

Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue

The Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue is a non-governmental, non-profit organization based in Geneva, Switzerland. Working in cooperation with the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and United Nations Human Rights Council to promote and protect human rights through global dialogue, the Centre is independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest, or religion.

The Centre functions as a platform to bring together the United Nations agencies, intergovernmental organizations, governments, academia, civil society and human rights defenders, with national human rights institutions and the private sector, and coordinates international conferences, provides human rights training, and advises governments and related agencies. The Centre is keen to be a bridge between civilizations, cultures and religions, and to broaden areas of consensus.

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GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE
مركز جنيف لحقوق الإنسان والحوار العالمي
CENTRE DE GENÈVE POUR LA PROMOTION DES DROITS DE L'HOMME ET DU DIALOGUE GLOBAL

THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE ARAB WORLD

REPORT OF SIDE EVENT AT THE UN OFFICE IN GENEVA
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Table of Contents

Event Details.....	1
Background Information.....	2 - 4
Programme of the Event	5
Opening Remarks	6
Panelists' Interventions.....	7 - 9
Debate	10 - 12
Closing Remarks	13

Closing Remarks

The session was closed with a concluding statement delivered by *H.E. Idriss Jazairy*, who expressed his appreciation to all the participants who contributed to the success of this panel, referring to some more examples consolidating the process of advancement in the status of women in the Arab region. Algeria, for instance, was one of the clear examples of progress, where the Algerian constitution provides a mandatory presence of one third of women in the elected assemblies at all levels. Thus, during the last national elections, in the Parliament 145 women were elected out of the 462 Member of Parliament.

Essentially, Sudan on the other hand, witnessed a high percentage of children dropping out from schools in the past years due to the sanctions related to increases in poverty. Girls represented the highest percentage of the drop out.

Consequently, to be able to monitor the overall evolution of the conditions of women in the Arab region. Mr. Jazairy sent a direct appeal to the Arab representatives who were present at the meeting, and to the Arab league in particular, asking them to provide the Centre with periodic information and statistics concerning the latest development of the status of women in each country in order to assist the Centre in collecting accurate data and thus contribute to changing the prevailing stereotypical idea about the status of Arab women.

Event Details

Education provides knowledge for women to be better informed about their basic and acquired rights and equips them with the necessary tools and mechanisms to protect and advance their own status. Education also enlightens the thinking of men towards women and makes them sensitive to the need to ensure gender equality.



In the framework of the 31st session of the Human Rights Council, the *Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue* in collaboration with the *UNESCO Liaison Office in Geneva*, organized a panel of discussion entitled “*The Advancement of the Status of Women in the Arab World*”, on the 22nd March 2016, at the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva, Room XXI.

Considering that acknowledging achievements for what they are represents an important step towards achieving gender equality and respect for women’s rights in the Arab region, the panel focused on the advancements for women’s rights and empowerment achieved in the Arab world, particularly from the standpoint of access to education and women’s political and economic active participation.



H.E. Dr. Hanif Al Qassim, Chairman



The number of participants exceeded 90, with strong representation from various diplomatic missions, intergovernmental and NGO representatives, and the media attending the event. Both participants and panelists described the discussion as interesting and enriching.

Background Information

Over the past years, Arab countries adopted a positive stance towards international treaties on gender issues. Almost all Arab countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and many lifted their reservations based on “religious and cultural factors”. Particularly, the articles of the Convention that have generated most of reservations are: Article 2, dealing with political measures to eliminate discrimination against women, Article 9, on women’s right to acquire, change or retain their nationality, Article 15, on equality before the law, and Article 16, on matters relating to marriage and family relations.

However, Arab States have greatly progressed in lifting their reservations to the Convention. For example, in 2014, Tunisia officially withdrew all of its specific reservations to the treaty. Showing further interest for prioritizing women’s issues, Arab countries actively participated in the review of Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Optional Protocol to the CEDAW, regulating women’s access to international adjudication, remains however non-ratified by the majority of Arab States.

In terms of national legislation, important advancements were also achieved towards improving the status of women, eliminating discrimination, and protecting women’s rights. Governments showed an increased will to tackle gender-based violence (GBV) and engaged in legal reforms to combat violence against women. Lebanon’s Parliament passed, in April 2014, the Law on the Protection of Women and Family Members from Domestic Violence, guaranteeing the right to seek judicial processes and remedies for women subjected to violence. Similar endeavors were noted in countries like Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. Tunisia’s newly adopted Constitution of January 2014, marks in Article 46 that the State must take all measures to eliminate violence against women.

H.E. Ambassador Abdulla Nasser Al Rahbi, the Permanent Representative of the Sultanate of Oman, was critical of the expectations that countries in the West have about the advancement of the status of Women in the Arab region, which in their view must copy the development model of women’s status in the West. He opposed this view stressing the possibility of improving and advancing the status of Arab women without renouncing the Arab and Islamic culture and civilization.



A representative from the Permanent Mission of the State of Palestine spoke about the conditions of Palestinian women, and about the suffering, they go through as a result of being under occupation and how this enormously affects the process of women’s evolution. Yet, despite the restrictions imposed by the occupying authority, women are still excelling in various fields. He gave a recent example of the Palestinian teacher who won an international global teaching prize for being the best teacher in the world for 2015.



Amongst the other interventions and questions from the participants, a question about the negative role that tradition could play in delaying the progress of Arab women’s status, and the possibility for culture to become a driving force for improving the status of women in the Arab region. The response to that question highlighted the importance of education in transforming possible constraints of tradition into a momentum for advancement.

The moderator of the debate, **Mrs. Patricia Schulz**, *Rapporteur of the UN Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, and Former Director of the Federal Office of Gender Equality*, concluded by praising the achievements that some Arab countries made to develop and advance the status of women, whether through their legislation, domestic laws, or through conforming to international covenants. She mentioned Tunisia for being the first Arab country to withdraw its reservations on article (9) (equal rights with regard to nationality) and (16) (equality in marriage and family life) from the Convention on the elimination



of all forms of Discrimination against Women. She finally encouraged all Arab states to follow this example, also followed by Morocco, in the search for achieving equality and equity for Arab women.

Debate

During the debate, *H.E. Obaid Salem Al Zaabi, Permanent Representative of the UAE to the United Nations* provided some examples of what the UAE has done recently to reinforce the role of women in society. He stated that the number of Emirati women in government positions, military and police has risen dramatically in the past few years, and that a quarter of the cabinet ministers are females. He also mentioned the government's latest decision to appoint a young female aged 22 to become the minister for Youth.



Also in Tunisia, according to Amnesty International, a comprehensive draft law to combat violence against women remained under consideration at the end 2015. Similarly, in Algeria, a new law came into effect in February 2016, punishing violence against women and sexual harassment. In Morocco, a new bill that criminalizes sexual harassment against women was introduced in 2015. Furthermore, countries like Iraq, Sudan, Lebanon, Tunisia, and the OPT adopted specific plans of action or initiatives to GBV in conflict and post-conflict situations, aiming to implement the UN Resolution 1325.

Developments have equally been striking in terms of access to rights. Women gained suffrage in Oman in 2003, Kuwait and Qatar in 2005, the United Arab Emirates in 2006, and Saudi Arabia in 2011 (with Saudi women voting for the first time for the 2015 municipal elections). Women in Kuwait have been able to run for office in parliamentary elections since 2006, while the first female judges were appointed in Bahrain in 2006 and in the UAE in 2008. Some countries modified their Constitutions for a gender equality-based approach: Algeria added a new article stressing women's political participation, Morocco added the parity principle, Tunisia adopted a legal text stating gender parity in the elections code – the first such law in the Arab world – requiring that political parties nominate equal numbers of women and men, before the elections in 2011. Also, Tunisia's Constitution of 2014 affirms the principle of equality and elements of access to justice, in Article 21. Similarly, Egypt's Constitution of 2014 guarantees basic rights and freedoms to all citizens without discrimination on the basis of sex, ethnicity, language and religion.

The efficiency of these measures is best illustrated through concrete results, and Arab countries have been following a positive trend in one of the most important fields for achieving gender equality: education. Thus, remarkable progress was noted in education for women: in the Gulf States, female adult literacy rates increased from 56% in 2000 to 69% in 2010, and women's high participation in tertiary education is growing. In all eight Gulf States, women make up more than 50 % of the overall student body, with Qatar and the UAE having the highest female-to-male university ratio.

This positive trend with regard to access to education for Arab women has been reflected in women's contribution and representation to political life and economy. According to the International Parliamentary Union 2015 Map, the Arab region continued to show progress in terms of women in Government positions, increasing its share of women ministers to 9.5 per cent, i.e. almost one in 10 of all ministers. In terms of parliamentary representation, by 2015 there were two Arab countries with women accounting for more than 30 % of all MPs – Algeria and Tunisia.

According to the EFA Global Monitoring Report elaborated by UNESCO, gender disparities in secondary education are closing, but improvements are still needed. The Arab States made progress, as the number of girls enrolled for every 100 boys increased from 87 in 1999 to 95 in 2012. There was fast progress in the Arab States during the 2000s, as the female adult literacy rate increased from 56% in 2000 to 69% in 2010, while the gender parity index for literate women relative to men increased from 0.73 to 0.81.

From the point of view of women's economic participation, between 1980 and 2000, women's participation in the labor force doubled in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain; it nearly tripled in UAE and Oman. Women play an increasing role in the economy of Arab States: their financial contribution to the household is increasingly perceived as necessary, and there is a trend toward more acceptance of women's role in positions of economic decision-making. According to National Reports, participation of women in the economy had reached, in 2013, 48.2% in Kuwait, 35% in Qatar, 25.6% in Tunisia, and 17.6% in Algeria. According to the ILO, there was a strong reduction in the gender employment gap in the Middle East between 2002 and 2007 compared to central and Western Europe. Moreover, the representation of Arab women employment in the public sector, especially in GCC countries is relatively high. In Egypt three quarters of employees in the public sector are women, in Saudi Arabia, almost half of the employees of the public sector are women, and in Morocco, the share of employment of men and women in the public sector is equal.

She established a comparison between Western and Arab women in pointing out the enhanced right of the latter to manage their own wealth long before this right was recognized to their Western sisters. She declared that men play a major role in rendering rights much less accessible for women. The interpretation of Quranic and Sunna texts in a manner that serves men's desires and aspirations, leads to depriving women from their inherent and legitimate rights. Therefore, she suggested that governments must work on developing training programs for women to make them eligible to participate in the religious interpretation, which is now within the exclusive purview of men. This she emphasized would result in creating a more balanced society in terms of gender equality.

Mrs. Lama Jbarah, Representative of the Geneva Centre, stressed the importance of acknowledging the achievements made in the advancement of the status of Arab women in the past few years, and reviewed some recent examples from Arab countries, emphasizing the question of the



evolution of women's status in the Arab region. One of the most notable recent achievements was a seminar organised by the Algerian National Security Forces Platform in the framework of the 5th General Meeting of the Kigali Conference emphasizing the role of the

Algerian police in promoting the prevention of all forms of violence against women.

The statement covered the centre's plans for following up with the question of the status of women in the Arab region, that will be implemented through collecting data about the latest developments on the status of women, and also working on developing recommendations intended for governments and other relevant stakeholders. In addition, improving the Centre's training programmes will be within the new strategy aiming at enhancing the status of women in the Arab region.

Opening Remarks

The session started with an *opening remarks* statement delivered by H.E. Idriss Jazairy, the Former Ambassador of Algeria to the United Nations Office in Geneva and Resident Member of the Board of the Geneva Centre. He greeted the participants on behalf of the Chair of the Geneva Centre H.E. Dr. Hanif Al Qassim, and stressed the importance of organizing events dedicated to analyzing, and monitoring the developments concerning the status of women in the Arab region. Mr. Jazairy also warned of the danger of misinterpretation of the current conditions of woman in the Arab region, in order to serve and nourish Islamophobia.

“I would like to emphasize the role of national and local governments, civil society actors, and the international community, which could join forces to promote the status of women inter alia in the Arab region. Presenting a more positive feedback about the achieved progress will certainly lead to better recognition of the evolving situation which is conducive to a fairer and more equitable status for women in that region.” (H.E. Idriss Jazairy, Opening Remarks)



Panelists

H.E. Ambassador Walid Doudech, Permanent Representative of Tunisia to the United Nations in Geneva, offered a detailed explanation on how the richness of the Islamic and historical culture of Tunisia from ancient times resulted in providing a positive attitude of the Tunisian people towards women and their rights. In turn, this influenced the process of legislation and the enactment of laws, which support women’s rights in a manner that made Tunisia one of the pioneers in supporting women and their rights in the region.



The Ambassador added that the Tunisian authorities worked seriously on the process of emancipation of women and applied policies raising awareness in order to educate women about their rights. Moreover, the government ensured its commitment to protect women’s acquired rights and to ensure equal opportunities between men and women in all aspects of life. This is demonstrated through the representation of female workers in the public sector, where the percentage of women working in governmental positions represents 66 %. He underlined that Tunisia has long since withdrawn all reservations on article (9) (equal rights with regard to nationality), and (16) (equality in marriage and family life) of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Mr. Zayed Saeed Al-Shamsi, Chair of the Emirati Lawyers and Legist Association spoke about the prominent role its association plays in the pursuit of social justice. He explained that the State’s constitution provide, equal opportunities for men and women. He also spoke about specific laws and legislations that ensures the preservation of women’s



specific rights such as labour laws, which do not support women to work on night shifts, maternity laws, and mourning and grief laws that extend paid leaves and take the psychological aspect of a working woman's life into consideration. According to Mr. Alshamsi, this all resulted in strengthening the role that women play in society, and encouraged their involvement to become active members in the state's dynamics. He also mentioned the role of women in government and elected assemblies.

Ms. Golda El-Khoury, *Chief of the UNESCO Public Policies and Capacity Building Section*, confirmed the progress achieved over the past few years with regard to the status of women in the Arab region. However, she expressed great concern about the delay in the process of progress in the status of women in some Arab countries, and indicated how culture plays a big role in hindering this process. She stated that the UNESCO is involved in finding the underlying causes resulting in letting some Arab countries lag behind in this region. According to the organization's findings, a misplaced culture of fear and shame, women's symbiotic association to men, and the typical conventional role that women play in the family, contribute to this situation.

She also pointed to the problem of the insufficient investment in human resources, especially in girl's and women's education in the Arab region. She advocated more effective mechanisms that enable women to pursue a career following completion of their education, including in vocational education fields, which are considered to be one of the shameful fields for women to work in some cases.

Mrs. Fawziya Al Ashmawi, *President of the Muslim European Women Forum*, focused on the role that Islam played since its inception in preserving women's rights. This is present in the Al-Shoura principle, whereby women are not prevented from practicing their social and political rights through consultation.



Programme of the Event

Moderator

Mrs. Patricia Schulz, Rapporteur of the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and Former Director of the Federal Office of Gender Equality.

Opening Remarks on behalf of H.E. Dr. Hanif Al Qassim

H.E. Idriss Jazairy, Former Ambassador of Algeria to the United Nations Office in Geneva and Resident Member of the Board of the Geneva Centre

Panelists

H.E. Ambassador Walid Doudech, Permanent Representative of Tunisia to the United Nations Office in Geneva and Specialized Agencies.

Mr. Zayd Saeed Alshamsi, Chairman of the Emirates Lawyer and Legist Association.

Ms. Golda El-Khoury, Chief of the Public Policies and Capacity Building Section for Social and Human Sciences UNESCO Paris.

Dr. Fawzia Al Ashmawi, President of the Forum for European Muslim Women

Mrs. Lama Jbarah, Representative of the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue

Programme

The duration of the panel was two hours. The sequence of the speakers during this panel discussion was as follows:

1. Opening remarks by H.E. Mr. Idriss Jazairy.
2. Initial discussion led by the moderator, each panelist disposing of ten to twelve minutes speaking time.
3. Short intermission after the third speaker for questions and remarks from the floor. (Allowing 5 minutes time for questions and 5-10 for comments and replies by panelists).
4. Resuming the discussion with the rest of the panelists, and then opening the floor once again for questions and remarks.
5. Concluding remarks.
6. Public participation through questions and comments.