tensions at the Israeli-Palestinian, Jordanian, Lebanese and Syrian borders continue to impact the lives of millions of Palestinian refugees and displaced persons.

The region has also gone through some other major wars in recent decades. The Iran

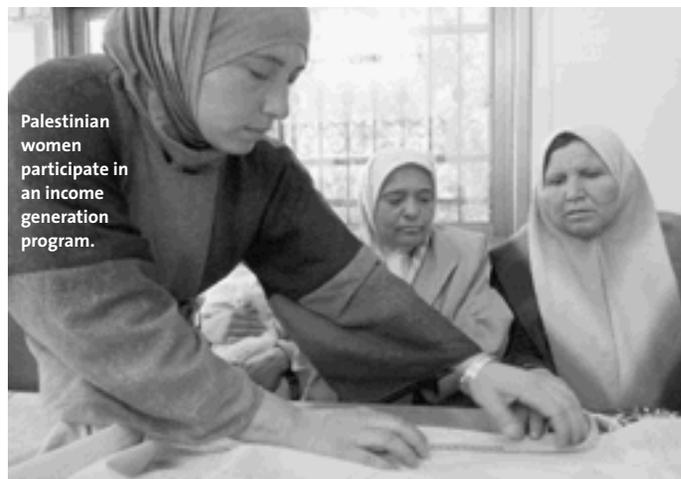
and Iraq war in the 1980s, the Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1990s and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 have killed and displaced civilians, with women and children being most affected. Yemen also has had a long internal civil war that froze all social development processes in the country before the country's unification in 1990. Lebanon experienced 17 years of a brutal civil war that destroyed its economy and resulted in massive migration and poverty for its people before ending in 1994.

Today there are an estimated 5 million Palestinians, 6 million Iraqis and 15 million Lebanese living as refugees in various parts of the world. They had to flee their homelands either due to foreign military occupation (Palestine), war and internal civil war (Lebanon) or to save their lives from war and political oppression (Iraq).

These armed conflicts have involved a massive militarization in the region and extensive military spending. Military governments influence political, security and peace issues in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and among others. In the case of monarchies such as in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the armed conflicts have further consolidated the hold of royal families on the country's natural resources, foreign aid, security and intelligence agencies. The large number of Western and U.S. military bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have also had an impact on the political, social and economic developments in these countries, creating religiously motivated political opposition to foreign troops and new social classes that have widened the gaps between the haves and the have nots.

Although substantial improvements have been made in the five Gulf states, governments in the Arab region in general have been slow in responding to the actual social development needs of their populations. Most do not invest sufficiently in the social sector, and development budgets are slashed in favor of heavy spending on military, security and defense needs. Even the secular governments of Iraq and Syria that instituted exemplary health and education services to popularize their socialist governments in the 1960s did not keep up these two sectors as they chose to advance military agendas in the region.

In addition to military control of development budgets, the region also suffers from politicization of development priorities. Internal military and political alliances often determine which part of the country will get what amount of development funding. Political opponents of strong military governments are often denied access to social and infrastructure development processes by the ruling authorities. Millions of religious and ethnic minorities suffered from extreme poverty in Iraq due to their political opposition to Sad-



dam Hussein. However, the Tikrit region of the country, native home of Saddam Hussein, was one of the richest and most developed parts of Iraq before it was heavily bombed and destroyed by the U.S. military in 2003.

The impact of war and lack of peace is felt most strongly by women, the first to face the consequences of war in the home. Maintaining the family kitchen, trauma care for children and ensuring safety all fall on women when the male members of the family are engaged in fighting, or imprisoned or killed. Women must suddenly assume the role of the head of the family in a society where public life is completely male dominated.

These problems are further exacerbated in unstable economies such as Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, where armed conflicts add the problems of having children witness the cycle of violence, mental trauma, disruption of education, shortage of food and fuel, lack of medicines and medical treatment and general insecurity to the already extensive list of obstacles that women face.

Inheritance and property rights problems for women are magnified during an armed conflict. Widows often have to face long legal battles before getting ownership of their family assets. During the Iran-Iraq war, women were faced with social pressure to produce more children as more and more men were

Box 39. Arab Women's Solidarity Association Says No to the Racist, Colonialist War on Iraq

As you're reading this statement, Iraqi civilians are being killed in a racist, colonialist war led by the U.S. empire. U.S.-led sanctions have devastated and impoverished Iraqi land and people for over a decade and now the U.S.-led war kills Iraqi people, devastates Iraqi land and destroys the infrastructure of Iraq. All of this is rationalized through a propaganda machine that claims to liberate Iraqi people. Since when did liberation mean bombing, killing and starving a people?

As we denounced Saddam's regime, we also denounce this war and all other forms of colonialist militarism in the region. Democracy cannot be brought by force especially through foreign intervention. The Bush administration, by backing a right-wing government in Israel and other authoritarian regimes in the region, has lost its credibility in the Arab streets.

So far several hundred Iraqi civilians have been killed, and Saddam's popularity is on the rise. The corporate U.S. media has been complicit in this war by hiding the reality of this genocide. This is an urgent call for the Bush administration to withdraw its troops from Iraq and to end this genocide now!

Whereas we see the U.S. war on Iraq in the larger context of its role in West Asia,

Whereas the U.S.-led war on Iraq is a key part of the Bush administration's plan to re-colonize the entire Middle-East region,

Whereas UN (U.S. enforced) sanctions have devastated the Iraqi people for many years, and the U.S. war on Iraq will further devastate Iraqi resources, killing hundreds of thousands of civilians,

Whereas the U.S. arrogance in the UN Security Council has demonstrated the farcical nature of democracy and accountability within the UN,

Whereas the U.S.-supported war on Palestine continues, and the UN has failed again to enforce its own resolutions regarding the ethnic cleansing of indigenous Palestinians from their homeland,

Whereas we recognize the U.S. war on Palestine as a continuation of U.S.-led genocide in Guatemala, Philippines, East Timor, El Salvador, Colombia, Western Sahara,

Panama, etc. (to name a few),

Whereas Israel benefits from the war on Iraq; as the world turns its attention to Iraq, Israel is intensifying its ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people,

Whereas the U.S. Government continues to prop up ruthless despots across the Arab states of West Asia and North Africa in order to secure its economic, political and military interests,

Whereas the U.S.-led war abroad means increased violence, hate crimes and racism against Arabs and Muslims in the U.S.,

Whereas the U.S. "War on Terrorism" is a white supremacist "crusade" against Arabs, Muslims and other people of color all over the world,

Whereas the Bush administration promotes racist propaganda about Arab women's oppression and uses racist images of Arab and Muslim women to justify its imperialist foreign policies,

Whereas we reject the false claim that the U.S.-led war on Iraq will "liberate" the Iraqi people,

Whereas Saddam's oppressive regime, previously funded and supported by the U.S., must be dismantled by the people of Iraq, not outside imperialist forces,

Whereas women and children are disproportionately impacted by war; women often lose their men to war and are faced with raising families on their own without enough food, medicine and water,

Whereas war promotes patriarchy, sexual assault and increased domestic violence,

We, the women of the Arab Women Solidarity Association of North America, condemn the U.S.-led war on Iraq and the Iraqi people and its continued war on the Arab peoples at home and in the diaspora.

NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE!

U.S. OUT OF WEST ASIA!

April 10, 2003

Contact:

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(http://www.awsa.net/iraq_war.htm)

killed. Palestinian women also have one of the highest fertility rates in the region. Women's gender-specific agendas are sometimes sacrificed for the cause of the community's overall welfare, and violations of women's rights within the community often do not get highlighted due to fear of damaging the national struggle. Although women face hardships due to war in any part of the world, the specific conditions of Arab women make their situations particularly difficult.

Women face gender-specific problems and social pressures as prisoners. Currently there are 98 Palestinian women in Israeli prisons. Imprisonment of male family members also makes women vulnerable to political harassment and pressures. The Israeli Army has a tradition of destroying the homes and agriculture land of the Palestinians that they arrest from the Palestinian territories. This causes extra burdens on the Palestinian women, who have to build not only the emotional life of their family but also the physical structure of their homes and agricultural land.

Although Arab women pay a higher social and emotional price for war, their voices are not included in the processes that may help to end the cycle of war in the region. The military profession in West Asia is exclusively male, and women are excluded from joining. Except for Hanan Ashrawi from Palestine, a member of the Legislative Council, Arab women have not been visible in the Arab political power structures and peace process negotiations, or in military establishments that decide war and peace agendas, military budgets and expansions.

Security Council Resolution 1325

Gender issues are not integrated in the military and defense policies of the national governments, and women's gender-specific needs during war and armed conflicts are neglected during the negotiations of peace processes. Governments in West Asia do not apply UN Security Council Resolution 1325 rationally. At the regional level, Arab governments strongly endorse 1325 for the rights of Palestinian women. Mrs. Susanne Mubarak, wife of the Egyptian president, leads a regional initiative to promote the UN Resolution 1325 as an essential element of peace processes in the region. During 2003-2004, the member governments of the Arab League have also highlighted Resolution 1325 and the role of women during the peace process and established a body called the Organization of Arab Women within the Arab League to work on women's empowerment, peace and security issues.

Women's groups in West Asia have been actively working on the issue of peace and security for the last three decades. In most countries, women's groups were the first to highlight the negative consequences of war and conflict and also the first to start supportive services for victims of war, refuge, and displaced persons. In 1982, Egyptian feminist Nawal Sadawi established the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA), which works to highlight that the struggle for the liberation of Arab people from economic, cultural and media domination cannot be separated from the liberation of Arab women. ASWA has issued statements for the rights of Palestinian women and children and against the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Arab women's NGOs have raised their voices for the rights of Arab women in all parts of the region and the cause of freedom for Palestinian women is their cherished goal. This is one issue that unites all civil society in the Arab region from Jordan to Oman. In addition, millions of women living in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria are either themselves Palestinian refugees or have family origins in Palestine. Their own personal struggles have kept them motivated to keep highlighting the gender-specific problems of Palestinian women and to call for an end to the occupation. The civil war in Lebanon has also motivated Lebanese women's groups to take an active part in educational activities that promote peace. There are numerous women's groups in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon that work exclusively on promoting peace in the region.

In addition, there are joint Israeli and Palestinian women's groups that work on peace issues and promote peace through their work together on the gender-specific needs of women. The Jerusalem Center for Women provides legal aid to Palestinian and Arab women. International Women's Peace Service (IWPS) Palestine, based in the West Bank has been working since 2002 for the rights of Palestinian women and also supporting Palestinian and Israeli anti-occupation groups in their grassroots resistance to end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. In 1994, Palestinian and Israeli women established the Jerusalem Link comprising two women's organizations, Bat Shalom on the Israeli side and the Jerusalem Center for Women on the Palestinian side. The two organizations share a set of political principles, which serve as the foundation for a cooperative model of co-existence between Palestinian and Israeli women. Palestinian women's groups are also mobilizing civil society throughout the world against

the construction of the separation wall that is being built between the Israeli and Palestinian areas. They are calling for immediate cessation of the building of the wall, which has already caused great hardships to Palestinian women's access to education, health services, agriculture and family life.

The International Criminal Court

Out of the 97 countries that have ratified the Rome Statute as of September 2004, Jordan is the only country in the Arab region that has done so.

Women's groups have been calling on their governments to ratify the Rome Statute so that citizens can be protected against war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. More than 100 NGOs in the region are part of the international NGO Coalition for the ICC. Currently there are two NGO coalitions established in the region (Jordan and Yemen). Women's groups started both these coalitions. In Jordan, Mizan Law Group for Human Rights, which has been working on women's human rights for decades, coordinates this work. In Yemen, the women's human rights group The Sisters Arab Forum for Human Rights (SAF) hosts the national ICC NGO coalition. SAF is also the regional headquarters for ICC advocacy for West Asia. Preparation for an NGO Coalition for the ICC is also under way in Bahrain. These coalitions educate the public in their countries about the ICC and about the importance of the Rome Statute. They lobby their governments to ratify the ICC and also engage in the global campaign of ratification and in monitoring the work of the ICC to ensure its independence, neutrality and impartiality.

POWER AND DECISION-MAKING

Arab women's representation in high-level decision-making posts has increased in the region. During the last ten years, the region has witnessed women appointed as ministers and in the judiciary, and elected as members of parliament and in local councils. Governments have also appointed more women in the diplomatic corps to represent their countries abroad and to head international organizations. In 1995, only two Arab countries



Egyptian Girls at play.

had women ministers. Today the number of Arab countries with women in high-level posts such as ministers is nine, with the appointment of women ministers in Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Syria, UAE and in Yemen. In addition, Yemen has a fixed quota in national parliaments to ensure women's representation in the political process, a step that has been welcomed by local NGOs.

Women have been increasingly taking part in national political processes in the region. The number of women in parliaments has increased. However, two countries in the region still do not allow women to take part in the national level political structure—Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Both countries deny women the right to vote and to be elected in national decision-making bodies. In a landmark development, the first ever woman judge was appointed to the Constitutional Supreme Court of Egypt. Women have also been appointed in senior management posts in Oman and UAE.

Since the Beijing Conference, a number of countries have also established National Commissions on Women that are headed by women, such as Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and Yemen. These commissions are working on follow-up to the Beijing conference and also to integrate women's rights in national laws and government policies. The support for these high-level posts has come mostly from the highest office of the country, such as the president. Although the first ladies are doing very impressive work for the empowerment of women in some countries, in order for these institutions to be sustainable, these posts and offices need to be institutionalized.

However, women's representation is still lacking and women's participation in the political process is considered the lowest in the world. Except for a few countries, women's representation is mostly symbolic. Even today, women cannot work as judges in most

Box 40. Women's Health Depends on Husbands

Umm Haithem, a mother of five, told Arab News: "I suffer from several health problems and need constant medical treatment and so does one of my daughters. But to get the treatment, especially at government hospitals, I need the original family card. Now whether I get or don't get the card depends on my husband's whims and moods. If he's in a bad mood or we've had some disagreement he'll keep the card from me for months regardless of how much I need the treatment. And we can't go to a private hospital because he holds back even money along with the card!"

Source: Arabnews.com, Jeddah, October 29, 2004.

countries in the region and their political participation meets with strong resistance from the society. Women are also excluded from the most powerful institutions in their countries—the military and defense ministries. In a large number of countries, the real political power lies with the military establishment and women are not visible in any high-level military offices or defense posts in the region.

At the same time, the impact of women's increasing entry into power structures and high-level decision-making posts is extremely good news for Arab women. These women have helped to create role models for the future to help more women obtain these posts. Long-shut doors have been opened and women's access to such work has increased tremendously. Women ministers appointed in all the countries are highly qualified and have extensive experience and expertise in the area of their work. Their merit and professional work is also setting high standards among their colleagues and is proving helpful for bringing more women to work in similar posts.

Women's NGOs have been very active in promoting women's appointment to high level decision-making posts in their countries. Women's rights groups have adopted different strategies in different countries depending on the local power structures. In Jordan, women's rights activists have focused their advocacy efforts with the Jordanian King in order to give high visibility to women's political issues. Some women's rights activists in Iraq decided to work with the U.S. coalition authority even though they had reservations about it; as they assessed

the prioritization of including a women's rights agenda in the newly forming political structures in the country, a number of women joined the interim Iraqi government structure despite great risks to their personal security. Women in Syria work both inside and outside the government structures to demand greater political rights for women. Women's groups in Bahrain, Kuwait and Yemen in particular have broken new ground in national activism for increasing women's access to power structures.

Women's rights activists in Bahrain were instrumental in ensuring women's seats in political parties in the first ever elections in their country in 2002. Women's rights activists in Kuwait have been fighting for women's political rights for over a decade and despite their failure to get these rights, their consistent advocacy and legal challenges have kept the issue of women's political rights at the forefront of debate in the country's Parliament. Women in Yemen have expanded the participation of women in the country's national government and have also empowered more women with knowledge about their political rights. The one woman in Yemen's national Parliament is elected, not appointed; the first-ever woman Minister for Human Rights was appointed in 2000. Similar efforts have been taking place throughout the region and women's rights groups have been successful in expanding the space on the issue of women's greater participation in power structures.

EDUCATION

Women's access to education has improved remarkably during the last 10 years. According to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Egypt, Oman and Syria will have achieved gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2005. Governments, particularly in the Gulf States namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE, have made huge investments in the education of women and girls, and improved both the access and quality of education. Women's access to education has also improved in the non-Gulf countries as almost all the countries have prioritized women's education as a key goal since the Beijing conference.

However, due to the historic neglect of women's education in the region, huge gaps still remain. The number of women who cannot read or write is still very high, especially among adult and rural women. According to UNESCO, 62 percent of adult illiterates are

women. Women also face gender-specific social and cultural obstacles in their access to education. A woman's access to education in rural areas is still determined by her family members and not by herself, and women still do not have the same opportunities as men for access to technical and skill training education after high school as the number of training centers for women is still relatively lower. Education budgets in many countries in the region are still very low and need to be improved to ensure education for all women and girls.

HEALTH

Although women's access to health has improved in recent years, they still face many problems in their right to health, especially reproductive health. Except for the Gulf States, governments are not making sufficient investments in women's health, and women in most non-Gulf countries do not have safe and adequate access to health services. In addition, due to a lack of proper services and qualified doctors, women also have to face logistical and cultural obstacles due to their gender. A lack of transportation services in most rural areas means that women often cannot get to health centers. In the area of reproductive health, in the majority of countries in the Arab region, women do not always have the right to make independent decisions about the number and spacing of their children. The health problems for women are compounded due to the other social problems that women face such as illiteracy, poverty and an inferior legal status that requires women to obtain permission from their husbands if they need to access many services.

Authors

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Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA).

Notes

1. For the purposes of this report, Algeria, Comoros, Djibuti, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia and Sudan have been included in the Africa region.