

# Women in the Arab world

This month's newsletter is dedicated to women in the Arab world. The scope of information it provides goes beyond usual media coverage in that it offers the reader a broad range of viewpoints and perspectives from different sources.

## 1.1 Does gender matter?

It certainly does. The advancement of Arab women is not only relevant from a gender perspective but also entails important development and human security implications. Gender inequality is generally recognized as one of the main obstacles to development in the Arab region. The authors of the first *Arab Human Development Report*, published in 2002 by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), have already identified gender bias in the Arab region as one of three major factors hindering these countries' economic, political and cultural development. The latest *Arab Human Development Report* even singled out the empowerment of women as the prime precondition for renewed progress and prosperity in the region.

Links to and information on the report (the entire version is not available free of charge) as well as other relevant UN conventions and agreements are presented in the first section of this newsletter.

## 1.2 What are the problems and where are the solutions?

The factors preventing Arab women from equal access to educational and professional opportunities, health care as well as meaningful participation in public and political life are manifold and closely intertwined. They include economic, legal, social, political and cultural impediments. The latest *Arab Human Development Report* therefore calls for the temporary adoption of affirmative action measures to promote the integration of Arab women into all aspects of life. This is the only way the old tradition of discrimination against women can be dismantled.

Many organizations that are primarily affiliated with or part of the United Nations already work toward promoting this goal. The links to these organizations as well as a concise description of the main and most interesting ones are presented in the second section of this newsletter.

## 1.3 Are there Arab feminists?

Despite the above described impediments, there are reasons for optimism. The results of a poll commissioned for the *Arab Human Development Report* reveals clear discontent with the current

gender situation and a desire for more gender quality in the region. The report acknowledges that gender issues are gaining prominence in the regional intellectual discourse and public dialogue. This development is partly due to new and more open media platforms such as blogs, chat rooms and satellite television channels.

There are Arab women networks and feminist organizations and they are not just Western imports. Some of them look back on and preserve a remarkable history and tradition.

The last set of links and descriptions in this newsletter focus on the work of Arab women networks and includes feminist organizations from the Arab world as well as articles on feminism in the region.

Myriam Käser  
ISN Editor

#### **1.4 OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS AND REPORTS**

*Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World*, by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), New York, US

The report focuses on the history and contemporary dynamics of Arab women's economic, political and social empowerment. It details the processes in which gender impacts Arab development while suggesting means of overcoming some of the challenges and building more equitable societies. The website offers an informative summary for free as well as links to UNDP Arab country office sites, regional program sites and draft country program outlooks for the years 2007 to 2011.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, by the Division for the Advancement of Women, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, New York, US

The site provides not only the full text of the convention, which can be downloaded for free in the six official UN languages, but also an outline of the history of the convention. It lists the 185 state parties to the Convention and offers information on permitted reservations regarding ratification. The site also features a directory of other UN resources on gender and women's issues and the most recent country reports outlining the measures the individual countries have taken to comply with their treaty obligations.

International Agreements, by the Palestinian Women's Information and Media Center, Gaza, Palestinian Territories

This website provides the texts of relevant international agreements on women's rights. It includes the UN Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict; the Agreement no. 100 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) on Equal Payment Between Man and Women (where the efforts are equal); the UN Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages; the UN Convention on Political Rights of Women; the UN Convention Against Discrimination in Education and the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

## 1.5 UN AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL INITIATIVES AND ORGANIZATIONS

Gender and Citizenship Initiative (GCI), by the United Nations Development Programme – Programme on Governance in the Arab World (UNDP-POGAR), Beirut, Lebanon

After the *2002 Arab Human Development Report* identified "women empowerment" as one of the three main "deficits" in the Arab region, the UNDP Regional Bureau of Arab States (RBAS) launched the Gender and Citizenship Initiative (GCI) in the Arab region through its Programme on Governance in the Arab Region (UNDP-POGAR). The initiative aims to support informed policy debates on women's citizenship in selected Arab countries, improve public and media awareness about the implications of gender inequalities inherent in legislation, and enhance the capacity of Arab women's NGOs. The website offers publications, links and country profiles with gender relevant information.

Arab States, by United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), New York, US

UNIFEM's work in the Arab states focuses on achieving gender equality in democratic governance and on reducing feminized poverty and exclusion through the realization of women's human rights and human security. The website offers news releases, stories from the field and speeches.

United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) Arab States Regional Office, Amman, Jordan

The UNIFEM Arab States Regional Office focuses on women's economic security, governance, women's human rights, HIV/AIDS, peacebuilding, leadership and women and information and communication technologies. Its strategy includes strengthening women's organizations and networks, leveraging political and financial support for women, forging new partnerships among women's organizations, governments, the UN system and the private sector, and undertaking pilot projects to test innovative approaches to women's empowerment. The website offers information on the different programs, publications, information on events, news and useful links to other organizations working in the field.

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA) Centre for Women (ECW), Beirut, Lebanon

ECW focuses on three main areas of empowerment: economic (poverty alleviation), social (gender roles and partnership in the family) and political (sharing in decision-making and political participation). Toward this end, ECW concentrates on sensitizing society to gender-related issues, analyzing the situation of Arab women and compiling profiles of the countries in the region. It supports member countries in formulating gender-sensitive legislation and policies, and assists in institution and capacity building for women NGOs. The website provides publications, related links as well as information on the Center's projects and activities.

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA) Gender Statistics Programmes (GSP), Beirut, Lebanon

GSP aims to enhance national capabilities in the production, use and dissemination of gender statistics to lead to more effective policies promoting change for the benefit of women and the advancement of society as a whole. The website provides free access to the Arab gender statistics

database, and includes information on project activities and outputs, the production of gender statistics as well as a glossary.

WomenWatch: Directory of UN Resources on Gender and Women's Issues: North Africa and the Middle East, by the UN Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE), New York, US

This website offers a compilation of relevant resources including occasional papers, reports, country profiles and organizations.

Toward Gender Equality in the Arab/Middle East Region: Islam, Culture and Feminist Activism, by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), New York, US

This report examines the contending approaches to the relationship between Islam, culture and gender. It outlines and assesses gender relations and women's status in the Middle East by focusing on women's economic and political participation. The author contrasts secular, Muslim and Islamic feminisms, and highlights accomplishments of the women's movement. The report also includes an analysis of Muslim family laws and the legal status of women. It concludes that gender is at the center of cultural change happening in the Arab region.

Arab International Women's Forum (AIWF), London, UK

AIWF links Arab business and professional women in the 22 Arab countries with each other and with their counterparts in the international community. Its objective is to show the development of Arab women, break stereotypical images and create greater public awareness of their success and prospects within an international context. The website offers publications as well as information on the forum's activities.

Association for Middle East Women's Studies (AMEWS), University of California, Los Angeles, US

AMEWS is an organization of scholars and individuals with an interest in promoting quality research in the field of Middle East women's studies. It organizes conference panels and publishes the Journal of Middle East Women's Studies (JMEWS), which includes contributions across disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. The website offers information on ANEWS Standing Committees and the Association's initiatives as well as links and contact information to organizations and programs concerned with Middle Eastern women in the region.

## **1.6 ARAB FEMINISM AND WOMEN'S NETWORKS IN THE ARAB WORLD**

Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), Lebanese American University, Beirut, Lebanon

This institute aims to promote policy change regarding the rights of women in the Arab world. It engages in academic research on Arab women, empowers them through development programs and education, and facilitates networking and communication among individuals, groups and institutions concerned with women in the Arab world. The website offers publications as well as information on the institute's academic activities and development programs.

Machreq/Maghreb Gender Linking and Information Project (MACMAG GLIP), Beirut, Lebanon  
MACMAG GLIP is a forum for debate, learning and exchange on women, gender and development issues for interested groups in the Middle East and Maghreb region. The organization seeks to be a point for access to gender information in the region. Its work includes training and capacity building, research and exchange programs. The website offers publications, information on events and workshops and links to online gender resources.

Women's Court: The Permanent Arab Court to Resist Violence Against Women, Beirut, Lebanon  
The Women's Court is a symbolic popular court fighting all forms of violence practiced against women in Arab societies. The Women's Court detects, documents and reports acts of violence against women to the general public and examines and condemns the factors that encourage this violence. It lobbies for respecting women's rights and exerts pressure on Arab governments to introduce the necessary changes on the existing laws and create new laws to provide full protection for women victims of violence. The website offers information about the accomplishments of this organization.

The Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), Tunis, Tunisia  
CATWAR is an independent Tunisian institution promoting gender equality in the Arab world through research, training, networking and advocacy. The center contributes to developing a new vision of the Arab women and raising awareness among policymakers and the general public about the current situation of Arab women and their potential to contribute to national development. It also enhances the capacity of government institutions and NGOs to monitor and analyze women's changing roles and to design appropriate policies. The website offers access to an online library and databases with relevant information, including the publications of the *Arab Women Development Report*, and provides information on the center's programs and activities.

Initiatives pour la Promotion des Droits des Femmes (IPDF), Meknès, Morocco  
This organization works for the removal of all forms of discrimination against women as defined in the corresponding international conventions and promotes women's effective participation in public life. The website offers information on the organization's activities, publications, testimonies, legal resources and a gallery. The site is only available in Arabic and French.

Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) United, Cairo, Egypt  
The Arab Women's Solidarity Association was founded in Egypt in 1982 to promote Arab women's active participation in social, economic, cultural and political life. AWSA has developed income generating projects for economically underprivileged women, published literary magazines and books and produced films about Arab women's lives. The website offers various online resources of relevance to Arab women including information about famous Arab women.

Women's Forum for Research and Training (WFRT), Taiz, Yemen  
This forum works for women's rights in Yemen. It conducts research, organizes conferences, seminars and training workshops and publishes human rights information. It provides advocacy and training to increase awareness, monitor human rights violations and exert pressure on government authorities. The website offers reports, a comprehensive links directory, studies and publications as well as information on its activities, which include programs to enhance women's participation in elections, raise awareness and lobby, examine women's rights in Islam and build capacity.

Palestinian Women's Information and Media Center, Gaza, Palestinian Territories

The Center supports women's aspiration towards a wider scale of participation in public life. It provides researchers, governmental bodies, centers and non-governmental organizations with the necessary data, recommendations, studies and statistics on all women's fields. The website offers interviews, statistics and information on the Center's activities. It also makes available reports on the situation of Palestinian women regarding health, media, culture, education, human development, politics and economics.

Nissa wa Aafaq - Women and Horizons, Kufur Qari, Israel

This feminist organization works to increase Palestinian women's rights through a liberal interpretation of the Islamic holy scripts. They support women in becoming active members of society. The website provides information on the organization's strategies and activities, including lectures and courses.

Kayan Feminist Organization, Haifa, Israel

Kayan is a feminist organization established by Palestinian Israeli women. Founded in 1998, Kayan is a capacity building, non-governmental organization devoted to women's development. It offers a wide array of courses, knowledge-based trainings, mentoring programs and activities with women's groups and the public. The website mainly provides information on the organizations programs and activities.

The Jordan National Commission for Women (JNCW), Amman, Jordan

JNCW is one of the first semi-governmental commissions established in the Arab world to promote women's issues. Established by a Jordanian Cabinet decision in 1992, JNCW formulated a national strategy for women in Jordan. Its responsibilities broadened in 1996 with the Cabinet's decision to charge the Commission with defining policies and legislation related to women and identifying priorities, plans and programs in both governmental and non-governmental sectors. JNCW is headed by Princess Basma Bint Talal and is Jordan's authority on women's issues. It represents the country in all dealings pertaining to women's affairs. The website mainly offers information on JNCW's strategy and major programs.

Feminism in a nationalist century

This *Al-Ahram Weekly* article maps Egyptian women's struggle for liberation during the entire 20th century. The writer describes the discrete social feminism of the first two decades of the century when Egypt's feminist foremothers gained initial entry into public space, legitimized largely as a vital nationalist force. She argues that feminism grew into a forceful political movement in the following three decades. Later on, women articulated feminism within the discourses of both Islamic modernism and secular nationalism. Since the end of the 20th century feminism has taken multiple shapes and nationalist feminism has become more pragmatic.