

**ARAB INTERNATIONAL Women's Forum**

**POWERING THE FUTURE**

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**Arab Business Women in Modern Economy**

**ARAB BUSINESS WOMEN AND POLITICS**

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Arab women are an effective actor of development and change. They have invested progressively many fields economic, social cultural and political.

Women's leadership in the Arab World in a recent phenomenon, and multidimensional,

Our concern today is women entrepreneurship in the stage of globalization, and how women in the Arab world are involved in it, demonstrating their competences and capacities as leaders in a field from which, they were excluded and marginalized for a long time. Leaders who are able

To lead the local, national and world business,

To participate in the economic and social development of their countries

To contribute intensively to social and cultural changes in the society

To intervene in force to improve women's status, to alter the former and traditional representations conveyed on them.

Women who make great efforts to balance their role as mothers, spouses and professionals.

- But how are businesswomen in the Arab world involved in politics?
- Are they playing their full role as citizens?
- How do they contribute to the national, regional and local policies?
- Could female entrepreneurs constitute a real force of lobbying to contribute to women empowerment in their countries?
- How could Arab society and Arab states accept women in business but not in politics.

- **1 / Introduction**

- The Arab world contains 22 countries with 310 millions of inhabitants in 2006
- Arab world is not homogenous,
- Great disparities, between golf countries, Near Eastern countries and North African countries. (In size of population, GNP, employment, infant and mothers mortality rate, school enrolment....etc),
- Arab world has been subject to many political upheavals, military conflicts, sanctions, embargos during many years, which affects its economic growth, its social development.
- If we add a rampant democracy, a process that is timidly started in some countries and ignored in others, many violations of human rights, we could say that Arab countries are living many deficits as it was reported by the Arab human report in 2002 : the freedom and democracy deficit, the women's empowerment deficit, the knowledge deficit.

- Furthermore, economic growth has been improved in recent years due to mainly the higher oil prices, some economic reforms that alleviate the rate of unemployment that fell from 14.3 % to 10.8% between 2000 and 2005.
- The private sector has become more important in creating more jobs.
- Globalisation has changed the face of the Arab world, but has divided it into unequal groups, at national and regional levels.
- Political crisis and security issues are leading to the amplification of military expenditures
- This situation creates wide disparities between Arab women who are the most affected by :
  - \* The lasting conflicts,
  - \* The liberalization of economies,
  - \* The lack of democracy

- **2 / Status of women in the Arab states**

- \* Many efforts have been invested by the Arab States to improve the women's situation in the Arab countries, and especially in recent years.
- \* On the one hand, UN intervenes strongly for the signature of many treaties and conventions concerning women's rights. Through it system, with the cooperation of other international institutions, they try to introduce some changes on women's lives, taking a lot measures to empower them.
- \* On the other hand,, Arab states have developed a great awareness on improving women's status, giving an impetus to improve women's education and to integrate more women in the economical circuits, and to half open the door for a political participation..

- **Education**

- Rate of illiteracy is still high in many Arab countries, exception for the Gulf countries.
- Nowadays, we are witnessing a lot of progress in women's education, the rate of girls enrolment in Primary school varies from 97% to 90% (Tunisia, Syria and Qatar, Bahrain, Lebanon , Jordan, Palestinian territories, Algeria, morocco ) from 32% to 42% ( Djibouti and Sudan).
- Concerning the secondary school, eight countries have a girl's enrolment rate very important :90% to 70%, (Bahrain, Palestinian territories, Egypt, Qatar, Jordan, Kuwait, Arab emirates, Oman)
- With respect to higher education the highest rate is 53% Arab Emirates and the lowest is 5% Yemen and 2 % Djibouti,

- **Employment**

The growth of the rate of women employment in the Arab world is slowly evolving. It is considered as the lowest in the world with many variations from one country to another. The employment rate evolves from 20% to 42%. The highest rates are in Morocco and Qatar and the lowest concerns Oman and Saudi Arabia respectively 20.3 and 22.4 (UNDP Report 2005)

- **Politics**

- According to the UN data, (UNDP Report 2005):
- 5 Arab countries have zero women in their parliaments ( Qatar, Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia),
- One country, have 0.3% (Yemen)
- 4 countries have between 2% and 3% of women in parliament ( Oman, Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt
- 3 countries have between 5 and 10% ( Algeria, Jordan Sudan)
- 3 countries have between 10 and 12 % of women in parliament ( Syria, Morocco, Djibouti and Iraq.

- As decision makers women are really absent. The percentage of women in government, and especially as ministers is so weak in the Arab world; the rate is derisive 0.1 in 2005. Male officials appointed women just as a symbol, and they are very proud.
- Arab regimes find different ways to deal with women's issues and especially under the internal demands and international pressures. They often prefer to introduce slight and superficial improvements in women's status rather than to implement radical reforms that might contradict their ideology and antagonize conservative elements in the country.

- **3 / Arab Women as a pillar of development and change**
- Arab women illiterate, or educated have been always a main factor in change,
- Women are more receptive to new technology, because it alleviates the burden of domestic duties; they are more responsive to girl's education which opens the doors to modernity and freedom.
- Islam has given women and men equal rights in many aspects of life, while the false interpretations of Islam is in a good part responsible for the inferior status of women, their marginalization from public life, and exclusion from politics.
- Women entrepreneurship is a tradition in the Islamic world. Islam has given women the rights to work, to own property and to have wealth.

- **4 / Arab women in business**

- Throughout the world, large numbers of women are starting and operating their own businesses successfully. Arab and Islamic world are not an exception. Many studies and the last one led by the World Bank found out that women are forming new businesses at a much greater scale, and many of these entrepreneurs are involved in international business, and trade.

- "Female-owned businesses are as well established and as sophisticated as their male counterpart," said Daniela Gressani, World Bank Vice President for the Middle East and North Africa Region. "It is clear that women entrepreneurs play a far more important role in the region's economies than previously thought, but there are still too few of them."

## ***5 / Characteristics of women entrepreneurs***

- \* Most of women entrepreneurs in MENA region are between 35 and 54 years old
- \*The majority of them are married and most of them have children
- \*They are very well educated
- \*Strong and full of ambition to succeed in their jobs
- \*Incite family and mainly males to change
- \*Try to balance work and family

- **6/ Female entrepreneurs in the Arab world receive an international support**

- The situation of women in the Arab world is inextricably in link with international policies, either American or European.
- During the last decade, European and American officials are giving a lot of importance to women's issues, bringing a great sustain to women empowerment.
- The examples of the Barcelona process and the Middle East partnership initiative are very significant ,explaining how are the interests for women issues effectively oriented towards women in business.

- **The Barcelona process**

- From 1995 to 2005 the main actions and projects financed by the EU focused on women in business. The main euro Mediterranean conferences : Ericeira 1998, Brussels 2000, Casablanca 2000, and the regional forum on the role of women in development, Brussels 2001 were categorized under the heading of integrating women into economic and social development ,and are mainly focused on women in business, women who start companies, access to jobs, education and professional training
- The recommendations from those conferences were oriented to augmenting finance to promote women's business , including gender issues in all the euro Mediterranean projects and actions.

- **The Middle East partnership initiative**
- MEPI recognizes women's empowerment as one of the four key pillars of the reforms introduced in the region along with political, educational and economic advancements. Women are full beneficiaries of programs in all the MEPI pillars.
- Many actions were conducted through MEPI programs
- 1 / The USA through MEPI has founded seminars and meetings that provide political leadership skills and organisational training for women seeking elective office.

- These kind of meetings, helped business women leaders to explore broader issues affecting not only business field, but seeking the ways to build a constructive leadership and how they might fight against discrepancy and the lack of economic, social, and political rights of women in the region.”

- **7/ What hampers women entrepreneurs to be a real actor in politics**
- According to the World Bank Report, the business environment and business laws in the MENA Region are far less discriminatory than presumed. But, social attitudes and laws outside the business legislation heighten the barriers for women entrepreneurs and limit their opportunities
- Women entrepreneurs can still face more hurdles than their male counterparts..

four special barriers are gender related :

- **Family law**
- Arab world is excessively hostage to clerics, who do not allow in some Arab countries the codification of civil personal status laws. They interpret Islam to sanction and perpetuate many sexist practices and views.
- This kind of laws has an impact on the social attitudes and discourages women to invest labour market. such as those requiring a husband's permission to travel : the example of the Egyptian women minister of finance, who until 2001 was not able to travel without her husband's permission.

- **Traditions and Stereotypes**

- Unlike men, women not only hold fulltime jobs, but also handle all the domestic duties.
- Traditions impose a gender paradigm that presumes that the most important contribution women can make is to family and society.
- It focuses on the assumption that the man is the sole breadwinner of the family
- It establishes a code asserting that family honour and dignity rest on the reputation of women.
- Hence the paradigm presumes that the man's responsibility for supporting and protecting his wife and family justify his authority over his wife's interaction in the public sphere and control over it.
- The mixing of male and female in public sphere is forbidden in some Arab countries, some professions are still forbidden for women even if the number of qualified and highly educated women is increasing

- **Patriarchy**

- The persistence of patriarchy in the Arab world, and other regions, is an obstacle for women, children, families, and states. It affects education, labour, human rights, and democracy.
- Patriarchy is still very powerful in the Arab world, because age-based kinship values and relationships, the priority and privileges given to males, the super protection of women are the fundamental base of family and the whole society.
- Patriarchy is still the major force hindering Arab women advancement.
- A combination of patriarchy, conservative religion interpretations and stereotypes has built very strong psychological barriers among Arab population regarding women's participation in the public sphere.
- The hierarchal, patriarchal and tribal structure of several Arab societies contribute to maintain women under male domination

- **Women's absence in politics**
- If women's participation in labour force in the region is generally low, their political part whether in appointed or elected positions is even lower
- On many fronts, Arab nations lag behind many other countries on gender issues.
- New initiative to expand the role of women in society and politics, many Arab countries have moved to introduce some reforms that helps few women to access to politics. The cases of many Golf countries.

Why women do not have access to politics like men and especially business women ?

- Women are not active in politics, because politics is not a safe and secure place.
- They feel more secure in business than in politics.

Because :

- \*More companies have a majority of women's workers
- \*The administrative staff is known by the male of the family
- \*They are not subject to confrontation with males
- \*Business is part of the family activities
- \*And the company is then transformed in new private space

- They feel marginalized from politics

Because

- \*Male are the obviously the rulers. Under pressures they give for a few women a small place in the political space to keep them silent.
- \*The main rules of democracy is interpreted and adjusted according to the social structures and the rulers interests.
- \*women were not educated to be at the political foreground

Despite all this, women in the Arab world are moving, working to establish their real and effective place within a society dominated by male, trying to break this ice ceiling to breathe a fresh air and to develop their wings in order to fly and to be free

- **8 /Suggestions,**
- Entrepreneurship should empower women at different levels, not in business only
- If the main objectives of businesswomen and their associations are to promote women through business, to help, to train, to develop women expertise, to facilitate the dissemination of information. It becomes urgent to overcome the business sphere and to participate intensively in politics with the aims :
  - \* To promote gender equality in the world of business and within society
  - \* To uphold women in executive, managerial and leadership positions not only in business but and especially in politics,
  - \* To reinforce cooperation and exchange between women in politics, and women in business, and sustain the links between business and society,
  - \* to seek innovative approaches to promoting young women executives and leaders.

Women cannot do business outside politics

It goes without saying that the mass media contribute in shaping people's minds. The Mass media have an important role to support women by disseminating positive images on women's roles in society and banning the stereotypes and especially those that consider a woman unable to achieve success by herself, and a woman has no place in politics. This opinion is false, it underestimates women's abilities, capacities and undermines their will of being an effective citizen of a country with the same rights and obligations like men.