

Interview with Head of UNIFEM's Arab States Office, Dr Haifa Abu Ghazaleh

08 Mar 2006 10:58:40 GMT

<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/IRIN/a1d678023dcd52b226e8a7e0d1fa3a26.htm>

AMMAN, 8 March (IRIN) - Gender inequality is generally recognised as being one of the main obstacles to development in the Arab world.

The latest Arab Human Development Report notes that in general, women suffer from inequality with men and are vulnerable to discrimination, both in law and in practice. Despite laudable efforts to promote women's status, the report notes that "success remains limited."

Greater progress is required in women's political participation, in changes to personal status laws, in the integration of women in development, and in the right of a woman married to a foreign husband to pass on her citizenship to her children, according to the report.

The failure of existing legislation to protect women from domestic violence, as well as violence perpetrated by society and the state is another "deficit area," it says.

Despite this prognosis from Arab experts, the Director of the United Nations Development Fund (UNIFEM) Arab States Regional Office, based in Jordan, Dr Haifa Abu Ghazaleh, remains upbeat about women's changing status in the region.

In excerpts of an interview with IRIN, she said that progress on women's rights was being made, although much more remained to be achieved.

QUESTION: Are women's rights improving in the Middle East?

ANSWER: The situation for Arab women has improved slightly in all spheres of public and private life. Women's access to education and health has increased considerably compared to past decades and their participation in the economy, environment and decision-making spheres is steadily growing.

Q: Which countries have made improvements in respect of women's rights and what specific measures have they taken?

A: In the Middle East...women's human rights have entered the agendas of numerous NGOs and governments, which are slowly introducing legislative changes.....In Jordan, for example, an amendment to

Article 340 of the penal code was introduced in December 2001. This amendment cancels an exemption from punishment for men who kill female relatives who are found committing adultery. Other amendments introduced in Jordan, as well as in Egypt, include the right for women to file for divorce unilaterally, provided there is economic compensation [khule].

In both Jordan and Palestine, initiatives concerning violence against women have gained momentum and, although governmental actors have taken no specific steps to design a comprehensive plan of action, NGOs are increasingly providing services [i.e. counselling, protection through hotlines and shelter facilities] and information.

In Lebanon, the work of the National Commission for Lebanese Women as well as NGOs contributed to legislative changes introduced to the labour law and the penal code in 1999 and 2001. Changes in the labour law have included an increase in the period allowed for maternal leave from 40 days to seven weeks, the prohibition of women's dismissal due to pregnancy....and the granting to female employees of equal benefits and privileges.

In addition, Kuwait has recently granted women the right to vote and run for elections as part of a constitutional monarchy framework. Kuwaiti women will be able to participate in the next national legislative elections in 2007 as voters and candidates.

Q: Where are women's rights not improving?

A: The rights of women in the Arab region are constantly violated....women are still deprived of exercising their basic rights due to unawareness of these rights or simply because of weak monitoring systems to ensure the realisation of their rights.

The application of laws is also prejudiced against women since judges, prosecutors and lawyers are generally hesitant to take up cases involving women's rights because of societal views that these issues ought to be resolved within the family.