



**GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE**

On the margins of the 36th Session of the UN Human Rights Council

Rue de Vermont 37-39, CP 186
1211 Geneva 20
Tel: +41 (0)22 748 27 80-88
Fax: +41 (0)22 748 27 89
info@gchragd.org
www.gchragd.org

Panel Discussion

Women's rights in the Arab region: between myth and reality

15 September 2017, from 10:00 to 12:00
Palais des Nations, Room XXIV

CONCEPT-NOTE

Introduction

The *Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue* (hereinafter “Geneva Centre”) will convene, in cooperation with the *Permanent Mission of the Arab Republic of Egypt to the United Nations Office, World Trade Organization and other international organizations in Geneva*, a panel discussion entitled “***Women's rights in the Arab region: between myth and reality***”. The panel discussion aims to challenge the often-promoted stereotype that the issues related to women's rights and gender inequalities are more likely to pertain to the developing countries or to countries of the South— and more particularly, to Arab countries. The discussion represents an incentive to overcome cultural stereotyping with regard to the status of women, to deconstruct the existing myths and to embrace the need to acknowledge this matter at the global scale.

This issue has already been the subject of a panel discussion organized by the Geneva Centre in March 2016, in cooperation with the UNESCO Geneva Liaison Bureau. Further to the discussion, which sought to offer an alternative narrative on women in the Arab region, the Geneva Centre published a study entitled “*Women's Rights in the Arab Region: Myths and Realities*”. This publication includes the proceedings of the discussion, reflections on the progress achieved and key recommendations, and benefited from input from a number of Permanent Missions in Geneva. The side-event proposed by the Geneva Centre in cooperation with the *Permanent Mission of the Arab Republic of Egypt to the United Nations Office at Geneva*, will broaden and update the debate initiated in March 2016, by attempting to elucidate the persisting misconceptions on the situation of women in the Arab region, as well as the remaining barriers.

The panel discussion will be organized as a side-event to the 36th Session of the UN Human Rights Council



Background

“Patriarchy has no single religion or culture. It rears its head in all nations and in all cultures with uniform ferocity, despite the differing ideologies by which it seeks to perpetuate itself” observed Maha Akeel, Director of the Information Department at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, in an opinion editorial from April 2017¹ that examined equality between men and women in the Muslim world, and underscored the challenges faced by Arab countries and by the rest of the world. The question of gender equality, women’s status, their rights, and their full participation to all aspects of society remains a central issue on the international agenda. Hardly any State in the world can pride itself with a flawless record as regards gender equality. The “Women’s March” global movement that emerged in January 2017 gathered 500 000 people in Washington only, and an estimated 2.5 million people worldwide, and was a stern reminder that women’s rights and equality remain a challenge, regardless of culture and frontiers.

Undeniable progress has nevertheless been achieved in the direction of gender equality in the world. The adoption of a plethora of legal, social and economic instruments to promote women’s rights, at both the international and the national level, from Conventions, to Declarations and UN Security Council Resolutions, to the creation of a new International Agency, UN Women, all point in the right direction. Likewise, national legislation addressing gender issues in many countries including in the Arab world, is undoubtedly a significant step forward. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its Optional Protocol, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action provide an international legal framework and a comprehensive set of measures for the empowerment of women and girls, the former convention having been ratified by a majority of States.² UN Security Council Resolution 1325 adopted in 2000 was the first of many resolutions³ tackling

¹ Opinion editorial: “*The case for gender equality in the Muslim world*”, by Maha Akeel, Director of the information department at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/04/case-gender-equality-muslim-world-170424095756513.html>

² Among the Arab countries, only Sudan and Somalia have not ratified the Convention, whereas only Libya and Tunisia have ratified the Optional Protocol so far. (See *Status of Arab Women Report Access to Justice for Women and Girls in the Arab Region: From Ratification to Implementation of International Instruments*, UNESCWA, 2014, page 27)

³ Including **Resolution 1820** (2008), condemning sexual violence as a weapon of war and declaring rape and other forms of sexual violence as war crimes; **Resolution 1888** (2009), which led to the creation of the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict; **Resolution 1889** (2009) on increasing women's participation in peace processes; **Resolution 1960** (2010) on ending impunity for sexual violence in armed conflict; **Resolution 2106** (2013) on addressing impunity on sexual violence in armed conflict; and **Resolution 2122** (2013) reaffirming the Council's commitment to combating sexual violence in armed conflict and the full implementation of Resolution 1325 and other resolutions on women, peace, and security.

Similarly, the most recent General Assembly resolutions promoting gender equality include: *Improvement of the situation of women and girls in rural areas* (A/RES/70/132); *Violence against women migrant workers* (A/RES/70/130); *Women in development* (A/RES/70/219); *Trafficking in women and girls* (A/RES/69/149).



the issue of women's participation in peace and security and their protection from violence during conflict, picturing women as actors of peace rather than just victims during conflict. The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda also places the spotlight on women's issues and gender equality.

However, the slow progress towards actually reaching equality is proof that the mere existence of a legal framework is not enough. Both the North and the South have a long way to go in terms of achieving gender equality and are confronted with noteworthy obstacles in this regard. A statement released on the occasion of the International Women's Day⁴, signed by a group of women's human rights experts, including the Chair-Rapporteur and members of the Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice and the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, urged the international community to acknowledge that "*the continuing existence of direct and indirect discrimination, both visible and invisible, is responsible for women lagging behind in a number of fields*". The statement deplored the fact that women's high educational achievements worldwide had not translated into corresponding leadership positions or even equality in the economic field. It also denounced the persistence of violence against women, the lack of access to specific health and safety and other unsettled issues that stymie the achievement of equality between men and women globally.⁵

Two-thirds of the world's illiterate adults are women. Unemployment touches half of the world's women, compared to one quarter of world's men - while women spend two and a half times more time than men on unpaid care work and household responsibilities. Globally, women only have a 36 % share of global income, measured in purchasing power parity terms. This perpetuates massive inequalities in overall incomes, health and education.⁶ These inequalities are often exacerbated in countries of the South, and in the Arab world, where the share of women in GDP remains at only about 29%, against 50 % in all developing countries, and the poverty rate is 31.6 % among women, almost double than the rate among men.⁷ The issue of the gender wage gap has also taken centre stage worldwide, with women being paid on average 77 cents for every one dollar earned by a man, which makes for a 23% disparity. While

The ECOSOC also considers gender equality issues under a dedicated agenda item on mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes of the UN system, which results in a yearly resolution adopted on this matter: *Mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes in the United Nations system* (E/RES/2016/2) was the latest such resolution adopted in 2016.

⁴ International Women's Day Statement by United Nations Women's Human Rights Experts, 7 March 2017:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21302&LangID=E>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Aljazeera "*The case for gender equality in the Muslim world*", by Maha Akeel, Director of the information department at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/04/case-gender-equality-muslim-world-170424095756513.html>

⁷ Ibid.



in the US a 20.4 % wage gap was calculated in 2015⁸, the countries of the European Union are not spared by this issue either: in 2015, Estonia had the biggest gender pay gap of 29.9%, followed by Austria, with 23% and Germany with 21.6%.⁹ These numbers are a real wake-up call on a global scale.

Discussing the biases that thwart women's advancement in paid work, in the North and in the South alike, Lindsey Rix, management staff at Aviva UK, noted that despite “*an enormous amount of progress on diversity, (...) there was still a long way to go from a cultural point of view*” – referring particularly to societal perceptions and to corporate culture.¹⁰ Despite women now outnumbering men in many financial services organisations, not a single company in the world has yet achieved gender equality in senior roles. Furthermore, in the same field, women made up 25.5% of senior roles in 2016, compared with 23.7% in 2014 – a painfully slow progress. The same applies for science and technology studies, where women graduates remain scarce. In the US for instance, women earned only 18% of all Computer and Information Sciences Bachelor's degrees and made up less than 25% of the workers in engineering- and computing fields, in 2015.¹¹

With respect to women holding high political positions, UN Women and Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU) warned in March 2017 that “*women's voices were still missing from the executive branches of governments and parliaments worldwide, slowing achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*”¹². According to the latest¹³ IPU ranking of countries with most women holding seats in the Parliament, three countries of the South are in the lead: as of January 2017, Rwanda is ahead with 61.3%, followed closely by Bolivia with 53.1% and Cuba with 48.9%. Iceland is the first ranked European country, occupying the 4th position with 47.6%, followed by Finland with 42%. However, countries like Austria (30.6%); United Kingdom (30%); France (25.8%) or United States of America (19.1%) are placed in the lower half of ranking. The Arab countries have greatly progressed over the past years in this regard. In Algeria for example, the proportion of women holding seats in the Parliament has risen from 8 % in 2011 to 31.6% in 2017; Algeria is closely followed by Tunisia (31.3%) and Sudan

⁸ “*US Should Combat the Gender Wage Gap*”, by Janet Walsh, Human Rights Watch:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/04/us-should-combat-gender-wage-gap>

⁹ “*Which European countries have the biggest gender pay gaps?*”, Emma Luxton, World Economic Forum

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/12/which-european-countries-have-the-biggest-gender-pay-gaps/>

¹⁰ “*Equal pay and opportunities for women in finance: why the hold-up?*” by Laura Noonan, Madison Marriage and Patrick Jenkins, 4 April 2017, Financial Times: <https://www.ft.com/content/198abd62-1471-11e7-80f4-13e067d5072c>

¹¹ Report: “*Women In Tech: The Facts*” 2016 by Catherine Ashcraft, Brad McLain, and Elizabeth Eger, NCWIT Fact Sheet; The National Center for Women & Information Technology (NCWIT)

https://www.ncwit.org/sites/default/files/resources/womenintech_facts_fullreport_05132016.pdf

¹² “*Women's political parity slow to grow as UN launches latest 'Women in Politics' map*”:

<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2017/03/womens-political-parity-slow-to-grow-as-un-launches-latest-women-in-politics-map/>

¹³ IPU map “*Women in Politics 2017*”: <http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/wmmmap17-en.pdf>



(30.5).¹⁴ The United Arab Emirates have also made progress, achieving 20% women in Parliament, as has Jordan, with 15.4% and Egypt with 15%. Acknowledging this progress, Martin Chungong, Secretary-General of the IPU, noted however that “(...) *when it comes to representation of women in Parliament, there is progress but the progress is excruciatingly slow. At this rate, it will take 50 years to reach 50-50 parity*”.¹⁵

On the positive side of the ledger, the countries of the Arab region have made visible progress over the past years not only in increasing the percentage of women occupying executive positions in politics¹⁶, but also in promoting gender equality through women’s education and inclusion in the workforce. There are now more women than men who attend university in Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, Algeria, Iran, Jordan and Kuwait. Women are also increasingly visible in the public sphere¹⁷. In terms of inclusion in paid work, between 1980 and 2000, women’s participation in the labour force doubled in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain; it nearly tripled in UAE and Oman. Women play an increasingly important role in the economy of Arab States: according to National Reports, their participation in the economy had reached, in 2013, 48.2% in Kuwait, 35% in Qatar, 25.6% in Tunisia, and 17.6% in Algeria.¹⁸

Recent years have also witnessed a feminist effervescence in the Arab region, with Arab women stepping up to defend their rights and reviving feminist movements to make their voices heard. However, the Arab women’s rich contribution to the global movement for women’s rights often goes unrecognized, and is, at times, even rejected by Western media and scholars. There is little recognition of the role of leading women in Islam. To name but a few, one can refer to the first wife of Prophet Mohamed, Khadija, an active and self confident business woman, to his later wife Aicha, whom the Prophet vouched was the custodian of the accuracy of a full half of the Qur’an (“*Take half of the religion from this little red head*”), to the great sufi and poetess Rabi’a el Adwiya from 8th century Basrah, or to Fatima of Cordoba who was the guide and teacher of one of the greatest sufis of all times, Muhieddine Ibn-Arabi. In modern times, from the pioneering feminism of Huda Shaârawi in Egypt, to the writings of the Tunisian

¹⁴ According to statistics drawn from the Arab Human Development Report <http://www.arab-hdr.org/> and the IPU latest map “Women in Politics 2017”

¹⁵ “*Women’s political parity slow to grow as UN launches latest ‘Women in Politics’ map*”: <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2017/03/womens-political-parity-slow-to-grow-as-un-launches-latest-women-in-politics-map/>

¹⁶ In 2016, the Arab States had reached 9.7 % of senior executive posts held by women, led by Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates, at 23.1 % and 26.7 %, respectively, according to the IPU.

¹⁷ UNESCO Report: “*Counting (on) women in politics Experiences from Morocco & Tunisia*”, UNESCO, Division for Gender Equality, 2017: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002469/246962m.pdf>

¹⁸ *Arab Regional Synthesis Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action Twenty Years Later*, UN ESCWA, UN Women, League of Arab States, 2015 (prepared for the Arab High-Level Conference on Beijing +20: Towards Justice and Equality for Women in the Arab Region): <http://www.lasportal.org/ar/sectors/dep/Documents/Report%20on%20the%20Implementation%20of%20the%20Beijing%20platform%20for%20Action%20Twenty%20Years%20Later.pdf>



Tahar Haddad in the 1930s, the philosophical works of the Moroccan Fatima Mernissi, as well to the role of national heroines such as Djamila Bouhired, Djamila Boupacha and Fatma N'Soumer, and many others involved in the fight for Algeria's independence, the history of the Arab movement for the advancement of women's status and their rights is in clear contradiction with today's stereotypes. However, the image of a backward and oppressed Arab woman, awaiting salvation from the West, often prevails.

In terms of societal attitudes, Arab men's perceptions with regard to the status of women have undergone substantial change, but this has yet to be reflected in the accounts provided by mainstream media and experts. A study led in the Arab region by UNDP in 2006¹⁹ showed that 91% of the interviewees were in favour of equal access to the labour market, while 78% considered that the working conditions should be the same for women as for men. A recently released study conducted by UN Women and Promundo²⁰ in Egypt, the Palestinian territories, Morocco and Lebanon, showed that 50% of the men surveyed held favourable views of married women working outside their homes; in Egypt, 74% of men supported equal salaries for men and women and 86% were willing to work with female colleagues (yet only 55% were willing to work for a female boss). Moreover, it was shown that men from educated, wealthier environments in these countries were more likely to hold gender-equitable attitudes than their counterparts in the US for example.²¹ These numbers show a significant shift in men's views with regard to Arab women's autonomy and involvement in society, despite the persistence of more traditionalist, patriarchal views. The report points to the fact that, despite typical preconceptions, female labour-force participation is not stymied uniquely by Arab men's hostility or their controlling attitudes towards women.

Despite this progress, the media, particularly in the West, relentlessly delivers a single-sided story on Arab women and their status. There is a persistence of negative depictions, often stemming from stereotypes. Indeed, it is unquestionable that certain aspects of the situation of women in certain Arab countries are far from meeting the standards set in the previously mentioned international instruments. It would however be a missed opportunity for the media and other stakeholders involved in the promotion of women's rights and equality, to solely shed light on the negative aspects, and to disregard the progress that has been achieved in Arab countries. As shown above, issues, some grave, some unconscious and thus hardly acknowledged, persist in the Western, developed world as well. But positive stories, featuring motivational women who serve as a model to the youth, are pushed forward and made visible by the media and by gender experts in the West, in an attempt to inspire society to embrace

¹⁹ UNDP study focused on Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Morocco, quoted in "*Les Arabes, les femmes, la liberté*", Sophie Bessis – Albin Michel Editions, 2007

²⁰ Report: "*Understanding Masculinities: Results from the International Men And Gender Equality Survey (Images) – Middle East And North Africa*" UN Women and Promundo-US, 2017 : <http://imagesmena.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/04/IMAGESMENA-2017-FULL-Final.pdf>

²¹ "*UN gender equality report gives insight into Arab male identity*" by Bianca Britton, CNN, 10 May 2017: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/09/middleeast/gender-equality-study-mena/>



gender equality as a must. Why is the story different when it comes to women in the Arab world? The region is surely not lacking its fair share of women actively involved in politics, activism, science, education and other fields. Why does the media constantly repeat the same tune that depicts shortfalls in the realization of women's rights in Islamic societies as if these societies were by essence impervious to feminism or to equal gender rights?

Objective criticism is necessary in order to progress towards gender equality, be it in the Arab countries or in the West. But obstinately choosing to focus on shortcomings in this regard and to the dismissive statement that women in Islamic societies are submissive, is a form of condescension akin to Islamophobia. People who are familiar with these societies know that in north Africa for instance, men's insertion into society depends on their women folk. Ignoring this reality feeds stereotypes and forms of discrimination in disguise. The acclaimed Nigerian writer and women's rights activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie declared, while speaking on the media's obsession of constantly relegating Africa to poverty and aid-dependency that *"the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."*²² The same applies to the "single story" on Arab women and the stereotypes promoted by mainstream media with regard to their status.

Objectives

The goal of the panel discussion proposed by the Geneva Centre is to deconstruct the existing myths with regard to women in the Arab region, by giving voice to women and experts who can provide the audience with views that celebrate the progress achieved in the Arab countries. The panellists will discuss the involvement of women in various aspects of Arab societies, as well as the way in which their participation is reshaping these societies. The setbacks and the most blatant barriers that still keep gender equality at bay in certain Arab countries will also be approached from an objective point of view. This means also taking on board the difficulties encountered in the Western world in the same areas and finding out the relevance of lessons to be learnt from the most successful experiences.

The ultimate outcome of the proposed panel discussion will be to collect the proceedings of the debate, the main recommendations and the most pertinent ideas exchanged during this event, into a new publication in follow-up to the study entitled *"Women's Rights in the Arab Region: Myths and Realities"*, published in March 2017. The next outcome publication is intended to be a follow-up to and an improvement on the March 2017 study. The study will also attempt to examine the shortcomings in the pursuit of gender equality in Islamic and mainly Arab societies, against the backdrop of weaknesses that the North continues to endure in the

²² TED Talk *The danger of a single story* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, July 2009, available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lhs241zeg>



pursuit of the same objective of gender equality. It would be advisable that all panel members read the Centre's publication mentioned above so as to be able to improve it and update it through an interactive dialogue with participants.

Date and venue

The panel discussion will take place on 15 September 2017, from 10:00 to 12:00, in room XXIV at the Palais des Nations.

Format

The panel meeting will be opened by the Chairman of the Geneva Centre, H. E. Dr. Hanif Al Qassim. The panel will include a moderator and 6 panellists. Opening remarks will be made by the distinguished representatives of the organizing parties. The organizing parties will be given 5 minutes each for their opening statements.

The moderator will then make a brief introduction of a maximum of 5 minutes. He will be followed by the panellists, each of whom will be invited to summarize, in bullet points of no more than 5 to 7-minutes, a statement which will be sent to the Centre in advance of the meeting. The statements will be published in full in an annex to the new publication. Following the panellists' interventions, the moderator will engage in an interactive discussion with the panellists, by raising questions or making comments related to their statements. Thereafter, the moderator will open the floor for a Q&A session with the audience.

Opening remarks

H. E. Dr. Hanif Hassan Ali Al Qassim, Chairman of the Geneva Centre's Board of Management

H. E. Mr. Amr Ramadan, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Arab Republic of Egypt to the United Nations Office at Geneva

Moderator

Ambassador Idriss Jazairy, Executive Director of the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue



Panellists

- **H. E. Ms. Hoda Al-Helaissi**, member of Saudi Arabia's Shura Council, former Vice-Chairperson at King Saud University
- **H. E. Ms. Emna Aouij**, Member of the UN Working Group on Discrimination against women in law and in practice
- **H. E. Ms. Naela Mohamed Gabr**, Member of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
- **H. E. Ms. Dubravka Šimonovic**, UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences
- **Dr. Susan Carland** , Researcher and specialist on gender and Islam in the modern world, Director of Monash University's Bachelor of Global Studies.
- **Ms. Sarah Zouak**, Co-founder of the association *Lallab*, organizer of the Women Sense Tour, writer and producer of the documentary Women Sense Tour

Languages

Simultaneous interpretation from and into Arabic, English and French will be provided.