

4 June 2007

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

Mrs. Pajín,
Mrs. Martín Muñoz,
Distinguished Senators,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a delight to be here, at the Palacio de Senado. I would like to sincerely thank Minister Moratinos, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, as well as the Casa Arabe for their warm hospitality throughout my visit.

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to address you, on a topic that is dear to my heart: the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women from a Middle Eastern perspective. I firmly believe that true gender equality can only be achieved if more women assume leadership positions in the public sphere: in their parliaments, governments, at the United Nations and in other multilateral organizations.

I commend the government of Spain on its advances in women's rights.

Although women have made significant progress in political participation around the world, the global average of women's representation in national parliaments remains low at 17 percent.

Distinguished Senators,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

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.

At the 2005 World Summit, Heads of State and Government set out a vision - 'Progress for Women is progress for all'. They endorsed 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.

Given all this, I cannot help but ask: how can we improve the standing of women in the Middle East?

I was in Vienna only last Thursday, the 31st of May, to participate in a conference addressing this timely issue. It was a conference on Women Leaders – Networking for Peace and Security in the Middle East organized by the Foreign Minister of Austria, Ms. Plassnik.

It brought together many women in leading political positions.

It was broadly agreed that stability and security can only be achieved if we resolve the political disputes in the region, in particular the Arab-Israeli conflict. And, also we need to address the reasons behind the social imbalances that lead to tension.

Distinguished Senators,
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 Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Middle East is a vast, diverse region and the status of women varies significantly from one country to the other. Women in some parts of the region still face multi-layered discrimination that is deep-rooted in our legal framework, culture, and educational system.

I would like to briefly elaborate on some of the problems in some parts of the region.

Concerning the legal framework – women do not enjoy a favorable legal status in many countries in the region. This is because they are subject to family laws which follow interpretations of Islamic scholars dating back hundreds of years. Naturally these interpretations are subject to completely different social contexts in today's world.

As Islamic texts are open to various interpretations, it is important to have interpretations based on the needs of the time...our time, as what is suitable for one society might not be suitable for another...and what was suitable a few hundred years ago might not be suitable for the 21st Century.

In some countries in the region, polygamy is permissible by law, while in others polygamy is restricted, whereas in Turkey and Tunisia, for example, it is banned. The same is true for divorce; in many countries men possess a unilateral and unconditional right to divorce; women on the other hand must resort to the court in order to obtain a divorce, where they confront social, legal and bureaucratic obstacles.

Concerning culture – women’s rights are often restricted if they are perceived to conflict with the rights of the family unit at large, which is the building block of society in the Middle East.

Often traditions are associated with religion, making them far more difficult to criticize or change. This has created a mentality that fears the autonomy of women because it is viewed as a threat: a threat to the traditional family and a threat to marital relationships as well as a catalyst to sexual freedom.

Practically, this translates into men deeming women physically incapable of carrying out decision-making duties. In turn, women doubt their own capabilities. They end up accepting a level of control and submission, even violence at times, to keep the family intact.

Concerning education – a lot has been done, but we need to further modernize our curricula.

It is imperative that our curricula focus more on subjects like philosophy and theology that nurture critical thinking. These subjects lay the foundation to review, evaluate and criticize the ideas that shape our societies.

It is also crucial that these curricula embrace the diversities in the world, and allow future generations to consider openly, different approaches, to address the many challenges we face today.

We should not be left with fertile ground for extremist ideologies.

We should not allow those who want to limit us to the past, to solve problems of the present.

Some countries in the region have started their path to modernize education. For example, the United Arab Emirates launched a 10 billion dollar education fund during the World Economic Forum meeting in Amman that was held last month.

Distinguished Senators,
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These realities hinder women from being fully active in the public sphere.

If we look at recent elections in Bahrain and Kuwait, many religious leaders encouraged voters not to elect women on religious grounds, claiming that a women’s place is at home. Some women also oppose other women’s involvement in politics, viewing it as unfeminine and threatening to the well-being of society. This was the case in Bahrain in 2002, when the majority of voters were women but not one woman out of the eight female candidates was actually elected.

Hence women remain under-represented in parliaments, at higher government positions, as well as in multi-lateral institutions.

However, many women are active even if it is not on a high profile or decision-making level. They influence policy making and public opinion through the media, in petitions to Members of Parliament and government officials, as well as through their memberships in unions, political parties and NGOs.

Indeed, there is a long tradition of women's involvement in NGOs and civil society institutions in the Middle East. It is a trend that needs to be strengthened by all.

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This backdrop compelled me to organize a high-level meeting at the General Assembly last March, on the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. I wanted to let women in the Middle East and around the world realize that they are not alone in their struggle. I also wanted to discuss policies and success stories that could serve as a point of departure in enhancing and supporting gender equality and women leadership.

There was a special focus on the role that microfinance could play in empowering women socially and economically, in particular in developing countries.

Experiences from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East have demonstrated that when women are given the chance to succeed through small business loans or increased educational opportunities; families are stronger, economies are advancing, and communities flourish.

However, it is important to recognize that micro-credit plans constitute one poverty eradication strategy. This is where the role of governments come in; they play a crucial role in including gender perspectives in their economic policies. Such policies include assisting women in entering markets and obtaining reasonable interest rates for loans, as well as promoting decent employment opportunities.

I encourage the government of Spain to further its development strategies on this front, towards helping women in developing countries achieve more economic independence.

Distinguished Senators,
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I would like to take this opportunity to highlight a subject that is of importance to Spain and to my presidency; the interaction between Civilizations and Cultures. I commend the Government of Spain for its initiative, with Turkey, to launch The Alliance of Civilizations.

Just recently, in May, I organized a two day meeting on the issue, under the heading “Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace”. Scholars, political figures, intellectuals, and writers from diverse backgrounds, came together to exchange views on issues such as: Respect for Cultural Diversity, the Role of Religion in Modern Societies, the Role of the Media, and the Political Framework of the interactions between Civilizations and its impact on Global Peace and Security.

It is imperative for such initiatives to continue, in order to promote better understanding among peoples in a shrinking world.

We need to utilize all the tools available to allow the moderate voices in the world, who are the vast majority, to be heard and not sidelined by the noise of extremism and discrimination.

Distinguished Senators,
Excellencies,
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I would like to conclude by taking this opportunity to remind us all of the fact that since 1946, all Secretary-Generals of the United Nations have been men, and I am only the third female President of the General Assembly and the first Arab woman. I hope that this imbalance will be corrected, and that we will be able to create a culture of true gender equality early in the 21st Century. It is long overdue.

Thank you again.