

23 September 2006

**Statement of H.E. Ms. Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa,  
President of the 61st Session of the General Assembly,  
at the Working Session on Women's Empowerment**

Heads of State and Government,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset I would like to thank Secretary Rice for her kind invitation to participate in this working Session on Women's Empowerment. This important initiative comes at a time of inconsistency in the status of women around the world. While some of us are fortunate to be holding prominent positions, the majority of women remain marginalized.

Before proceeding further let me loudly emphasise one point, namely that women regardless of their background are the backbone of society; hence, the relevance and purpose of this gathering.

As a Bahraini lawyer, I would like to briefly share with you a few thoughts on the status of women in the Middle East in particular the Gulf region.

Over the course of my professional career, I have witnessed great achievements as well as many challenges. In today's Middle East women enjoy various political and social rights. Politically, women are increasingly exercising their rights to vote and run for elections. They are also assuming high decision-making positions. Socially, women are broadening their professional sphere and increasing their involvement in civil society.

Yet, we continue to be confronted with tremendous obstacles, in particular the pervasive stereotypes that deter women from exploring their full potential.

In the Seventies when I began practicing law, for example, both men and women in my society were critical of my efforts. They perceived women lawyers as breaking with traditions.

These traditions were not long standing. During the pre-oil era, women in the Arabian Gulf played a vital role in decision-making while their male counterparts were at sea. For a minimum of three months, men were away from their homelands, pearl driving or trading. This vacuum required that women play a leading role in everyday life.

With the discovery of oil, however, these industries diminished in relevance; decreasing the need and length of travel. Consequently, women's role in decision making narrowed.

This illustrates that the stereotype of Arab women as being passive and weak is a recent phenomenon.

With time, this phenomenon was embedded in our culture and adopted in our collective thinking. It was then mistakenly associated with religion, making it more difficult to tackle.

In fact, Islam is a religion that promotes equality and embraces women's rights. Unfortunately, this is often overlooked because of a very rigid interpretation of Islamic doctrines.

While I was studying Shari'a law, I was encouraged to be critical and question social and religious construed truths. I began to distinguish between the inherent principles of religion and the by-products of our history, particularly power struggles.

I am convinced that critical thinking is a fundamental measure for women to realize their full potential. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of quality education that cultivates this approach to knowledge.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is disheartening that many leading figures in our societies including our elders are satisfied with the status quo. This is a further barrier to empowering women.

The challenge before us all is to initiate dialogue among key figures from scholars to political and religious leaders. I am convinced that such a dialogue can introduce a new approach to education. Then and only then, can we overcome these barriers and empower women legally, politically, economically and socially.

I look forward to exchanging ideas with such a distinguished group of women. Yet, this exchange cannot and should not replace a nationally driven dialogue. Ownership of this dialogue is fundamental to unleash the true potential of education. This will not only benefit women but society as a whole.

Thank You.