

7 February 2007

**Statement of H.E. Ms. Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa,  
President of the 61st Session of the General Assembly,  
on the Millennium Development Goals: Education and Gender  
Equality in the Arab World at “The Plenary of the Women’s  
Empowerment Action Team”**

Excellencies,  
Friends,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank my dear friend Ambassador Shirin Tahir-Kehli for organizing this event. I am also grateful to all of you here for giving me this opportunity.

Today, I would like to talk to you about two closely interlinked Millennium Development Goals that have a particular bearing on the Arab World. They are: promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and providing universal primary education for all.

Although all countries in this region face similar challenges that hinder the achievement of these goals, each country remains unique and in need of tailor-made national policies that take into consideration their indigenous economic and cultural dimensions.

Let us begin, by examining the goal of promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women. At the heart of this goal is the notion that all people are born free with equal rights. This basic human rights approach is universally agreed upon in principle, unfortunately, not all people are equally entitled to these rights.

In the Arab world some cultural and religious traditions continue to perpetuate inequalities. In this regard, I would like to briefly affirm that most interpretations of Islam are sanctified as holy and consequently untouchable. However, some interpretations have often been used interchangeably with cultural traditions within certain societies, and, as a consequence restrained the empowerment of Arab women.

I would like to apply this analysis within the context of a typical household in the Arab World and examine its legal, international and political implications.

In an Arabic setting, the building block of society is the family rather than the individual, and the roles of both females and males are clearly defined and distinguished: females are responsible predominantly for bearing and the upbringing of children, whereas males are protectors and economic providers. Any change in these roles can be perceived as undermining the family.

The reproduction of this ideology from one generation to another has hindered gender equality and the empowerment of women. It has constrained women from realizing their full potential; from seeking non-traditional education and professional careers. Furthermore, it has led society to view the family as a private entity, which has deterred outside interference in most interfamilial situations. In fact, one of the most obvious and alarming examples of this reluctance to interfere, concerns situations of domestic violence.

Some of you may deem the solution simple and realizable in the short term; for all it takes is to make society aware that women are human beings with equal rights. Yet, the problem lies in the fact that cultural perceptions and religious interpretations influence society on a subconscious level, preventing the identification of the source of the problem and therefore its remedy.

From a legal perspective, laws remain conservative and resistant to change, particularly personal status laws that regulate marital relations. In most Arab countries, these laws prevent women from exercising their basic rights to self-determination, such as the power to conclude marital contracts without a male guardian. Laws can go as far as regarding fathers, brothers, cousins and even sons as legal guardians. In the case of divorce, these same laws allow husbands to divorce their wives by a mere verbal declaration.

Now, the question that we must ask ourselves is not only how to ensure equal participation, but how we expect women to assume professional decision-making roles, when at the same time women are deprived from determining their own fate? This unequal distribution of basic civil rights has international and political implications. On the international front, it has led to reservations on a number of crucial international agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Many Arab countries have expressed reservations about several Articles of this convention on the grounds that they are in conflict, with either, religious or national laws. In particular, Article (2) establishing the principle of equality between men and women. Opting out of this Article undermines the whole of CEDAW.

On the political front, there are barriers for women who wish to assume political positions. In the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, for example, and despite recent laws that allow women to run for parliament, practically no woman has succeeded. This is because opponents have often used cultural and religious arguments, as a political weapon, to make the case to electorates that women belong at home, rather than seeking professional careers in the public and private sector.

During elections in Bahrain and Kuwait for example, many religious groups encouraged voters not to elect women on religious grounds. What is more shocking is that even some women advocated this position.

So where do we go from here?

It is imperative that we adopt an inclusive approach to gender issues that takes into consideration not only the need to have a legal system that is in line with international legal codes, but also the need to prepare these societies to accept their shortcomings and rectify them.

This can be achieved, if we focus on education, which takes me to the second Millennium Goal that I referred to at the beginning of my address.

Distinguished Guests,

Education is the ultimate Millennium Development Goal. It is a basic human right that benefits not only children, but families, communities, and whole nations.

In the Arab world, I am saddened by the fact that almost 20 per cent of primary school age children are not enrolled. This means that one in five children will grow up without the opportunities that we have had.

Gender disparities continue to exist in secondary and higher education, and a greater proportion of illiterate young people in the Arab region are women. In poorer Arab countries, nearly half of adult females cannot read or write, compared to a third of the male population.

If we are to reverse this situation, governments must begin by making primary education for all, particularly for girls, an urgent national development priority. Yet, we must go beyond this, and concentrate on the quality of education. For, it is not enough to merely raise the enrolment and literacy rates if we continue to, explicitly and implicitly, teach our children notions of inferiority and stereo-typing. School curricula must encourage creativity, critical thinking and offer a variety of religious and secular perspectives.

Without this approach progress made in education will not be translated into real empowerment for women. Until we invest in quality education, which questions certain interpretations of religious doctrines, and their cultural implications, we will continue to deny women equal opportunities. Fortunately, there are a number of encouraging signs, and, throughout history women have organized to take matters into their own hands.

In fact, Egypt was at the forefront; the first "women's educational society" was established in 1881, and many others sprung up during the 1940s. In my own country - Bahrain - the first girls' school was established in 1928; and, the first civil society organization for women in 1955. Both organizations continue to play influential roles in women's education and empowerment today.

However, these human development issues cannot be seen in isolation from broader regional political and security concerns that hinder progress in the Arab world.

The protracted Arab-Israeli conflict remains a major source of instability, a significant impediment to human development and an obstacle to more productive dialogue amongst States.

A just and durable solution to this conflict, stability in Iraq and an end to violence in Darfur must remain priorities for the international community.

Progress in resolving political and security issues, including terrorism, will foster development and prosperity in the region as a whole.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There are many hopeful signs of progress in the Middle East. The rule of law, good governance, and respect for democratic values, are principles that guide many of today's governments in the Arab world. And, the increasing role and influence of civil society and NGOs is a welcome trend in moving towards more open societies and greater gender equality.

The Fourth Arab Human Development Report, focusing on gender equality and women endorses this point of view. For example it includes some encouraging indications on women assuming decision-making positions. In a sample poll from Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Morocco;

- 66.4% agree that women have the right to become a judge,
- 76.6%, that women have the right to become a minister;
- 65.7%, that women have the right to become a prime-minister; and,
- 50.4% agree that women have the right to become a head of state.

Although these figures are encouraging and public opinion may desire faster progress, this needs to be balanced with maintaining social stability against reactionary ideological forces and traditional cultural practices.

In order to bring gender equality and the empowerment of women up the international agenda, on the 6th and 7th of March 2007, I shall convene an informal thematic debate on these issues in the General Assembly, in New York. I very much hope that some of you will be able to attend the debate.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

As women leaders and decision-makers, our challenge must be to keep up the political pressure. Doing so will generate new opportunities for many and provide renewed hope for more equality and human rights for women in the future.

Going forward we should bear in mind the inspiring words of Martin Luther King Junior, when he said; "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.... Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

Thank you very much for your attention.