

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

**REGIONAL EVALUATION OF PROGRESS ACHIEVED IN
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR
ACTION IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES**

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Introduction

The Fourth International Conference on Women held in 1995 in Beijing, China, has been different from previous international conferences in many ways. One difference stands out in terms of the follow-up procedures that are being taken on the different geographical levels. In the Arab Region seventeen countries held a meeting in Beijing after the conference in which they decided to convene a regional meeting to formulate a regional plan of action and to establish a mechanism to follow up on both the regional and the international Plan of Action. To implement such decision, the League of Arab States convened a regional meeting in Jordan during September 1996. The meeting was attended by government representatives, experts and NGOs. The meeting culminated in the Regional Plan of Action that gives priority to three areas of concern, namely, alleviating women's poverty, increasing women's participation in decision-making and strengthening women's status within the family system.

A second Arab meeting to follow up on Beijing was held in Beirut During 12-15 December 1998. A questionnaire prepared by the Division for Advancement of Women (DAW) was distributed to Arab governments to obtain information for the regional evaluation report. This paper discusses the data contained in the replies to the questionnaire received from nine Arab countries. The paper has also used information from other country reports whenever relevant particularly those submitted at the Second Arab meeting in December 1998.

The structure of the paper follows that of the questionnaire filled by the countries. Accordingly, the data is organized in three parts. Part one gives an overview of trends in achieving gender equality and women advancement. Part two describes the financial and institutional measures undertaken to enhance equality and women's advancement, and part three discusses the implementation of the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action. The paper will end with a summary and conclusion derived from the data.

I. OVERVIEW OF TRENDS IN ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT

It was difficult to find data in Arab countries replies to the questionnaire that would fit properly the questions stated in Part One. On the basis of the data obtained, this part will be organized under four headings, namely, major achievements in implementing the national action plan and/or policies and programmes for gender equality and advancement of women, the countries priorities in terms of the critical areas of concern of the Platform for Action, sectors where gender approach is being applied and degree of success and changes in government policies, legislation and practices since 1995. Some of the information in this part overlaps with information contained in the two following parts.

A. MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS IN IMPLEMENTING THE NATIONAL PLAN AND/OR POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

Different major achievements were mentioned by the Arab countries among which was appointing women in certain posts which was closed to them. In Egypt, women were for the first time, appointed as the head of the administrative judiciary system, as the general secretary of the city council, as the chair of a village council and as chief in the village administration. In Qatar a woman was appointed as chief and as deputy chief of a local council. In Palestine the percentage of women in both the National council and the Legislative council increased and women were accepted as officers in the police force.

In the area of legislation, Palestine issued a law that brings equality between the sexes in employment, equal pay and other aspects.

Egypt issued the child law which safeguards the rights of girls and boys.

In the area of education and reproductive health, Bahrain, Palestine and Syria were able to reduce illiteracy rates to a great extent. Syria was able to reduce maternal mortality rate and Algeria increased the number of women using health services, using contraceptives and raised the age of marriage among girls. In countries such as in Kuwait and Algeria, the percentage of women in the labour force has also increased.

B. COUNTRIES PRIORITIES IN TERMS OF THE CRITICAL AREAS OF CONCERN OF THE PLATFORM FOR ACTION

Taking into consideration the areas of priorities agreed upon during the Regional Arab Meeting in 1966, some countries added to such priorities. Jordan, Palestine and Iraq listed political participation of women, women and the environment, empowerment of women, and women and poverty among priorities. Equality and equity was listed as a priority for Jordan and Iraq and the family was a priority for Jordan. Education, violence against women, the media, the girl child, the economy, health, human rights and social well being was listed as priorities by Palestine, Qatar and Iraq. Improving the political and socio-economic situation of women was mentioned as a priority for Morocco. Oman listed all the critical areas of concern as priorities.

C. AREAS OF MAINSTREAMING A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

In Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan a special component on women was included in the National Five Year Plan. They also applied a gender approach in all sectors. Great success was achieved in the health sector of Egypt. This included the development of a data base segregated by gender, establishing centres for women health as part of the health system, concern for adolescent girls health, providing health cards for all children and appointing women doctors in health centres. Egypt has also organized reproductive health education programmes that are attended by spouses together. In Tunisia a gender perspective was mainstreamed in the urban development programme and the rural development programme. Its policy gives equal share to women in terms of employment, social and financial assistance and small-scale industries. In the area of vocational training girls are now allowed to join types of training which were exclusively for boys. Tunisia has also

applied a gender approach in its cultural life where women were supported to produce written and audiovisual material within the policy of the Ministry of Culture.

D. ATTENTION TO GENDER EQUALITY AND ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

Changes in the attention to gender equality and advancement of women was expressed in different forms. In Egypt, Jordan and Palestine the government has paid more attention to gender equality in terms of its policies. In Egypt this was reflected in the media where the woman programme of the TV selected issues of priority related to the critical areas of concern of Beijing Platform for Action. A special film was produced by an NGO with the cooperation of the Ministry of Information to project positive image of the Egyptian woman. In Jordan increased concern for gender equality is expressed in the Royal speeches as well as government strategies. A special information campaign has been launched to advocate women rights and to reflect women advancement and achievements in the different sectors. In Palestine the media has also transmitted programmes that reflect the increased concern on the part of the government for gender equality.

In Palestine the government has paid more attention to vocational training of women to meet the requirements of globalization and economic changes. Iraq has stated that concern for gender equality has changed to the worse since the imposition of sanctions on the country. Other issues such as food and political matters became more important.

II. FINANCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL MEASURES

Information that was obtained from the replies of the Arab countries to this part of the questionnaire was not sufficient to give a clear picture about the situation. The following is, however, an indication of measures undertaken by some countries.

A. FINANCIAL MEASURES

Apparently it was difficult for most countries of the region to indicate exactly their budget or expenditure for women programmes. This may be due to the fact that women are part of the total population covered by many programmes and hence it is not easy to calculate women's share in financial terms. This may highlight the importance and the need to develop data systems that would provide such information and help monitor the situation.

Egypt and Palestine were the two countries which were able to give the percentage of the overall budget that is allocated for women specific policies/programmes. In Egypt the overall average is about seven per cent but did not mention whether the percentage is increasing or decreasing. Palestine mentioned the exact budget spent in this respect during the years 1995 - 1998 in dollars. The percentage allocated to women to the total national budget increased from about 0.4% in 1995 to 1.2% in 1998. Kuwait was able to indicate only the amount of budget allocated to girls education, which shows an increase since 1995 and Djibouti has allocated the sum of \$17 000 for the Women Department in 1998 besides, the Department obtained from UNDP for the same year the amount of \$50000. Palestine has also mentioned that their women programmes get contributions from international bodies but did not specify the amount of such contributions. They also allocate special budget to implement their national plan of action for women, but did not indicate the amount of allocation.

As for efforts to monitor budgetary allocations related to achieving gender equality, national commissions for women in cooperation with the different departments in the ministries prepare yearly reports for this purpose.

B. STRUCTURES AND MECHANISMS

Almost all the Arab countries have established a structure and a mechanism to follow-up on, and implement the Platform for Action of Beijing. National structures have different titles in the different countries. As an example Lebanon, Yemen, Palestine, Jordan, Sudan, Kuwait, Iraq and Morocco have a national committee for women. Egypt has a national commission, Djibouti and Yemen have general directorate and Qatar has a family higher council. Some of these structures are under the presidency of the republic, such as in Djibouti. Others are under the council of ministers, like Egypt or under a selected ministry.

Beside the structures on the national level, some countries have established women committees on the regional level, such as in Egypt. A number of countries have also established women departments within sectoral ministries, such as in Kuwait, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES and Egypt. The latter along with Yemen have a gender unit within their social fund. A number of countries have a national women union as in Tunisia, Iraq, Kuwait and Syria. Finally, Jordan has established a special committee to coordinate NGOs activities with government's projects and programmes.

Many of the above-mentioned structures share the same type of functions and roles. One major function is to formulate national policies for women development and to translate such policies into a national plan with defined priorities such as in Jordan, Yemen, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Djibouti, Lebanon, Morocco and Kuwait. To be able to do that, many structures are involved in carrying research and studies and have established a data base as a foundation for planning such as in Qatar, Lebanon, Egypt, and Djibouti.

A number of other functions are carried out by the existing structures. These include coordination between different organs working in the field of women development, such as in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Egypt. Monitoring the implementation of national plans, is another function for many structures

including Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Palestine. In Jordan and Djibouti, their structures outline draft legislative, advocate them and follow-up their implementation when they come into force.

Some structures carry selected projects as new models of women's programmes, like Lebanon and Egypt, and a variety of other functions are performed by some structures including consultation, conferences and panel discussions, advocacy and reviewing international cooperation projects and monitoring their implementation.

C. ARRANGEMENTS TO COORDINATE THE VARIOUS FOLLOW-UP EFFORTS TO GLOBAL CONFERENCES

Arab countries did not address this part of the questionnaire except for Egypt, where it mentioned, that a committee including representatives from different ministries along with the Ministry of Social affairs is following-up on the implementation of the recommendations of Copenhagen conference for Social Development. Egypt has also established a special committee in cooperation with the Ministry of Health to follow-up on the implementation of the recommendations of Cairo Population Conference.

D. THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Many Arab countries indicated that non-governmental organizations work as partners with the government in their countries. The women union in Syria, Tunis and Iraq cooperates with the government in planning, coordinating, executing and monitoring women programmes on different levels. A number of national committees for women include representatives of NGOs in their membership, such as in Jordan, Egypt and Yemen. In Jordan NGOs play a major role through such membership beside having a special plan for the year 2000. The government of Kuwait supports many NGOs to enable them to play their role effectively in following-up Beijing.

III. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CRITICAL AREAS OF CONCERN OF THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION

The data in this part will be organized under each critical area of concern of the Platform for Action.

Within each area the data will include:

1. Summary of basic recommendations stated within the area in Beijing Platform for Action and in the Arab Regional Plan;
2. Examples of successful policies, programmes and projects implemented within the area;
3. Examples of obstacles encountered and lessons learned;
4. Commitment to further action and new initiatives.

A. WOMEN AND POVERTY

1. *Beijing Platform for Action and the Arab Regional Plan*

The Beijing Platform for Action recognizes poverty as a multi-dimensional problem originating from economic and social variables. The objectives and recommendations to handle the problem deal with external debt, macro-economic policies and the employment of women. The recommendations include promoting relevant development strategies, policies and legislation that address the feminization of poverty and that meet the needs of poor women and measures to offset the effect.

The Arab Regional Plan suggests that countries take into consideration the needs of poor women when formulating their development plans, give priority to poor and female disadvantaged women within their programmes, assist female heads of households, promote productive schemes, provide child care services to enable poor women to work, limit foreign labour, encourage private sector to employ poor women and give concern to bedouin poor women.

2. *Examples of successful policies and programmes*

A variety of successful activities have been undertaken by the Arab countries to address women's poverty. Certain activities have been existing in some countries before Beijing and are still continuing such as certain provisions in the social security, social insurance and the public assistance systems which benefit the poor women. Some programmes include both sexes such as micro credit and small loans. More than one country is providing small loans to poor women to start economic projects or to enlarge already existing ones. This type of programme is run either by the Government or by NGOs. Some of them have an innovative aspect such as the Special Bank for Women established in Mauritania and is supported by a Network of 1400 women NGOs engaged in this activity. In many instances the loans are complemented by training and marketing such as those in Egypt, Oman and Palestine.

Special structures have been established to help the poor women in the form of government units to encourage small industries and special funds to promote agricultural and fishing industries. In countries where social funds were established to cushion the effects of the structural adjustment policies on the poor, poor women were given priority in their programmes such as those in Egypt and Yemen.

A higher committee for employment has also been formulated in Jordan to address unemployment and a National Fund was established to assist the poor from both sexes. Palestine has also implemented a programme to give financial assistance to poor women through NGOs. In order to facilitate the implementation of family courts decisions in divorce cases, the Government of Tunisia established a special fund to disburse alimony benefits, particularly to poor women, without delay. Tunis has also reviewed its legislation in relation to family conflicts and alimony procedures for the benefit of women.

A component for women was included in the national plans of both Yemen and Egypt. In Egypt an effort was made to regulate the informal sector, which includes a high percentage of poor women, to protect their rights. The contribution made by women in this sector is no more ignored by the official statistics.

A number of countries are systemizing their data on women in general, and on poor women in particular, to improve their planning procedure. The problem of the female headed household has been getting attention from some countries, where it was studied and where special programmes are tailored for them such as in Syria.

3. Obstacles encountered and lessons learned

Different types of obstacles are encountered by the Arab countries which affect their activities in the area of women's poverty. Some of these obstacles are general ones and political in nature, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, from which Palestine and Syria are suffering.

Other general obstacles are related to the countries economic situations and the limited resources available for women's services in general and for projects aimed to alleviating women's poverty in particular. These also affect the sustainability of the projects or their extension to larger target groups.

Other types of obstacles relate to the prevalence of a discriminating culture, where women come at the end of the list of priorities among beneficiaries of programmes for alleviating poverty.

Excluding women from participating in the planning process of programmes decreases the relevance of such programmes to the real needs of the poor women, as mentioned in Yemen's reply to the questionnaire. Lack of adequate data for the sound planning of programmes to alleviate poverty was mentioned in Syria's report.

The high percentage of illiteracy among women, particularly the poor, does not give them access to information about economic opportunities and deprives them from eligibility for such opportunities. Added to this is women's lack of awareness about their rights, particularly among the poor.

An important obstacle facing countries efforts to alleviate women's poverty is the lack of relevant social welfare services, which enable women to benefit from the economic opportunities.

This is accentuated by the large size family, which the poor tend to have and the mother's responsibility for small children.

Finally the small size of loans which the programmes provide to women and the high interest rate that goes with them prohibit many poor women from applying as beneficiaries.

As for lessons learned by some countries, Palestine stated one successful lesson, where the local community took the responsibility to sustain a project for the welfare of orphan girls.

4. Commitments to further action and new initiatives

More than one country fulfilled their commitments made at Beijing in terms of studies undertaken to understand the situation of the poor women and to plan projects to address such situation and to better their lives. This applies to Yemen, Palestine and Qatar. Other commitments were also fulfilled in terms of designing programmes for female heads of households, such as in Yemen and facilitating access to loans and credits.

Qatar has also fulfilled its commitment to organize technical training and to create job opportunities for the poor women. It also reviewed its legislation to emphasize poor women's rights and organized legal literacy programmes to create awareness around these rights.

Certain countries made new commitments in the area of food subsidies, giving priority to poor women in new economic projects, particularly rural poor women and encourage NGOs to provide social welfare services, particularly for children of poor women.

A new commitment has been made by Jordan as a follow up to its plan of action in the form of an evaluative study and a national conference to discuss the evaluation by both NGOs and the Government.

B. EDUCATION AND TRAINING OF WOMEN

1. *Beijing Platform for Action and the Arab Regional Plan*

Education was recognized in the Platform of Action of Beijing as a human right. The Platform for Action aimed at achieving six objectives under the critical area of education with a set of recommendations. The recommendations emphasized girls access to basic education in terms of increasing school enrollment and education rates. The recommendations addressed the content and quality of education in terms of gender, sensitizing the curricula, textbooks and teaching aids. Other recommendations included eradicating basic and functional literacy among women and improving their access to vocational training. Special importance was given to the allocation of resources to the educational sector in general and to basic education of women in particular. Support systems were also urged to enable women to use educational opportunities.

The set of recommendations of the Regional Arab Plan included eradication of illiteracy, reduction of drop-out rates, legislating compulsory basic education for all, providing life education, opening channels between formal and non-formal education, encouraging technical studies for girls, gender sensitizing the curriculum and textbooks, providing fellowships for girls, ensuring women participation in education planning and giving priority to basic education within the budget.

2. *Examples of successful policies and programmes*

Arab countries have indicated a variety of successful examples of policies and programmes to implement their national action plans within the framework of the Beijing recommendations and the Arab Regional Plan. A number of countries have managed to increase the number and percentage of girls enrollment in schools such as Syria, Kuwait, Egypt, Algeria, Tunis and Palestine. The increase cut across all the educational stages such as in Syria. Factors contributing to such increase included the introduction of the one class school and the distant educational system such as in Egypt, and the incentive schemes provided for students and their families in other countries. The incentives were in the form of financial assistance, school meals, free books, health insurance and dormitories for poor pupils such as in Algeria. Other incentives were in the form of loans to students such as in Jordan, and free school meals such as in Egypt. Some of these incentives covered students from both sexes while others were exclusively for girls. A decrease in drop-out rates was achieved in Tunis and Palestine. The latter has also succeeded in extending the number of years within its basic educational system. Besides, a positive change was achieved by Qatar and Syria, where both the percentage of females among the total number of teaching staff and number of females acquiring the highest grades in universities have increased.

Examples of successful vocational and technical training policies and programmes were indicated by Jordan, Yemen, Egypt, Palestine and Bahrain. In Yemen industrial, agricultural, commercial and fishery vocational schools enrolled students from both sexes. These schools were established by both the private business sector and the voluntary organizations. In Palestine the ministry of Social Affairs opened two vocational training centres for women coming out of Israeli prisons. Other countries formulated policies to coordinate between the education system and the demands of the labour market, thus improving access to job opportunities for both sexes.

Emphases on informal education programmes, particularly to eradicate female illiteracy, was evident in most of the countries including Jordan, Oman, Syria, Qatar, Kuwait, UAE, Algeria and Bahrain.

Four countries, namely, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan and Kuwait introduced changes in their educational curriculum to meet the real needs of their girl students. Finally the increase in expenditure on education in some Arab countries has reflected positively on both sexes in quantitative and qualitative terms.

3. Obstacles encountered and lessons learned

Different kinds of obstacles were indicated by the Arab countries within the area of women and education. The prevalent cultures in the region which prefers marriage to education for girls still creates a gap between boys and girls in terms of enrollment. This culture has fortunately been internalized by the girls themselves. The problem is compounded when families see the content of education irrelevant to the needs of their girls. Some families also see their investment in education does not pay off in terms of employment opportunities. Besides, although basic education is compulsory in almost all Arab countries, there is no effective mechanism to implement such law.

Girls drop-out rates from basic education is also an important problem prevalent in many Arab countries such as in Egypt, Algeria, Yemen and Morocco.

The weakness of the technical education system was stated by some countries such as Jordan, UAE, in spite of some improvement which has been achieved during the reported period. The shortage in technical and scientific staff has contributed to this problem.

Some countries like Morocco have indicated that girls still prefer the theoretical and liberal arts studies rather than science and technology. In Morocco, the content of education has not also been sensitized in terms of gender. The shortage in resources to implement programmes for girls' education was mentioned by Palestine as another obstacle. Palestine has also mentioned few successful lessons learned among which was the value of education and training for women prisoners, and the effect of educating the families to understand the value of girls education on the enrollment rates.

4. Commitments to further action and new initiatives

A commitment is being made by Jordan, Qatar and Algeria to continue their efforts to reduce illiteracy rates among women. Jordan is planning to reduce the rate to 8 per cent by the year 2000. A number of commitments are being made in the area of vocational and technical training for girls. Yemen intends to formulate national strategy for females' training relevant to the needs of rural and urban communities. Within such strategy, Yemen will study the demands of the labour market, coordinate between the business sector and vocational training centres, encourage small-scale industries, allocate necessary resources for the training centres and create a specialized institution to supervise all female training programmes.

Qatar has committed itself to induce the business sector to establish female colleges and to finance relevant researches and studies. There has also been commitments from Qatar and Palestine to introduce new relevant subjects, distant and continuous education and positive images of women in the curriculum.

Egypt has also committed itself to build about 1400 schools for both girls and boys by the end of the fourth national plan.

C. WOMAN AND HEALTH

1. Beijing Platform for Action and the Arab Regional Plan

Beijing Platform for Action highlighted the interaction of health and the state of well-being of women as a cause and effect. The document identifies several variables that affect women's health including lack of equality in access and use of health resources, in health information, in opportunities for protection of their health and in family responsibilities. The variables also include inadequate environmental sanitation. Their limited power over their reproductive health and their lack of influence on decision-making in the matter of early marriages and pregnancies, genital mutilation, violence, unsafe abortions and sexually transmitted diseases. Recommendations of Beijing emphasize increasing women's access to appropriate,

affordable and quality health care, their rights to the highest standards of physical and mental health, training for health workers, eliminating harmful medical interventions, health hazards and traditional harmful health policies. The Platform for Action calls for strengthening preventive programmes, increasing the number of women leaders in the health profession, allocating more resources to research on women's health issues and developing local health services.

The Arab Regional Plan has a set of recommendations in the area of women and health. These included enacting legislation to eliminate harmful health practices, making pre-marital health obligatory, creating awareness around reproductive health, improving primary health care systems, increasing women access to health services, early detection of cancer, increasing attention to rehabilitation of the handicapped, using mass media for health education and increasing expenditure on health.

2. Examples of successful policies and programmes

Arab countries have stated variety of successful examples of policies and programmes to implement their national action plans guided by Beijing recommendations and the Regional Plan. Successful examples of health services for women and girls included new projects to provide family health services and post-natal care such as in Jordan. A number of countries have mentioned free of charge projects to improve the level of services provided by their MCH units and to increase the number of these units including Syria, Kuwait and UAE. Besides, Egypt made women's health a priority within its Health policy. Many countries developed their services in the area of reproductive health such as in Egypt where new methods of contraceptives were introduced and special programmes were designed to encourage men to share the responsibility of family planning. A successful project was also cited by Egypt achieving collaboration between the Ministry of Health and the Population Council, the private sector and NGOs in the area of reproductive health. Several countries including Jordan, UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Algeria and Tunis intensified their efforts in the area of family planning and introduced policies and new projects in this regard where NGOs played an important role.

A number of countries have succeeded in lowering the rate of maternal mortality including Jordan, Yemen, Qatar, Morocco, Tunis and Kuwait. New policies making hospitals accessible for prenatal care and delivery and penalizing non-certified persons who perform such services contributed to the success. To control illegal health practice, Palestine has prepared a draft legislation defining professional standards and regulating health practices. To encourage women to use health services Qatar and Algeria increased the number of females in the health staff.

A variety of achievements were stated by Arab countries on the preventive level. Jordan and UAE necessitated health examination before marriage. Many countries have strengthened their health education programmes and new units for such purposes were established in some countries such as Qatar. Students, adolescents, women and families in general were targeted for these programmes through the media, NGOs and in the schools. Nutrition centres were established in UAE for educating women and girls. A number of countries including UAE, Oman, Algeria, Tunis, and Bahrain have started projects for the early detection of cancer among women.

To make health services more accessible to women, the Egyptian Ministry of Health established a health mobile units scheme to reach distant communities. To strengthen its primary health care programme, the health card and a comprehensive health care system has been implemented. In Tunis and Algeria, women health units are improving their services in the area of sexually transmitted diseases and the latter has issued a law permitting abortion in cases of rape.

Palestine took a number of initiatives among which is the formulation of a national strategy for women health and a five year plan for health outlined with the participation of women. Palestine has also established a data base system on health and has raised the percentage of vaccinated children of both sexes to 95 per cent. Finally, it should be mentioned, that Bahrain has succeeded in raising the government expenditure on health, and the expected age of life for women increased in Tunis.

3. Obstacles encountered and lessons learned

Besides the above-mentioned achievements a number of obstacles were mentioned affecting women's health in some countries. High maternal mortality rates is still a problem in both Yemen and Qatar. Early marriages and pregnancies were also cited by Yemen, besides high fertility rate and repeated pregnancies within a short period. Morocco mentioned three obstacles affecting women's health, namely, the weak health infrastructure, the lack of coordination between the health sector and others, and the inadequate health education campaigns and the shortage in health staff. Palestine cited a lesson and an obstacle where the first refers to the positive effect of data and information on health programmes and the obstacle refers to the inadequate financial resources.

4. Commitments to further action and new initiatives

A number of commitments within the area of women health were included in the five-year national plan of Yemen 1996-2000. Such commitments included raising the number of MCH clinics by 60 per cent by the end of the plan, raising the coverage of pregnant women by health care by 60 percent, reducing the rate of maternal mortality by 50 percent, encouraging women to use certified health practitioners and increase the number of hospitals.

Commitments to conduct studies to identify women health needs, to improve women health care and to provide necessary information for women to guide their health decisions were mentioned by both Yemen and Kuwait.

Egypt has committed itself to a number of initiatives including special services to elderly and handicapped women and those with drug addiction problems. It tends to issue new laws to enable women to benefit from health insurance schemes and to protect them from environmental hazards. It also intends to promote programmes to combat female genital mutilation, early marriages, breast cancer and bone diseases. Finally, it is committed to intensify family planning efforts to limit cases of abortion.

D. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

1. Beijing Platform for Action and the Arab Regional Plan

The Beijing Platform for Action emphasizes the elimination of all forms of violence against women and calls for taking measures to prevent and eliminate it by punishing act of violence, reviewing legislation, ratifying and implementing international human rights norms, supporting NGOs and media education and training campaigns to raise awareness about existing violence against women. The Platform also advocates studying the causes and consequences of violence against women and the effectiveness of preventive measures through collecting data and research, the ratification of international conventions on trafficking, addressing root causes of trafficking and developing educational and training programmes preventing sex tourism. It includes assisting and rehabilitating victims of violence and prostitution.

The Arab Regional Plan recommended that countries ratify CEDAW, protect women from violence through legislation and educational measures, sensitize social workers and the judiciary system to the issue, undertake studies to mobilize public opinion, establish programmes to rehabilitate the victims of violence and criminalize violence against women during times of war.

2. Examples of successful policies and programmes

Arab countries gave several examples of their efforts to address violence. Legislation was an important tool to eliminate violence in Qatar where several articles prohibited all kinds of violence against women, including harassment, abortion, rape, kidnapping and prostitution. Penalty for any of these acts is increased if the victim is young. Special articles in the law deals with criminal pregnant women sentenced to death. Their execution is postponed until delivery and until ending breast-feeding. In certain cases the sentence is being reduced and they receive special treatment while in prison.

Kuwait and Egypt have also special laws prohibiting violence against women. The latter has lately introduced certain amendments in the law to deter rape, and is reviewing court procedures with regard to cases of family conflicts. Algeria has also made polygamy approved only on the basis of agreement between the wives and prohibited divorce without compelling reasons.

Kuwait, Qatar, Algeria and Palestine have ratified human rights instruments advocating non-violence against women. A number of countries organized education and training programmes against violence including Jordan, Kuwait, Egypt and Palestine. To address the problem on a scientific basis both Jordan and Palestine have conducted studies to understand the causes of the problem and to strengthen measures to combat it.

A hotline was initiated by Jordan to receive complaints and rescue calls and has together with Kuwait established rehabilitation services for the victims. Palestine has established two hostels for girls and women who were victims of violence. Other initiatives such as prohibiting beating in schools and limiting female genital mutilation were undertaken by Egypt. Egypt has also promoted family counseling as one way to prevent violence.

3. Obstacles encountered and lessons learned

In spite of the efforts in the area of legislation addressing violence, the law was not completely successful in abolishing the phenomena as mentioned by Yemen and other countries. In Yemen violence has increased in several governorates including the capital. Incidences of murder by fault, kidnapping, suicide and rape are prevalent unfortunately more among children and married women. There is also leniency in implementing the existing law which influences its deterrence capacity. The delay in court procedures have also been cited by Egypt as one obstacle. Gaps in the legislation were mentioned by Palestine as an important obstacle.

In Algeria terrorism and armed militias resulted in an increase in the cases of rape. Finally, acts of violence are backed by the prevalent culture which considers women as a sex object; and female genital mutilation is still being practiced in Egypt and battered wives are becoming a phenomena.

4. Commitments to further action and new initiatives

Arab countries have committed themselves to several actions among which is to review existing legislation as cited by Egypt and Yemen. The latter intends to lower the incidence of rape and along with Algeria, will establish centres and mechanisms to protect girls and women against violence. Yemen will also provide rehabilitation services for victims of violence and will launch education campaigns to raise the awareness of the society around the problem. Qatar will provide legal literacy and counseling for women at risk and Egypt will intensify its efforts to combat early marriages and female genital mutilation.

E. WOMEN AND CONFLICT

1. Beijing Platform for Action and the Arab Regional Plan

The Beijing Platform for Action calls for participation of women in national and international peace forums, reducing military expenditures and directing such resources to development. It also promotes women's contribution to fostering a culture of peace through education, training, youth exchange programmes and peace research. The Platform emphasized protection and assistance of refugee and displaced women, the return of refugee women to their homes, the protection of the human rights of refugee woman and raising public awareness of the contribution of refugee women to their countries.

The list of recommendations in the Arab Regional Plan included putting efforts to resolve disputes before they erupt into armed conflict, involving women into negotiations and humanitarian relief operations, reducing defense budgets, freeing prisoners from Israeli jails, undertaking peace education programmes and encouraging NGOs to combat effects of armed conflicts.

2. Examples of successful policies and programmes

Two Arab countries, namely, Iraq and Palestine cited that they have been ensuring the participation of women in meetings and conferences concerned with policies, military issues and peace. Iraqi women have been involved in alleviating the effect of economic sanctions while Palestinian women have been completely involved in resistance activities against the Israeli occupation. A high percentage of Palestinian women were widowed due to the continuous armed conflict and are responsible for their families.

Both Qatar and Kuwait have ratified international instruments related to armed conflict including those prohibiting land mines. Qatar has provided special programmes, job opportunities and temporary nationality to refugees who entered the country. It also provided special programmes to the victims of the armed conflict that erupted after the Iran war. Kuwait has organized training programmes through the media to relieve the negative psychological effects of the Iraqi Gulf war.

3. Obstacles encountered and lessons learned

It was only Palestine that mentioned that shortage of financial resources stands as an obstacle affecting its effort in alleviating the consequences of the armed conflict. A great effort is also needed to keep the national spirit and resistance activities against the Israeli occupation. A lesson learned that is worth mentioning is the positive image of Palestinian women that emerged as a reflection of their role under armed conflict. The lesson was learned that women like men can defend their countries.

4. Commitments to further action and new initiatives

Palestine committed itself to search for financial resources for programmes to ameliorate the effects of the armed conflict. It also intends to put effort to keep the national spirit of its women high.

F. WOMEN AND ECONOMY

1. Beijing Platform for Action and the Arab Regional Plan

The recommendations of Beijing related to women in the economy included the promotion of women's economic rights, their access to employment and markets, equal pay for equal work, appropriate working conditions relevant to sharing families' responsibilities and control over economic resources. The recommendations included empowering women and enabling them to participate in formulating gender free economic and financial policies and programmes on national, regional and international levels. They prescribed equal access to training, economic information, credit, loans and social security provisions. They also suggested strengthening and supporting micro, small and medium enterprises run by women, targeting funds and outreach programmes for low income women, strengthening women's commercial networks, ensuring implementation of ILO standards and integrating a gender perspective into all economic restructuring policies.

Recommendations within the Arab Regional Plan suggested ensuring equality between the sexes in all aspects of work through legislation, guaranteeing career development, facilitating combining family and work responsibilities, granting paid leave, increasing job opportunities, providing educational and vocational training, promoting active participation in the private sector, raising legal awareness about work rights, providing supportive services and developing gender segregated data base to facilitate planning and monitoring.

2. Examples of successful policies and programmes

To protect the economic rights of women, Jordan opened a special section in its Ministry of Labour to detect and address any violation of such rights. In the area of legislation Yemen, Kuwait and Bahrain are implementing a law that gives equal pay for equal work to both sexes.

Many Arab countries include several categories of poor women under the umbrella of the Social Security Law but Algeria added a new provision to its law where housewives and part-time women workers can contribute to a pension fund and get benefits after sixty years old.

A number of programmes for rural women are undertaken by Jordan, Yemen, Algeria and Morocco. In Jordan this includes diversifying sources of income, supporting agriculture work for women and including women in land development projects. In Algeria agriculture projects are supported by the government agreement with the World Bank. In Oman the Ministry of Agriculture includes at present a special department for women to promote and market women's production. Oman has also developed a data base system to formulate sound plans for women development, while Jordan is also using its data base to identify women eligible for leadership roles.

To increase women's access to job opportunities, Bahrain has opened a special office in the Ministry of Social Affairs to assist women to find employment. Other countries are helping women to acquire necessary skills relevant to the labour market through market research, vocational counseling and training such as in Oman. Yemen encourages girls to continue university education to increase their access to employment opportunities, while Egypt and Morocco organize vocational training classes for this same purpose.

To facilitate employment for women, several programmes have been undertaken by some Arab countries. Yemen has been educating the community to appreciate women's work and along with Oman have ensured child day care services for working women. Bahrain is also providing relevant social services to encourage women to work in the private sector and to hold leadership positions. Bahraini women occupy about half the leadership positions in the government. Other measures have been taken to facilitate going back to work. Yemen in particular, has been retraining women to enable them to find new employment and has administrative procedures that allow women to go out and return to work. Special vocational training programmes and financial assistance to women heads of households are being undertaken in some countries.

A number of Arab countries carry small enterprise projects for women and provide loans as part of these projects. Yemen has a special department to implement these projects and secures funds for this purpose. Along with Egypt, Bahrain and Kuwait, they run these projects through the productive family schemes or through community development centres. NGOs in many Arab countries play an important role in this area. To encourage women to undertake business, Qatar has established the investment company for women in 1999.

3. Obstacles encountered and lessons learned

A number of obstacles still face Egyptian women's role in the economy. Among these obstacles are the negative values related to women's role outside home. The high percentage of illiteracy among women and the lack of administrative skills. Other obstacles are related to the short period allowed for returning loans, the difficulty in marketing the production and the inadequate training. Morocco mentioned also negative cultural norms, lack of coordination between projects, lack of adequate data, absence of strong commitment and weak infrastructure.

4. Commitments to further action and new initiatives

Jordan committed itself to mainstream women's issues in the new national plan 1999-2003 which will emphasize women's participation in economic decisions. Kuwait plans to review its policies and procedures to remove all obstacles facing women within the development programmes and projects. Other commitments cited by Kuwait, Yemen, Egypt and UAE include encouraging small enterprise projects, increasing the budget for productive families schemes, i.e. establishing industrial training centres, providing supportive services to enable women to combine housework and outside work and increasing the number of women in all sectors of the economy.

G. WOMEN IN POWER AND DECISION-MAKING

1. *Beijing Platform for Action and the Arab Regional Plan*

The Beijing Platform for Action includes a list of recommendations to empower women and enable them to have access to decision-making processes. These include encouraging political parties to integrate women in elective and non-elective public positions, and to review the electoral systems to increase women's representation in elected bodies. Moreover, it suggests that steps be taken to ensure non-discriminatory policies, the removal of barriers from political structures, the incorporation of gender issues in political parties agendas and to provide gender sensitive training for women and men to encourage women's participation in the electoral process. The Platform recommends the adoption of new employment policies to achieve gender equality in high-ranking posts, the development of career advancement programmes for women and the establishment of gender balance in governmental bodies and committees. It suggests sharing family responsibilities between women and men to facilitate women's participation in public life. The proposals also include supporting studies on women's participation and their impact on decision-making, monitoring women's access to senior levels of decision-making and establishing data base on women qualified for senior and political posts. Other recommendations address increasing women's capacity to influence decision-making through training, the benefits of sitting on boards of NGOs, and increasing solidarity through information and education.

To improve the situation of women in the decision-making process the Arab Regional Plan recommends that countries safeguard women political rights including the right to vote and run for public office in national legislative councils and local government bodies. It suggests that countries allocate a number of seats for women in decision-making structures, accord equal opportunity to occupy senior executive and representative posts in various organs, encourage women to participate in public life and enable them to reconcile their family duties and public life activities.

2. *Examples of successful policies and programmes*

Arab countries have put efforts to improve women power base and their decision-making structures. Accordingly, an increasing number of women have been using their voting power such as in Mauritania and occupying more seats in legislative councils such as in Palestine, Tunis, Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria. Women are gaining more seats also in the Shura councils as well as in other similar structures. In Palestine and Qatar women are sitting on the boards of the National council. Yemen had to introduce changes in its legislation to ensure women's participation in the voting process.

An increasing number of women are participating in the political parties in Egypt and Tunis. In Algeria two women are chairing their parties. In Palestine a woman was a candidate for the post of the President but did not win, and few women became members of the Cabinet in certain countries. An increasing number of women have also been appointed as ambassadors in some countries such as Egypt, Palestine and Tunis. The number of women judges has increased in nine Arab countries and a woman was appointed as the general attorney in Syria and another as the chief of the administrative branch of the Judiciary system in Egypt.

The number of the women in high positions in the government administrative structure as well as those in the business sector has been relatively increasing in most Arab countries. They have arrived at some unusual positions such as the head of women police force. Women now sit on higher committees such as in Bahrain and in Morocco.

Arab women are to a certain extent visible in labour unions and professional syndicates in some countries but not in others. In Palestine women participate in different forms of political activities, yet a study is being undertaken to increase such participation. As for decision-making positions in NGOs, a number of them are held by women in the Arab countries. Many of the NGOs implement programmes to educate women and raise their awareness around the practice of their political and legal rights.

3. Obstacles encountered and lessons learned

An important obstacle that influences women's position and their power in the decision-making process, is the prevalent culture that does not see women as capable of taking important public decisions. This was cited by a number of countries including Egypt, Yemen, Mauritania and Palestine. Political parties in some countries are not willing to include women on their lists of candidates to run for elections and are not enthusiastic to support them. Arab women on the other hand, are not active enough in the political arena and do not have weight in the political parties.

In some countries like Yemen, women have not arrived at certain levels in the government administrative structure, such as an under-secretary, while in other countries beside Yemen, some posts like governor, university president, judge or head of a party are still closed for women. Besides, the ratio of women in leadership positions to total number of women workers in various structures is usually low. Family responsibilities are, sometimes, an obstacle facing women who aspire to decision-making positions.

4. Commitments to further action and new initiatives

Yemen is committed to give more opportunities for women to participate in decision-making and in formulating legislation, and Palestine will continue to support its women who are struggling against Israeli occupation.

H. INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

1. Beijing Platform for Action and the Arab Regional Plan

Beijing Platform of Action has three main objectives related to this area with a set of recommendations that include placing the responsibility of the advancement of women in the highest level of government, creating or strengthening national institutions, mainstreaming gender concern, including broad range of actions to work for equality between the sexes and ensuring that women are direct beneficiaries of development through review of policies. Recommendations also include promoting gender perspective in all legislation, coordinating efforts of different organs, providing training to integrate gender in policies and programmes, undertaking studies and improving data, producing regular statistical publications on gender and using more gender sensitive data in formulation of policies and programmes.

The Arab Regional Plan recommends that an official mechanism concerned with women's issues should be established and directly linked to the highest executive authority with its own budget sufficient for the implementation of the programmes and projects for the advancement of women contained in the national plans and strategies.

2. Examples of successful policies and programmes

A variety of activities were undertaken by Arab countries in this area. Jordan has introduced a number of changes in its legislation where extended its maternity leave from 60 to 90 days with pay, provided divorced, widowed and women married to foreigners a family identity card, and allowed women to put their children under 16 years on their passports if the children are not registered on their fathers' passports. With regard to legislation, Egypt is also reviewing its procedures in relation to family courts and is studying a new law to facilitate payment of alimony for divorced women and their children.

A number of countries have established special mechanisms for the advancement of women. Algeria and Tunis have a ministry for women. The latter has also a centre for documentation and research on women.

A number of countries including Oman, Iraq and Yemen have established a national committee for women with the responsibilities of formulation of policies and plans, coordination of women's programmes and reviewing and improving legislation. Qatar established a higher council for the family with women constituting half its membership with the main purpose of supporting women to participate in public life. Other structures established for women in the Arab countries include women departments such as in Yemen

and Kuwait, gender units in the social fund such as in Yemen and Egypt and the national commission for the protection of the family as in Algeria. National unions for women have been in existence in some countries including Syria, Tunisia, Yemen and Lebanon.

Many Arab countries have a large number of NGOs working for women and supported by the government. Other activities in this area included outlining a strategy for the advancement of women such as in Egypt and a media and information strategy in Tunisia. Egypt has also incorporated a special component for the advancement of women in the Five-Year National Plan 1997 - 2005 and Qatar has convened a national conference to stage women's issues. Many other countries have organized panel discussions for the same reason.

3. Obstacles encountered and lessons learned

Yemen is the only country which listed a number of obstacles in this area, including inadequate budget to implement outlined strategies for women, lack of full time staff to manage women's structures, weak monitoring and evaluation system and dependence on outside international cooperation to support women programmes.

4. Commitments to further action and new initiatives

Commitments in terms of mechanisms were few. Jordan is committed to change a number of its legislation according to the recommendations of its national commission for women. These include the Social Security Act of 1978, the Retirement Act of 1959, the Nationality Act of 1954, the travel Document act of 1969, the Family Law and other laws that discriminate against women. Algeria will soon establish a national council for women.

I. HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN

1. Beijing Platform for Action and the Arab Regional Plan

The Platform of Beijing organizes its recommendations on women's human rights around implementation of international conventions and human rights treaties, specifically CEDAW and CRC, and those related to specific groups such as indigenous, refugee, migrant and displaced women. The Platform endorses the recommendations of the World conference on Human Rights. It emphasizes the necessity to review all national laws and policies to ensure equality between women and men and to harmonize them with human rights instruments. Beijing recommendations highlight the need for human rights education programmes and training for all professionals in a coordinated way and for similar training for UN personnel. The recommendations also include establishing legal aid assistance for disadvantaged women, ensuring implementation of legislation and publicizing the existence of mechanisms to redress violations of woman's human rights.

The Arab Regional Plan did not address this critical area of concern separately.

2. Examples of successful policies and programmes

Arab countries have undertaken a variety of measures in this area. With regard to human rights instruments, a number of countries have ratified CEDAW and many Arab countries have programmes to create awareness about the human rights conventions, particularly CEDAW and CRC. The conventions are being implemented by countries such as Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait and others which have ratified them. Jordan produced a manual for human rights to train workers with youth, and Morocco has highlighted the link between women's issues and human rights within its policies and plans.

Egypt has also organized training courses for different workers and reviewed its schools curricula to harmonize them with women human rights. In Qatar, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt a network of human rights groups include women's issues as part of their programme.

Yemen has introduced a number of changes in its laws to harmonize them with women human rights in the area of work, marriage and family welfare. Along with other countries including Egypt, Yemen undertakes legal literacy projects for women. A special committee is formulating the constitution of Qatar which will allow women to practice their political rights. Similarly Kuwaiti women will be able to vote and sit in parliament in the coming elections.

To improve women's skills in practicing their political rights, Egypt has been assisting women to obtain their voting cards and educating them to use their votes in the right direction. Special effort is being made by Egyptian NGOs to get women to sit in the seat of the judge and to obtain leadership jobs which are still not allowed for women. The media has been used extensively for that purpose. Finally, Kuwait has outlined policies and programmes to enable disadvantaged women to practice their human rights.

3. Obstacles encountered and lessons learned

Only Yemen and Egypt have mentioned some obstacles in the area of human rights. Yemen mentioned that the special committee concerned with women in decision-making structures has not decided its membership yet. Both countries mentioned culture and negative traditions as a main obstacle where religion is misinterpreted and lack of awareness among women contribute to the discriminatory attitudes toward them. The absence of women in the process of formulating legislation in Yemen and the discrimination in implementing the law in Egypt, are very significant obstacles to be addressed.

4. Commitments to further action and new initiatives

Qatar is the only country which has mentioned its commitment for new activities in the area of human rights. It intends to make health and social welfare the basic goal for its national plan and equality between sexes as the main strategy.

J. WOMEN AND THE MEDIA

1. Beijing Platform for Action and the Arab Regional Plan

The Beijing Platform of Action has a list of recommendations that include the increase of women in management posts and decision-making positions that influence media policies, programmes and training to integrate a gender perspective. It also recommends compiling a directory of women media experts, promoting of non-stereotype portrayals of women by the media, and avoiding presenting women as inferior beings. NGOs were requested to establish media watch groups to promote campaigns to increase awareness around women's rights and address violence against them.

The Arab Regional Plan has also a list of recommendations. These included producing media programmes to reflect a favourable perception of women's issues, training women to participate effectively in media programmes, promoting women in media work, formulating strategies and plans to project women's concerns in different spheres, establishing media watch groups to check negative stereotyped images of women and urging media to advocate non-discrimination against the girl child.

2. Examples of successful policies and programmes

The number of women working in the different structures of the media has been increasing since Beijing in almost all the Arab countries. They have arrived at high level leadership roles in certain countries as Egypt. To facilitate their combined role in the media and at home, Bahrain has established day care services at their work place. Almost all Arab countries stated that they try to promote positive images of women's role in development including Oman, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, Tunis and Bahrain. Training programmes have been organized for Women to impart skills in media production, writing, photography etc... and manuals were produced in Palestine to inform women about their human rights and about available services and programmes for them. Media programmes directed specially for women have been produced to support women's issues and other programmes to educate the different groups of the population about women's rights such as in Qatar and Egypt.

Women excelled in many competition festivals as in Tunis and Syria. The Ministry of Culture in Palestine has also been organizing competition programmes for creativity among women writers. New newspapers and women journals came out since Beijing in some countries. As an example, two women newspapers have been published in Yemen, three women journals in Tunis and a biweekly newspaper in Palestine. In Bahrain special pages within daily newspapers and within journals deal with women's issues.

Egypt has been extending its women's media programmes to the rural areas and has integrated women's issues in many general programmes. Finally Yemen is encouraging females to enroll into its new college for media and information.

3. Obstacles encountered and lessons learned

Yemen has listed a number of obstacles in the area of women and the media. It mentioned that the number of women in the media structures are still small, graduates from the Media and Information College cannot find jobs, NGOs role and contribution in this area is negligible and political parties journals have no interest in women's issues. Along with Egypt, Yemen stated that the media is still focusing on the traditional roles of women. Few females are studying media and information in Qatar.

Palestine stated that the financial resources constitute an obstacle in this area but it learned a lesson that health education programmes provided through the media were more effective than those provided through other channels. Such programmes were particularly effective with rural and illiterate women.

4. Commitments to further action and new initiatives

No other countries beside Palestine committed itself for new initiatives in this area. Palestine has stated that it will continue its efforts in promoting women's programmes in the media and will find resources for such programmes and for training women to improve their skills in this area.

K. WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

1. Beijing Platform for Action and the Arab Regional Plan

The Platform for Action of Beijing recommended focusing on empowerment of women through the participation in decisions related to the environment on all levels to integrate gender concerns and perspectives in all policies and programmes of sustainable development. The Platform emphasizes women's access to information and education in science and technology and to integrate the knowledge so gained in the management of the environment. Research was stressed particularly on the impact of environmental hazards on women to reduce such hazards and to establish mechanisms to assess the impact of environmental policies and programmes on women. Among the recommendations was raising women's awareness regarding environmental issues through different communication channels.

The recommendations listed in the Arab Regional Plan urged countries to implement Agenda 21 for the environment, called for women participation in formulating plans and legislation to protect women and their families against environmental hazards, asked that women participate in monitoring and implementing plans, should be trained in management of natural resources, asked that rural women should have alternative energy sources and potable drinking water and appropriate sewage disposal systems be available.

2. Examples of successful policies and programmes

A number of Arab countries mentioned some programmes and policies related to the environment in general, but did not specify where women or women's issues stand in relation to these policies and programmes. Aside from that, some countries stated that women participated in formulating the environmental policies, such as in Oman or managing environmental resources, such as in Iraq. More than one country has organized programmes to increase women's awareness around environment issues, such as in Jordan, Qatar, Egypt and Oman.

The latter has organized workshops for the same purpose. Oman has also been pioneering on taking into consideration environment issues in all its policies and, along with Jordan and Egypt has established training programmes to recycle wasted materials in new small industries. Oman and Egypt have also been encouraging and supporting NGOs working around environment protection.

3. Obstacles encountered and lessons learned

Kuwait is suffering from great environmental hazards as a result of the Gulf war, while Yemen mentioned a number of obstacles, including the exclusion of women from leadership roles in environmental programmes and in policy structures, lack of training programmes for women in this area and the inaccessibility of women to many environment programmes.

4. Commitments to further action and new initiatives

A new commitment was made by Yemen to undertake research to understand factors leading to excluding women from planning and executing programmes for the protection and management of the environment. It is also committed to implement the recommendations of the research in terms of enabling women to participate effectively in all activities related to the environment.

It is also committed to study the effect of environment hazards on women and take measures to alleviate such hazards.

L. THE GIRL CHILD

1. Beijing Platform for Action and the Arab Regional Plan

The Platform or Action of Beijing emphasizes the human rights of the girl child with respect to the signing and implementation of the articles of the CRC. The Platform calls for changing negative and harmful attitudes and practices through the educational system and by mobilizing the media. It recommends including the right of girls to basic education and retention in schools and gender sensitization of teachers. The Platform recommends girls access to common services, to be educated in how to obtain their rights in practice, to be protected against exploitation and all forms of violence. The document underlines the importance of supporting and educating families about the rights of girls and mobilizing NGOs to promote the participation of the girl child and ensure her equal status in society.

The girl child was not addressed separately as a critical area of concern in the Arab Regional Plan of Action.

2. Examples of successful policies and programmes

Many of the successful policies and programmes mentioned by the Arab countries in this area were not directed exclusively for the girl child. These included publicizing CRC and creating awareness around its articles, such as in Algeria and Palestine, introducing changes in family legislation and nationality law for the benefit of mothers and children, such as in Algeria, Qatar and Kuwait, prohibiting child labour, such as in Kuwait and Qatar, making education free and compulsory in Kuwait, protecting children against exploitation in Yemen and Qatar, extending child care services, providing health and education for mothers and implementing the World Summit Plan for Action.

Other examples of successful policies and programmes directed particularly for the girl child included ensuring that the inheritance law is implemented to give girls their share accordingly in Qatar. Qatar and Kuwait prohibited tests to discover fetus sex to avoid abortion when it is a girl. The Ministry of Justice of Egypt regulated girls marriage from foreigners and the media has been creating awareness around the risks of girls early marriages, while Yemen has raised the age of marriage. In the area of education, Algeria provided incentives to encourage enrollment of girls in schools. Palestine equalized all educational opportunities between the sexes and Yemen puts efforts to implement its law of compulsory education for girls.

Palestine, Qatar and Yemen are providing special preventive and rehabilitation services for the handicapped girls and the latter have vocational training and employment programmes for them.

In Palestine a number of ministries provide special programmes for girls. The Ministry of Social Affairs provides rehabilitation services for those who encountered violence acts either within the family or in the community. The Ministry of Youth organizes training courses for leadership and communication skills for girls. Finally, Egypt segregates data on childhood by gender to monitor progress in closing the gap between the sexes.

3. Obstacles encountered and lessons learned

Lack of enough resources to provide programmes for girls was listed as an obstacle by both Yemen and Palestine. Other obstacles included discrimination in the area of socialization, education, nutrition particularly in the rural areas as mentioned. Egypt and Palestine. Yemen listed a number of obstacles including the inability of the government to fulfill its commitments towards girls, inefficiency of services provided to the handicapped, the delinquent and girls living in the streets and the gaps in the advocacy programmes to educate the community about the rights of the girl child.

In Egypt female genital mutilation is still being practiced and early marriage among girls is still prevalent. Besides, Palestine has learned that efforts to combat discrimination against women have to start early in life, and that such efforts have to be coordinated covering all aspects.

4. Commitments to further action and new initiatives

Most of the commitments made by Yemen, Egypt and Palestine were related to girls education. These included extending the one class schools for girls in Egypt and Yemen, training teachers and girls to respect their gender rights in Palestine and Yemen, providing distance education, reviewing textbooks and curriculum to remove discrimination, integrate handicapped girls in public schools, eliminate girls school drop-out and introduce changes in the legislation to abolish discrimination in all respects.

M. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, the answers received from the Arab countries to the first two parts of the questionnaire were not as precise and clear as the answers to the last part. Certain questions were not answered by almost all countries, such as the question on globalization. Besides, there was some repetition due to the overlap in questions in the three parts of the questionnaire.

To give an overview of trends in achieving gender equality and women's advancement, many countries stated in their replies major achievements and breakthrough in this area. A number of countries were able to increase the percentage of women in decision-making positions. In certain countries women obtained their political rights during this period, while other women were supported to practice these rights through training and other services. A review of existing legislation was undertaken by some countries to establish gender equality particularly with regard to work conditions. A breakthrough was achieved by a number of countries in the areas of women health, literacy and reproductive health. Starting a data system segregated by gender was another breakthrough to refine planning and monitoring.

Arab Countries did not discuss sectors outside their national action plans, but they believe that there has been a general progress in the situation of women and girls since 1995. However, gender equality and advancement of women have not been pursued as a priority by Arab countries. This may be due to existing other significant problems in the region such as the Palestine question, the sanctions imposed on Iraq, the Israeli aggression in south Lebanon, the conflict in Sudan and other problems of economic nature in other Arab countries.

Three critical areas of concern were of priority to most countries, namely, women and poverty, women and the environment and women in power and in decision-making positions. Women in the

economy, violence against women, the girl child, the media and health came next in the order of priority, then came the rest of the critical areas of concern.

Two countries in the region were able to include a gender and the component within their national plans and succeeded in allocating necessary budget to implement the component. A gender perspective was mainstreamed successfully within the health sector in some countries. In other countries there has been an effort to apply a gender approach in the judiciary system and in the family laws. It was evident that it is easier to mainstream a gender perspective in some sectors like health more than in other sectors. Some countries have established gender units within the different ministries to apply a gender approach in its work.

Arab countries gave more attention to gender equality and advancement of women since 1995, where for example, women human rights were included in some Arab law schools and where the health sector appointed more women physicians in MCH clinics. More space in the Arab newspapers has been taken by articles around women issues, which sometimes creates healthy debates. On the other hand, there is still a lot to be desired in terms of the image of Arab women reflected in the media.

As to financial and institutional measures, it was very difficult for countries to answer the question on the percentage of the overall budget that is allocated for women specific policies/programmes and the change in the percentage since 1995. It was only one country which was able to give an estimation of 7.1 per cent and has a mechanism to monitor the budgetary allocation. Two others gave estimated figures but not percentages.

All Arab countries have established structures and mechanisms to institutionalize follow-up to, and implementation of the Platform for Action. They varied as to their place in the administration structure, as to the scope of their work and as to the name they take. Similar structures were established in few countries to follow-up on the Social Summit and the Population and Development Conference. The role of the various structures was similar in different Arab countries, including policy formulation, planning, coordination, monitoring, suggesting legislation and awareness raising and advocacy. One country tried to coordinate recommendations of the global conferences through its national development report.

Non-governmental organizations have been playing a role in planning, in follow-up activities and in implementing part of the recommendations of the global conferences. In some countries the NGOs sit on the structures which follow-up the Beijing conference.

In their answers to part three of the questionnaire, most Arab countries did not refer to their national action plan and focused to a great extent on government's activities. Answers, however, were within the frameworks of the Platform for Action of Beijing and the Arab Regional Plan for Action. In the area of women and poverty, the best practices and innovative actions undertaken by the countries included providing social insurance, social and public assistance security benefits; subsidizing certain products and food items, extending work opportunities, organizing vocational training programmes; facilitating getting loans, extending small enterprises projects and providing relevant assistance to special groups of women, such as the handicapped and females heading households. Obstacles encountered within these areas relate to finance, lack of adequate data, the size and interest of the loans and the effect of international economic sanctions. Commitments made in this area include continuing subsidies, extending social services and undertaking evaluation to improve action.

In the area of women and education, the best practices and innovative actions taken by the countries refer to both the coverage and the content and quality of education. Examples given by the countries include decreasing illiteracy and school drop-out rates, increasing enrollment rates, extending pre-school services, raising basic education years, increasing the number of female staff, providing school meals, health services and free books; providing study loans, improving school buildings, increasing education budget; eliminating negative gender images from textbooks and introducing new forms of education, such as the one class schools, distant education and video conferences. Obstacles still exist in terms of non-adequate budget and prevalent culture, the gap between labour market needs and content of education, early marriages and lack of mechanism for follow-up. New commitments include more budget, review of curricula, decreasing illiteracy and introducing electronic education.

In the area of health, examples of best practices refer to pre-marriage examination, early detection of cancer, family planning, preventing health practice by non-professionals, allowing abortion for raped women, eliminating female genital mutilation, reducing maternal mortality, extending life expectancy age, establishing health data base, coordinating with NGOs efforts, increasing female staff and providing nutrition education. Obstacles in the health area refer to early marriages, inadequate financial resources, inadequate health education and weak infrastructure. New commitments include increasing the number of MCH clinics, strengthening family planning programme and giving more attention to elderly women and the handicapped.

In the area of violence against women, examples of best practices include issuing relevant legislation, ratification of international conventions, raising awareness, establishing a hotline telephone for complaints, rehabilitating victims and conducting studies around the phenomena. Obstacles still exist in terms of delay in court verdicts against those committing violence, gaps in legislation which limit its deterrence effect, culture factors that look on women as sex objects and prevalence of terrorism and violence atmosphere. Commitments made by countries include reviewing legislation, legal literacy programmes and providing counseling and awareness services.

In the area of armed conflict, examples of best practices include participation of women in negotiation conferences, ensuring different services for refugee women, alleviating effects of war, ratifying international protocols and putting efforts in solving conflicts before they erupt into war. Obstacles in this area refer to Israeli aggression in Palestine and Lebanon. Commitments refer to searching for resources to provide services and keeping nationalism spirit high among citizens.

In the area of economy examples of successful programmes include issuing legislation, extending social insurance schemes, assisting women to get employment, helping through loans and marketing facilities, training and retraining, giving supportive social services, extending productive family programmes, conducting studies, advocating women's work, ensuring child care services to enable women to get employment and establishing data base system. NGOs play a big role in this area. A number of obstacles are being faced among which is the conditions of obtaining loans, lack of coordination between different services and projects, weak infrastructure, marketing difficulties and gender bias. Future commitments made by countries include putting effort to increase women employment, increase budget allocation for work for women projects, extending small loans, sensitize macro-economic policies and involve women in economic planning.

In the area of women and decision-making, examples of successful practices include allowing women to practice their political rights for the first time in some countries and encouraging such practice in these countries which had allowed them before. Examples also include increasing the number of women in leadership posts in the government, in the political parties, in labour unions and in NGOs. Women have also assumed certain jobs for the first time. Obstacles in this area included cultural factors, bias of the political parties, exclusion of women from certain jobs, high illiteracy rates and the difficulty of combining work and family responsibilities. Countries, however, made commitments to support more women to get into decision-making posts.

As to institutional mechanisms examples refer to introducing new legislation, refining existing legislation, establishing relevant structures, organizing training, conducting studies, mainstreaming gender in policies and plans and outlining gender strategies. Obstacles existing in this area refer to financial shortages, weak monitoring and dependence on international cooperation. Two forms of new commitments are made, namely, further changes in legislation and establishment of necessary structures.

In the area of human rights examples include the implementation of international conventions particularly CEDAW, training workers in different structures on women's rights, issuing and reviewing laws, encouraging human rights groups and giving concern to the rights of special groups of women. Obstacles in this area refer to misinterpretation of religion, lack of women's awareness and their relative absence from important structures. A commitment was made in terms of equalizing health rights.

In the area of women and the media successful examples include projecting images of women leaders, increasing the number of women holding positions in media structures, using media to advocate

family planning, organizing gender training, involving women in media discussions, refining women's programmes, putting special programmes for rural women and increasing the number of women journals and magazines. Obstacles still exist in terms of focusing on women traditional roles, unemployment of graduates from information colleges and absence of serious issues. Commitments refer to continuing efforts to support women's issues in the media.

In the area of women and the environment examples of successful projects include issuing legislation to protect women from environmental hazards, creating environment awareness, recycling wastages, considering the environment dimension in planning projects for women, conducting relevant studies, involving women in managing the environment and encouraging NGOs to carry projects in this area. Obstacles in this area refer to the effect of the Gulf war on the environment in certain countries and lack of women's skills in environmental management. New commitments are made to enable women to participate effectively in policy-making and in environmental projects, to alleviate the effect of environmental hazards on women and to improve environmental health in general.

As to the girl child examples of successful practices include the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, introducing changes in the law for the benefit of the girl, emphasizing girls education, raising the age of marriage, prohibiting child labour, family counseling, and concern for special groups of the girl child. Obstacles still exist in terms of female genital mutilation, gap between the sexes in education, cultural factors particularly in the rural areas and inadequate advocacy to treat the girl child as equal to the boy. New commitments are made in terms of issuing necessary legislation, ensuring education, training workers on girl child rights, extending one class schools and reviewing textbooks.

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