

Economic empowerment: cornerstone of equality

DEPENDENCE ON MEN SETS LEBANESE WOMEN BACK IN STRUGGLE FOR BROADER ROLE

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BEIRUT: The 23rd special session of the General Assembly on "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century" that took place at the United Nations Headquarters in New York from June 5 to June 9, 2000, focused on the importance of education, stressing that it was both the entry point into the global economy and the best defense against its pitfalls.

The consensus is that education is the key to gender equality and to larger employment opportunities for women. The story of gender equality in education in Lebanon appears to be one of success and advancement. According to UNICEF, "Lebanon has achieved most of the goals of the World Summit for Children. Ninety-eight percent of children aged six to 11 are at school, with no gender disparities, and 91 percent of children aged three to five are enrolled in pre-schools and child-care programs."

And according to the UNDP-POGAR (Program on Governance in the Arab Region) Gender and Citizenship Initiative, "Most women receive a good education in Lebanon, and half of all university students are women."

So how is it that in Lebanon, one of the most advanced Arab countries in terms of gender equality, only 27 percent of women are economically active, compared to 76 percent of men?

These are depressing numbers when compared to South Africa, where 64 percent of women are economically active, or countries such as Kuwait, where the percentage is 43 percent, or India with 41 percent, not to mention China where the rate of active women is 74 percent.

Some or rather many may wonder about the importance of gender disparity in employment for society as a whole, and women in particular. Few in the NGO sector in Lebanon are addressing this issue or giving it the priority it deserves. Addressing this issue is fundamental to define our response to wealth creation and development as poverty disproportionately affects women, children and the elderly.

There is little denying the fact that investing in human capital is one of the most effective means to reduce poverty and encourage sustainable development. We, in Lebanon, consider our human resources as our greatest asset. The best means of building a brighter future for our children is by improving our productivity.

Failing to make use of their education to get employment as is the case for Lebanese women is negatively affecting their participation in the economic and social life of the country. This undermines a vital pillar in the productivity of the nation.

Another very important related issue that women organizations are called upon to explore is that in Lebanon women's access to education has been improving gradually, however they are still restricted in their access to income-generating work, and without adequate income, they commonly depend on men for support, but often get little. This contributes to reinforce the belief that men contribute more to economies and brings more wealth to their families than do women, thus furthering the consideration of women and their role as less important and subservient.

Equality in duties and rights, freedom of movement and thought, and full political rights are the aims of the women's movement. History and the experiences of other nations indicate clearly that all of these much thought after rights must inevitably pass through economic empowerment.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN DEVELOPMENT

Education is often considered the primary prerequisite for the growth and development of thought. The more education expands and progresses in all areas, the more thought reaches higher standards and affects the advance of civilization, economic development and social progress.

The education of women in particular is seen to be essential and necessary for the building of the new society. Women comprise half of the total population, and their contribution to the nation-building process is imperative. World figures in literacy relate a sorry tale. According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, it is now estimated that two-thirds of the world's 875 million illiterate adults are women. Of the 130 million 6-11 year-old children not in school, a majority - 60 percent - are girls. The figures stress how in most regions of the world, especially the developing societies, gender bias impinges on girls' education.

The numbers also show a clear correlation between development and the education of women. The disparity in the literacy rates between men and women in the developed countries rarely exceeds a percentage point, while in the less-developed nations the average difference between male and female literacy rates is 9 percentage points. As for the disparity between male and female enrollment in secondary school, the average difference is one percent for more developed nations with countries like Norway registering an advantage for women. In contrast the average percentage disparity in less developed nation is 10 percentage points, reaching in some countries such as Djibouti 30 percentage points.

There is little denying of the fact that refusing women their basic right to education is detrimental to society as a whole, and hampers the development of nations. The inability to read, write and calculate complicates a girl's efforts to engage in both market-focused production and household activities as effectively and efficiently as possible. This affects her family's welfare and diminishes her potential contribution to the development of the household, the local economy, and national wealth.

LEBANESE WOMEN AND EDUCATION: A SUCCESS STORY

Even though Lebanon has achieved an excellent record regarding gender bias in education, the numbers show that this success story is not spread evenly over the whole country. There are disparities between the percentages of girl enrollment in secondary school between rural and urban regions.



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ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: AN ISSUE OF CONCERN

The problem for Lebanese women resides in the fact that the improvement in their educational opportunities did not translate into an increase in their chances for integration in the labor force and moving up the employment ladder.

Working women tend to be more educated than their male counterparts, as a higher standard of education is a prerequisite for women entering the labor force. For this reason 24.6 percent of women are employed in the professional sector, 81 percent in the service sector, with 14 percent in industry and 4 percent in agriculture.

It is true that women have found opportunities in government, medicine, the law, academia, the arts and business. Unfortunately, few women have achieved senior positions in their field. For instance, 90 percent of bank employees are women, but there are no female bank directors in the nation. And even in female-dominated sectors like health, women work as nurses, but a large majority of hospital directors and department heads are men.

In the new and upcoming sectors, there is a gender imbalance as well. An instance is ICTs where, despite the rapid growth of the sector, women generally occupy positions towards the bottom of the hierarchy. The most important factor hindering Lebanese women's entrance into the workforce and advancement to the upper echelons is that they have not yet managed to break the implicit social contract that for more than hundreds of years confined them to home, child rearing, household tasks and fieldwork, while men worked outside the home.

The numbers confirm this assumption as only 10.6 percent of married women join the workforce while 21 percent of non-married women are employed. The numbers soar to 44 percent for widowed women. This is a clear indication that despite the acceptance of working women as a de facto reality, the overwhelming belief remains that the place of women is at home, taking care of their husbands and children.

Because of this view of the role of women they are underpaid and very few managed to advance in their employment to decision-making positions. It is a fact that although young women are increasingly choosing typically 'male' professions, they remain over-represented in traditionally female jobs, such as secretaries, nurses, and under-represented in jobs with responsibility and the professions.

In Asia, more and more young women have been joining the official workforce in recent years and are experiencing some of the benefits such as financial independence and higher social status. Children in these countries have also benefited because women usually devote more of their income to the family's welfare compared to men. This is not the case in the Arab world, including Lebanon.

For example in Bahrain where the percentage of female enrollment in third-level college is 53 percent, only 24 percent of females are economically active compared to 65 percent for males. In Saudi Arabia it is 18 percent for females and 83 percent for males

while in Lebanon, the percentages are a depressing 27 percent for females compared to 76 percent for males.

The main factor that is hampering development in the Arab world as a whole is not in essence the discrimination in education, but the break in the logical chain of educated women entering the workforce and the production cycle.

A number of socio-cultural factors limit career advancement opportunities for Arab and Lebanese women. Women are raised and educated in a male-dominated society with very traditional attitudes, even though these constraints vary greatly not only from one region to the next, but also between urban and rural areas of the same region.

Other factors such as the challenges of combining responsibilities for a household and family (and usually in Lebanon it is an extended family) with a professional career have had also a negative effect on Lebanese women entering the workforce, specially that in Lebanon the social system does not provide assistance to working women in the form of long maternity leaves or public kindergarten as is the case in European countries.

CHANGING THE STATUS QUO IS A SHARED EFFORT

Whatever the reasons, the sad reality remains; the number of girls and women who have been left out of employment opportunities, still far outweighs those who have got them. In order to change this scenario, governmental efforts are not enough. There needs to be a change in societal norms, in cultural and traditional biases and in the general mindsets of people.

The main stakeholders, who can bring about a change in the cultural and societal moorings and provide girls and women better opportunities for education are, in addition to the government, the media and the civil society. The women's movement and women's associations also have much to contribute if we are to change the actual status quo.

What we need today in Lebanon are trends where girls are able not only to break out of the culturally determined patterns of employment but also be offered career possibilities that look beyond the traditionally acceptable female careers.

In many countries, special initiatives have been taken to direct girls to non-traditional fields of studies. For example, in Austria, special computer and Internet courses have been offered to increase the number of girls enrolled in technical courses.

Lebanon has achieved, in the last two decades, some noticeable progress. Several laws were passed helping increase the contribution of women in the workforce and gave them some equality regarding their duties and rights. However, looking beyond the statistics, one may deduce that education, as a social system, emerged to accommodate the existing traditional society.

The curriculums in Lebanon do not have any reference to the concepts of equality and justice between the sexes and most school textbooks still portray a somewhat blighted view of the role of women in society. If we are to change the actual gender stereotyping, it is very important to improve the

positive image of women's status and role in our educational programs.

Equally important is to have a comprehensive educational policy that goes hand-in-hand with a media policy so that together they serve the goals of the system at all learning levels.

Educating women in accordance with the general goals of sustainable development is an issue that ought to be addressed through a joint initiative by governments in cooperation with the civil society.

Despite the rise in the number of females graduating from secondary schools, the enrollment of females in technical education is very low compared to their male counterparts. Technical training being one of the most important means of assisting in the improvement of skills necessary for the work market, it becomes clear that the actual perspective toward changing the educational system is not linked to sufficient guidelines. There should be a comprehensive effort to make all fields of technical education accessible and attractive to Lebanese girls.

This could be achieved by improving programs for planning and administration so that they meet the needs of the job market, and ensuring equal opportunity in the fields of education and specialized training.

The civil society has also an important role to play in introducing women to a technical training that could improve their status in society and empowers them.

There are examples of success stories in very traditional countries such as India that could provide a good example where women were able to harness and make use of the potential of the ICT sector growth.

The M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, MSSRF, in Chennai, India has piloted a path-breaking project, in the tiny coastal state of Pondicherry. The project, being run by the foundations Rural Technology Centre, has helped local women become computer-literate and in the process, empowered them. The program has taught them how to download the latest weather reports from the US Oceanographic department on the Net. The women broadcast these reports on the public address system - information that is often crucial to their husbands out fishing on the high seas. They have earned respect from the community that once looked down upon them.

In another effort, Nari Raksha Samiti (NRS), an Indian social welfare organization devoted to improving the lives of poor and destitute women, has sought to use twenty-first century technology to address the wrongs that result from the age-old traditions associated with the dowry system. NRS trained 400 victims of harassment and exploitation in basic computer literacy providing them with the job skills necessary to break out of the cycle of poverty and abuse which affects so many women in India. The NRS training center has also allowed NRS to establish an online complaint system for solving dowry and family dispute issues. Women can confidentially lodge complaints through the system and receive assistance from NRS and police and government authorities.

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