

27 February 2007

**Statement of H.E. Ms. Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa,
President of the 61st Session of the General Assembly,
on “Towards a Culture of Gender Equality in the 21st Century” at the
Chamber of Deputies**

Speaker, Presidente Fausto Bertinotti
Distinguished Deputies
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed an honor and a privilege to be invited to address the Chamber of Deputies, in the historic Palazzo Montecitorio.

As President of the General Assembly, I am in the words of Mahatma Gandhi the 'chief servant' of Member States.

I am also, only the third woman, and the first from an Arab country to serve as President.

To create a culture of gender equality in the 21st century, more women must assume leadership positions at the United Nations and in other multilateral organizations.

Mr. Speaker,
Distinguished Deputies,

At the 2005 World Summit, Heads of State and government set out a vision - 'Progress for Women is progress for all'. They reiterated their commitment to promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, by endorsing three principles.

First, gender equality is essential to development, peace and security.

Second, all countries have a responsibility to mainstream gender policies across economic and social programmes.

And third, to achieve the Millennium Development Goals the Beijing Platform of Action for gender equality must be implemented in full.

At the heart of this approach is the notion that all people are born free with equal rights. However, while this is internationally agreed in principle, not all people are equally entitled to these rights in practice.

Mr. Speaker,

Distinguished Deputies,

We all stand to gain from women and men having equal opportunities to pursue their dreams. This basic principle on women's empowerment is contained in the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which was adopted by all governments.

Though these are universally agreed norms, women in the Arab world, in particular, face many cultural challenges if they want to have an equal stake in modern society.

Cultural and religious traditions continue to perpetuate inequalities. Some interpretations of religious text have been translated into cultural traditions that have restrained Arab women. The reproduction of these cultural traditions from one generation to the next has deterred women from seeking non-traditional education and professional careers. This explains the conservative nature of marital laws that prevent women from exercising their basic rights.

Many Arab countries have not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. And those who ratified the Convention, made formal reservations on article 2 which relates to gender equality., thus undermining the spirit of the entire Convention.

Despite recent laws that allow women to run for parliament in some Gulf countries, practically no woman has succeeded. During elections in some Gulf countries, many religious groups used women to encourage voters not to elect women.

In some contexts, women have paid with their lives for holding political office. I would like to pay my sincere respects to Zill-e-Huma the social welfare minister of Punjab, Pakistan, who was shot and died a few days ago.

Mr. Speaker,
Distinguished Deputies,

In my experience, providing quality education for women is critical to overcoming these obstacles to change.

Education is a basic human right that benefits not only children, but families, communities, and whole nations.

In the Arab world, gender disparities are common in secondary and higher education. In poorer Arab countries, nearly half of adult females cannot read or write. And, economic participation rates are among the lowest in the world.

We must concentrate on the quality of education. It is not enough to merely raise the enrolment and literacy rates of women, if we continue to teach our children notions of inferiority and stereotyping.

School curricula must encourage creativity, critical thinking and offer a variety of religious and secular perspectives.

Until we invest in quality education, which questions the cultural implications of certain religious doctrines, we will continue to deny women equal opportunities.

Mr. Speaker,
Distinguished Deputies,

There are many hopeful signs that things are changing in the Middle East.

The Fourth Arab Human Development Report endorses the view that Arab public opinion about women's role in politics is changing. In a sample poll conducted in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Morocco, three quarters of those surveyed, agreed that women have the right to become a minister. In addition, the increasing influence of NGOs is a welcome trend in moving towards more open societies and greater gender equality.

Though some desire faster progress a balance is needed to maintain social stability against reactionary forces.

In the golden age of Islam, the Arab world epitomised tolerance, diversity and innovation, while much of the Christian world was mired in sectarian conflict. Today however, the political context has changed.

The debate needs to move beyond the difficult tension between a national identity based on Islamic civilisation and culture, and the call for civil and political rights that some construe as Western imports.

Islamic feminists, reformists and modern Arab women have to challenge traditional values to show that cultural change is inevitable and healthy. That diversity is part of the historical make-up of the Middle East.

Historically, Arab women have organized to take matters into their own hands. In 1881 for example, women established educational societies in Egypt. In my own country - Bahrain - women created the first girls' school in 1928.

However, progress for women needs to be understood within the political and security concerns that continue to hinder human development across the Arab world.

A just and durable solution to the protracted Arab-Israeli conflict, stability in Iraq and an end to violence in Darfur must remain priorities for the international community.

Progress in resolving these issues will foster development and prosperity in the region as a whole, which can be translated into greater opportunities for women.

Mr. Speaker,
Distinguished Deputies,

To paraphrase Martin Luther King Junior - injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

King spoke of the American Constitution as a 'promissory note' for equality, which for black Americans, had been returned with 'insufficient funds'.

This exposed the gap between promises and reality.

The same is now true for the promises that governments have made to eliminate discrimination against women.

In order to bring gender equality and the empowerment of women further up the international agenda, on the 6th and 7th of March 2007, I shall convene a High Level debate on these issues in the General Assembly, in New York.

Mr. Speaker,
Distinguished Deputies,

The challenge for us all is to keep up the political pressure for change. Doing so will generate renewed hope; more equality and human rights for women in the future.

Thank you very much for your attention.