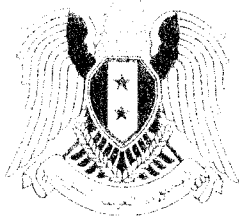


**THE PERMANENT MISSION OF THE SYRIAN ARAB  
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**بعثة الجمهورية العربية السورية  
الدائمة لدى الأمم المتحدة - نيويورك**

**COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF  
DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN**

Thirty-ninth session  
(14 May – 1 June 2007)

**Presentation of the  
INITIAL PERIODIC REPORT OF  
SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC**

Statement by  
**MOUNA GHANEM, MD. MPH**  
**CHARIEPERSON OF SYRIAN COMMISSION FOR FAMILY  
AFFAIRIES**

Head of Delegation  
**New York, 24 May 2007**

*(Check against delivery)*

Madam Chair

Distinguished Members of the Committee

Distinguished members of the UN Secretariat

Distinguished delegates

Ladies and Gentlemen

- I consider it an honor and a pleasure to head the a delegation that is happy to discuss with you today the initial report of the Syrian Arab Republic on the implementation of the CEDAW and to reply to your questions.
- We are sure that the frank, fruitful and constructive dialogue of today will contribute to the Syrian efforts in eliminating all kind of discriminations against women and will pave the way for implementing better strategies which will definitely improve the situation of Syrian women. As we consider this meeting with the distinguished Committee, an excellent opportunity for Syria not only to present the efforts that have been made, but also to highlight the challenges facing the national efforts to fully implement the Convention's obligations.

Madam Chair;

- Let me first start by introducing the members of the Syrian delegation. My name is Mouna Ghanem. I head the Syrian Commission for Family Affaires. Mr. Samir Hassan, is the Dean of Faculty of literature at Damascus University and Ms. Mona Asa'ad is a legal advisor at with the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and women activist.
- The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs is the 'responsible body' for changing Syrian Laws related to family issues, accordingly with the country's International Obligations, aiming at ensuring full empowerment and providing higher level of protection for all family member especially women and children vulnerable. The Syrian Commission for Family Affaires is also the national women machinery

responsible of setting the national policies and strategies and also monitoring its implementation. In addition to its mission in monitoring and evaluating the women's status. The SCFA comes as an initiative to modernize the administrative structure in the Government of Syria with the national reform process.

- Working under the umbrella of the Prime Ministry, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs has access to other governmental bodies. It is also responsible of cooperation and coordination with women non governmental organizations. As it is believed that only through transparent and strong partnership between governmental bodies and non governmental organizations, the issue of gender equity and equality would be realized.

Madam Chair;

- The Syrian Arab Republic attributes great importance and strives to fully respect its international commitments. The need to comply with CEDAW and to put into effect the Beijing Platform for action led to very important national initiatives and adopted important measures, which will definitely contribute to fulfill the Syrian Government commitment to remove all forms of discrimination against women in the country. Most of these initiatives and procedures are covered by the Beijing+10 and Beijing +12 national reports and by the CEDAW initial reports. However, I would like to draw your kind attention to some very important issues and to highlight the major challenges facing women in Syria. We strongly believe that the distinguished Committee comments and feedback will be reliable guidelines in order to achieve the national aspiration in fully implementing the CEDAW requirements.
- I would like to start by mentioning the positives, that the Syrian government approved to withdraw the reservations on withdraw its reservations on article 20-21 of CRC and Articles 2, Article 15-4, Article 16-1/g, and Article 16-2. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs considers this decision of withdrawing

reservation on article 2 of the CEDAW as an important step ahead. However, much more work is needed now to withdraw the remaining reservations and to realize the spirit the convention in the national law.

- It is worth acknowledging the tremendous efforts invested in such decisions, in particular in terms of advocacy, negotiations, lobbying and networking with all key players, mainly the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and women civil organizations. All stakeholders were included, most importantly parliamentarians, religious leaders and media personnel.
- The debates on withdrawing the reservations were also accompanied by a wide media campaign to spread knowledge about the CEDAW. Theses include workshops, printing materials and journal articles.

Madam Chair;

- The preparation and submission of initial report to your esteemed committee has received the utmost attention form the government of Syria. The process had included formulation of team of national experts from governmental and non-governmental organizations to prepare the initial report. Several training workshops were also conduced for the aforementioned team by ESCWA, UNIFEM and the Swedish Institute ‘Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law. The Arabic and English versions of the report were printed and distributed, together with the Arabic text of the Convention, to all national and international counterparts including members of the Parliament and ministers.
- Taking into consideration that according to article 25 of the Syrian Civil law, all ratifies international agreements and conventions have precedence over national laws. Currently, a training program on the utilization of the CEDAW as a legal tool in the national Courts has been prepared by the Syrian Commission for

Family Affairs; in cooperation with the Syrian Bar Association, the Women Union, and legal persons from NGOs and Civil Society.

- In a matter of fact, Syria is respecting its international obligations as stated by the ratified international Treaties and Conventions and therefore, and is insuring the compliance with the recommendations of the International Committees, such as the Child Committee and the CEDAW Committee. To that end, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs distributed to all governmental bodies the received recommendations prepared by child right Committees and a national Plan has been prepared in order to execute the Child Committee's recommendations. Similarly, a workshop was organized by SCFA to distribute the CEDAW committee questions and to formulate the reply.

Madam Chair;

- I am pleased to bring about another positive achievement of Syria. Violence against women is no longer a taboo in Syria. Several studies recently revealed the extent of the problem. Thanks to the support of the UNIFEM , an in depth study has been done by the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, in cooperation with the Bureau of Statistics and the Women's Union .
- The previously mentioned study has received an international attention and several reviews have been published about the study in a well known international newspapers and magazines. The issue of necessity eradicating VAW has been clearly stated in the State's 10<sup>th</sup> Five Years Plan, which is the most important socio-economic governmental document. The Plan emphasizes on the importance of setting a National Plan for eradicating VAS and securing the appropriate shelters for women in need.
- Additionally, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs fully cooperated with other governmental bodies and the civil society's associations and prepared a draft of the National Plan for the Protection of Women. It is worth mentioning

that, for the first time in Syria, the International Day on Violence Against Women had been marked in 2004 -2007.

- Nonetheless, the civil society has been taking a leading role in securing services for victimized women. We owe Thanks to the Sisters of Good Shepherd for their extremely valuable work in their shelters and help line. Recently the National Association for women's Progress started setting up a new shelter, funded by JICA, the Japanese Development Agency.
- Combating Gender-Based violence has drawn the attention of both religious and political leaders to our case. Hereby, a Nation wide Media campaign has been launched, targeting the widest category of people and focusing on delivering a unified message.
- It is also important to notice the increasing role of civil society in the continuous struggle to face the increased violence against women. The (Women of Syria) Nessa' Syria site (Women of Syria site) led the campaign of NGO's against the Honour Crime regulation, and demand to rescind Article N.548 of the Criminal Code. This campaign was strongly supported by the Grand Mufti and Minister of Religious Affaires and received an increasing attention from the society. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs has submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Justice, asking to review it and considered it accordingly.

Madam Chair;

- I would like also to highlight one of the major accomplishments, in terms of empowering women and strengthening gender equity. As regards to the political empowerment of women, for the first time in Syria a woman has been appointed in the position of Vice-President of State for Cultural Affairs. The decision reflects the political will to increase women's presence in decision-making positions.

- Following this, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs published a study titled 'The Political Empowerment of Syrian Women'. The Commission also executed a training program about 'Leadership and Political Participation of Women', which was implemented in cooperation between the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, the Women's Union and UNIFEM. This study is considered to be the first of its kind, in terms of applying transparency and accountability.
- Women health has been receiving increased attention from the government and non-governmental organizations. In order to further support the issue of reproductive health, the government has become a self reliance in regard of contraceptive procurement after 30 years of depending on donor organizations. Finally, the national strategy for population, prepared by the SCFA, has been approved by the government. Several awareness campaigns have been organized by the SCFA. Entertainment –Education approach has been utilized as a popular song has been produced about the safe motherhood and the benefit of family planning. A campaign under the slogan of: Smaller Families-Better Motherhood is being organized this year. Several TV spots and films was also produced and broadcasted. It is also worth to mention that two researches were conducted by the SCFA i.e health empowerment for women and KAP study on family planning in different region in the country.
- As education is the key bone for women empowerment process. The SCFA worked very closely with the Ministry of Education integrate gender sensitive concepts in the national curricula. Guideline for parents and teachers on women and child rights was also developed by the SCFA and UNICEF.
- As regards to Laws, the State 10<sup>th</sup> Five Years Plan (2006-2010) set specified objectives regarding laws' amendments, including amending the Personal Status Law and discriminating Articles in other Laws. As a start, a major change tackles the custody age; also amended versions of both Personal Status Law and Child Law have been prepared by the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs to be

presented to Parliament according to the formal processes. It is worth to mention that the state 10<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan had devoted a specific chapter on women advancement and another chapter on civil society. In addition, an amendment to the honor killing law was also prepared and submitted to the concerned parties by the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs for review and consideration.

- At the present time, Steps for preparation of the National Strategy for the Advancement of Women for the years (2007-2011) is being taken in support of UNIFEM. Taking about our cooperation with UNIFEM, it is worth to mention our joint initiative in training the staff of the Ministry of Finance on gender budgeting and another training on gender –sensitive strategies.
- As part of the government’s commitment to focus on underserved areas and population issues, the State Planning Commission prepared the National project to combat poverty and empower women, based on the findings of the poverty demographic map in Syria.
- Accordingly, the State Planning Commission prepared the ‘National Project to Combat Poverty and Empower Women’, based on the result of the poverty demographic map in Syria. Executing programmes of the project will be followed up by the State Planning Commission, Ministry of Local Administration and Environment and Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.
- Together with this project, the Ministry of Agriculture drafted the map for rural poverty which focused on analyzing the situation of rural women in Syria.
- Furthermore, the Directorate of Women Empowerment at the State Planning Commission conducted several workshops about national capacity-building to evaluate women’s position from the gender perspective; and building institutional and technical capacities of women. Also the same directorate worked on analysing the gender concepts in developing plans.



- After all these efforts to empower women, the State's Five Years Plan set specified intervention areas that are mentioned in the 'Strategy for Economic Empowerment of Women'.
- The Strategy is formed of five chapters related to: women and poverty, women and microfinance, women and agriculture, women and industry and women and public services.
- In addition, the North Eastern Region is currently being focused on by governmental bodies, NGOs and international organisations. The area represents the mosaic of Syrian society, with all religions, sects and ethnic groups. Moreover it is geographically, a difficult area with different natural conditions.
- As a result of these factors, this region witnessed several difficulties, including a high rate of drop-out students and shortage of health facilities. Therefore, the State Five Years Plan dedicated great efforts, aiming at developing the area economically and socially.
- The State Five Years Plan stressed on the necessity of social development. Social equity is the basic principle, and it needs an adequate legal environment and social security.
- At the present time, most of the governmental and international organizations projects are to be conducted in the North Eastern region. In particular, women empowerment, poverty alleviation and child protection projects at all levels.
- Concerning working with Civil society, I should draw your attention to the recent position of civil work in the gender field. There is constant cooperation between the government and the civil society associations. This appears in the efforts of the government to issue a progressed version of the Associations' Law. Another

progressive sign is the special section of the State 10<sup>th</sup> Five Years Plan dedicated to Civil Society.

- Cooperative work between Civil society and the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs has been supported by the British Embassy and the European Delegation in Syria. A partnership was created between the government and Civil society to advance women's issues and rights.
- Another clear success of Civil society and come into being by cooperating with the governmental bodies in the preparation of the CEDAW report. The Syrian Women's League prepared-for the first time in Syria- the shadow report of Beijing +10, which was presented in parallel with the official report to the government.
- This participation from the Civil society drew the attention of the government to the necessity and importance of including a special section in the State 10<sup>th</sup> Five Years Plan (2006-2010).
- Regarding human trafficking: Recently, Syria became a transition country for women for domestic help. Women. Therefore, the State took immediate action and issued a Law in 2005, Decree N. 5114; which states the drafting of a thorough law treating with human trafficking and organizing the workers agencies, responsible of importing domestic workers into the country. Therefore, a committee has been set, with representatives from the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of High Education, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of External Affairs, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, and the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs.
- In actual fact, the work has been conducted with the support of the International Migration Organisation, in parallel with the work in fighting human trafficking in

the country. Consequently, a draft law has been prepared concerning private companies and agencies that provide domestic helpers from outside Syria.

- The International Migration Organisation provided assistance to the Syrian Government. Based on an exploratory study on foreign domestic work in Syria, conducted by the International Migration Organisation in the year 2003; several workshops and studies have been carried out to tackle the issue of human trafficking in Syria.
- One of the workshops was about providing the assistance to the Committee working on draft a thorough law, aiming at combating human trafficking and setting up basic principles organising private companies and agencies that provide domestic helpers from outside Syria.
- In addition, the workshop worked on raising awareness about human trafficking amongst politicians, decision-makers and parliament members. It also worked on the capacity building of the Committee responsible for drafting the law.
- However, another part of the Organisation's work was to collect Syrian laws and regulations, starting with the Constitution, and going through the Criminal Code, Child Law and other Decrees. These regulation rule the human trafficking, sexual exploitation of women and children and adultery.
- Later on, in another workshop, the first version of the draft law has been distributed to the attendees, in order to receive their comments and remarks to change the law accordingly.
- As a result of the war on Lebanon, many refugees entered the country; consequently, Syria became a passage country for refugee. Hence, the Syrian government perceived the problem and acted accordingly.

- As a matter of fact, The increasing number of the refugees and refugee-seekers reflects negative impacts inside Iraq and in its neighbouring countries. Moreover, Syria is facing a huge mass of refugees, with a percentage thought to be greater than the overall number of refugees in the European countries together. This lays great pressure on the economy and infrastructure of our country, taking into consideration the negative impacts on the limited and weak social and health services and their bad effects on the Syrian citizens’.
- It is estimated that the number of refugees and refugee-seekers has come to 1.99 million representing 12% of the Syrian population. The necessity to enhance the international cooperation, in order to face the serve humanitarian situation of the Iraqi displaced persons and refugees.
- The above mentioned statement, clarify the Syrian acknowledgment of refugees difficulties. Nonetheless, the government took all necessary actions in order to protect human rights and prevent human trafficking with all its consequences.

Madam chair, distinguished members;

- Improving the situation of women and eliminating discrimination against them are very complicated and multi-disciplined tasks. These tasks should not be approached -especially in the Middle East- in isolation of the political and the socio-economic determinants that affect the future of the region. It is a fact that the situation of Syria should not be isolated from the accelerating events in the surrounding region.
- Both cultural and traditional factors work together to preserve the deep rooted patriarchal attitudes and machismo values regarding gender and human rights, in both private and public domains of women's life. The increased influence of radical conservatism in the region had definitely slowed the pace of women advancement, and present challenge for the secular systems to implement its gender sensitive strategies.

- Bearing that in mind, the connection between a peaceful situation in the country on women's issues. Significant further international efforts should be exerted, regarding 'women and peace processes.
- While the relation between democracy and women status is established, it is clear that democratic change should be a bottom-up- initiative and not imposed.
- Although women should be given a leading role in political life; yet advocacy and political empowerment of women should be coupled by capacity building programs. The aim is to equip women with appropriate skills and expertise needed for participation in political activities. Further, mechanism to encourage women political participation i.e. quota system should be strongly applied.
- It is a fact that the path to complete gender equity and equality is very long. Nonetheless, Syria has started its efforts to achieve social balance, in all life domains.
- Complying with International Obligations, updating National Laws, and preparing the environment within the society to accept changes are the pillars needed to correct the position of half of society. Having said that, a continuous cooperation with your distinguished Committee is needed, as well as profiting from lessons learned from other countries.
- Finally, I would like to thank the Committee for your kind attention and look forward to exchanging ideas and views for improving the situation of women in Syria.

Thank you very much