Opening Speeches

Women in the Arab World: Challenges and Opportunities

Address by Dr. Joseph G. Jabbra, President of the Lebanese American University to the Dubai and Northern Emirates LAU Alumni Chapter at the Gala Dinner, Dubai, Friday, December 2, 2005

Distinguished guests, colleagues and friends,

First, I’d like to take this opportunity to thank you for inviting me to speak to you tonight on this happy occasion. Second, I’d like to salute you for choosing for your forum such an important topic, The Role of Higher Education in the Empowerment and Achievements of Arab Women. Third, I am grateful to all the participants in this conference whose contributions, I am sure, will add significantly to improving the life of women in the Arab world, and fourth, I’d like to extend my most sincere gratitude to the organizers for working so hard to make this event most productive and most enjoyable.

In Road to the Future, Mustapha Al-Barghouti says that in the Arab world women are still marginalized, and that human development may not take root unless women become active participants in Arab society. He goes on to say: “It is quite clear that the dilemma of Arab development will not be solved without focusing fully on human development, the development of the citizen and his/her role in economic, social and political life.” In its general volume on human development, the UNDP states: “Promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment in its broader scope is a key objective of the Millennium Declaration” (UNDP, 2003b, p. 7).

In my talk tonight, I will address four women-related issues: the role of the Lebanese American University (LAU) in the education of Arab women, the contributions of LAU’s Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World to Arab women and their concerns, and I will conclude with a challenge to both LAU and the Institute.

Women-Related Issues
There are four women-related issues I’d like briefly to elaborate on. They are women and education, women and empowerment, women and health services, and women and inequality.

Women and Education
In today’s world, education is important because it is the only way to the good life that the Greek philosophers spoke about in glowing terms millennia ago. With education we can chart a suitable career path for ourselves, enjoy the delights of the modern world, realize our highest aspirations, contribute to society, and find self-fulfillment. With education, we can have better health, be more productive members of society, have a better income, and provide more amenities for our families. Without education, none of these can be realized (UNDP, 2003b, p. 7).

Therefore, it behooves every society to make sure that not only men but also women have the opportunity to get a good education. As we well know, women are strong agents of change because they are the primary care givers of children and are effective agents of social-
ization. They attend very closely to the needs of their children and contribute significantly to the initial formation of their sense of the world around them. Therefore, if women are well educated, they can use their education to form and contribute to the education of the next generation. Further, the daughters of educated women can, in turn, become strong change agents, contribute to the well-being of society, earn more income, and educate their sons and daughters to become better citizens of their countries and the world (UNDP, 2003b, p. 7).

But while women’s education may enrich the mind and satisfy the soul, it is not sufficient by itself. Arab societies must pay close attention to the content of women’s education and make sure that women have equal opportunity to specialize in the sciences where they are currently underrepresented. School and college curricula must also contain knowledge that corresponds to the needs of society, real as well as potential, particularly in mathematics, engineering, and the sciences in general. Perhaps because of the lack of attention to the latter, education in the Arab world has been unable to contribute significantly to the development of Arab societies. Further, while a significant advancement in the education of women has taken place in the Arab world, with improvements in literacy and enrollment, these achievements have not yet caused a significant change in the social, economic, educational, legal, and religious attitudes of Arab men who, on the whole, still regulate women’s role and place in society. As a result, and despite a noticeable improvement, more than half of Arab women are still illiterate. Arab governments should realize that while education is very expensive, the cost of ignorance for half of Arab society can be staggering (UNDP, 2002a, p. 3).

In Lebanon, the system of education is the most advanced in the Arab world and men and women have equal opportunity in education (UNDP, 1997). In fact, women’s enrollment is now a bit higher than men’s. But women are not transferring their education into the labor market; models of appropriate gender roles keep them at home after marriage, and particularly after they start to have children. Moreover, international experience has shown that the entry of women into the labor market will not by itself free them from the social shackles of society. What is needed is a paradigm shift, a change or adjustment in society’s social, cultural, and economic dimensions (UNDP, 1997, p. 106).

Women and Empowerment
It is not enough to educate women; it is essential that they be empowered. Education and empowerment give women the opportunity to become active members of society and effective contributors to its well-being. Further, empowering women means that Arab societies and governments must support women’s basic requirements to live comfortably, provide them with the opportunity to reexamine their status at home and in society, and protect them from violence, both physical and mental (UNDP, 2003b, p. 86).

Violence against women is a world-wide phenomenon and the Arab world is no exception. In the last week of November 2005, one of the television stations in the Arab world related the story of a 25-year-old woman, six months pregnant, who was beaten, almost to death, by her husband. She was taken to a hospital where she lost her baby; her teeth were broken, and she was incapacitated, yet she refused to say that she was beaten by her husband because of the shame (’aib) factor. This is what you call double abuse: first by her husband and second by the customs and traditions of her society.

There is no doubt that there is a women’s empowerment deficit in the Arab world. For example, in terms of gender empowerment measures, the Arab region ranks next to last — only sub-Saharan Africa has a lower score.

Women and Health Services
Part of the gender crisis in Arab society results from women’s poor access to good health services, which contributes to a significant mortality gap between men and women. Despite women’s biological advantage, they have higher mortality rates than men in a number of countries; and while progress is being made on this score, a lot remains to be done. The “missing women phenomenon,” in part, refers to women who die because they don’t have ready access to good health services (UNDP, 2003b, p. 50).

Every year, about 500,000 women die from pregnancy and childbirth complications. Moreover, scores of women are afflicted annually with injuries and infections related to pregnancy and childbirth (UNDP, 2003b). In order to reduce women’s premature deaths and diseases, the Arab world must provide better access to health services and health care. Arab societies must address all social obstacles that prevent Arab women from seeking proper health services. This is a pressing issue, especially in light of the fact that “the region’s maternal mortality rate is double that of Latin America and the Caribbean and four times that of East Asia” (UNDP, 2002a, p. 3).

Women and Gender Inequality
One of the goals of the Millennium Declaration calls for the improvement of women’s representation in the political, cultural, economic, and social arenas. Moreover, gender equality is at the core of whether some of the most noble human aspirations can be achieved: “from improving health and fighting deadly diseases, to reduc-
ing poverty and mitigating hunger, to expanding education and lowering child mortality, to increasing access to safe water, and to ensuring environmental sustainability.” (UNDP, 2003b, p. 50)

Providing women with the opportunity to get a good education is important but not sufficient. It is equally important to create jobs for women that are commensurate with their education and talents, and assure for them a sustainable and dignified existence. Arab societies must open the door for women to participate in politics, and occupy visible positions and positions of authority in the private as well as the public sectors. Arab societies must realize that gender inequality is so serious because it prevents half of the population from being fully productive (UNDP, 2002a, p. 98). It is unconscionable that half of Arab women are still illiterate and not prepared to participate in nation building. It is unacceptable that Arab women continue to suffer from “unequal citizenship and legal entitlement often evident in voting rights and legal codes” (UNDP, 2002a, p. 3).

Moreover, the participation of Arab women in the political arena (legislative assemblies, cabinets) remains extremely low, perhaps the lowest in the world. Arab women, on the whole, are not normally employed, and if they are, their wages are lower than those of men. There is no doubt that society as a whole suffers when a huge section of the population is idle and not productive. This situation, of course, lowers family incomes and standards of living, especially in a world where both husband and wife must work in order to even make ends meet (UNDP, 2002a).

As with political participation, Arab women’s formal economic participation remains low as well. This is unacceptable. Although women’s formal economic participation in society has increased in a number of Arab countries, it still leaves a lot to be desired. Arab women’s ability to contribute to society and to gain from their work experience remains hindered by customs, habits, conventions and legal restrictions (UNDP, 2002a, p. 11).

There has been no serious discussion about gender and globalization in the Arab world. In fact, globalization may have its winners…. However, in the Arab region, their numbers are relatively small and highly stratified. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these winners are mainly males. On the other hand, there are discernible numbers of losers, both males and females. Evidence suggests that, among the losers, female groups tend to be worse off in terms of economic exploitation and unemployment in situations where cost-cutting and flexibility are of paramount concern. (CAWTAR, 2001, p. 15)

Even in Lebanon where women have progressed considerably over the past two decades, they still do not participate effectively in all aspects of Lebanese life. Lebanese women are still subject to many acts of discrimination and don’t occupy many important decision-making posts. As a result, they don’t participate actively in the modernization process (UNDP, 1997, p. 112).

This situation is not unique to the Arab world. Although women in developed societies have made significant strides in the areas of employment and holding public office, their drive has met numerous difficulties. In her newsletter, Your Guide to Women’s Issues (October 20, 2005), Nikki Katz speaks of the “glass ceiling” phenomenon which has been debated and discussed for the past 20 years without much success. In this regard, Katz speaks of the paucity of women in leadership positions, and the pay inequality between men and women.

Although women in developed societies have achieved a great deal in the business and political arenas, they continue to experience serious difficulties in realizing their full aspirations. Progress by women in the Arab world has certainly been slower. As explained above, many obstacles stand in their way, ranging from socio-cultural to educational challenges. Many argue that the answer to these challenges lies in making education fully accessible to both men and women and fully coeducational. Education is a key to a paradigm shift in the way the Arab male understands and defines the role and place of women in Arab society.

**Lebanese American University**

I will now focus on one institution of higher education that is providing a golden opportunity for men and women to earn an education that will help Arab societies eliminate gender inequality. We are proud, ladies and gentlemen, that the roots of the Lebanese American University go back to 1835, when a group of adventurous missionaries from the Presbyterian Church in the United States decided to establish in Beirut a school for the education of women in the Ottoman Empire. According to a 1940 Beirut College for Women class project entitled A Short History of Women’s Education, that date, 1835, is carved on a stone in downtown Beirut. “If you go into the yard in front of the church downtown, you will see a monument. It marks the site of the first edifice built as a school for girls in the Turkish Empire.”

In 1924, the institution that became Lebanese American University was founded, and in 1927 it became the American Junior College for Women. In 1948-1949, the College program was expanded to the university level, and named Beirut College for Women (BCW). In 1950,
BCW was granted a provisional charter by the Board of Regents of the University of the State of New York that later became an absolute charter in 1955. In 1973, the name of the college was changed from Beirut College for Women to Beirut University College (BUC), and it began to accept men into its programs. In 1985, the Board of Trustees decided to establish branches in Byblos and Saida (this operation is currently suspended), and in 1994 the Board of Regents approved and adopted a new name, Lebanese American University.7

From 1924 until 1973, the institution graduated 5,113 female students, and from 1973 to the present, 9,712. Students came from various Arab countries, Europe, and America. Enrollment at the University now is about 6,300; and about half of them are women, and 18% come from 68 countries the world over. Although we don’t have reliable data on all our women graduates, we know that some of them went on to have careers in the public as well as the private sectors across the globe. They have been achievers in medicine, the arts, teaching, writing, social work, journalism, music, the sciences, and the media. And scores of them have raised terrific families. The sons and daughters of both continue to attend their parents’ Alma Mater.

In her 1967 book, Pioneering Profiles, Beirut College for Women, Dr. Marie Aziz Sabri wrote:

In the last forty years, Beirut College for Women has been the main continuous force which has supplied the Arab World with large numbers of women pioneers who, through knowledge, have found the key to freedom. When the Arab World has been changing at a great pace, Beirut College for Women (BCW) graduates have made a unique record in professional life and in services to their countries.6

Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World
In 1973, the university (then known as Beirut University College, BUC), established the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World with five clear objectives: strengthening women’s curricular offerings at the university; carrying out research on the role, status, and place of women in Lebanon and the Arab world; advocating positive change regarding the rights of Arab women; serving as a clearing house for individuals, groups of individuals, and institutions who are concerned about women’s issues in the Arab world and beyond; and empowering Arab women through engagement and education (Sabri, 1967, p. 1).

Inspired by these objectives, the Institute immediately engaged in three important types of activity: academic, special events, and action and development. Although the Institute does not offer a degree program, it has persuaded departments in the humanities and social sciences to offer courses related to women’s issues to interested students. Moreover, the Institute, through sponsored research, began to address the role and status of Arab women in education, the environment, literature, economic development, management, the media, and history. Furthermore, the Institute has, since its inception, hosted a number of conferences, seminars and workshops focusing on important women’s issues.7

In regard to special events, the Institute hosts annual film festivals that focus on women’s images and profiles, the veil, women in cinema, and women’s sexuality. Since 1988, it has organized celebrations of International Women’s Day. Highlights of such events have included photographs of and by women, with special emphasis on Lebanese pioneer women, music, concerts, and other cultural and social activities.8

Third, the Institute has promoted action and development programs, with the goal of promoting women’s literacy and increasing their social and political awareness. These action and development programs include a basic living skills program, written in Arabic and used by social workers and educators to help illiterate Arab women acquire literacy. Another important program focuses on empowering Arab women through 12 second-level literacy booklets that contain stories involving women and civic education, empowerment of women, violence against women, women’s health and the environment, and rehabilitation of women in Lebanese prisons.9

To its credit, the Institute has many publications, in English and Arabic, centering on women’s issues. Chief among these is Al-Raida, a quarterly journal which was established in 1976 with the objective of strengthening Arab women, promoting research on Arab women, and reporting on the Institute’s and the University’s activities. My observation is that Al-Raida has been carrying out its mission admirably.

The Challenge
It is clear that the Institute has been engaged in researching women-related issues and advocating the improvement of the status and role of women in Arab society and beyond. While this is important, I believe that the Institute has not been given the opportunity to live up to its potential, especially at an institution that was first established for the education of women.

From this podium, and with your support, I’d like to challenge LAU to support and strengthen the Institute so that it may become a major force, meticulously researching
women-related issues in the Arab world and beyond, and advocating a significant improvement in their condition.

More specifically, I’d like to see the Institute fully supported by the University on the basis of a well thought out strategic plan prepared by the Institute, in consultation with top-notch experts in the field of women and gender studies. Such a plan should tell us how the Institute can become a major research and action center, where the four issues I have already mentioned, namely: women and education, women and health services, women and empowerment, and women and inequality, are fully researched, and, in light of that, solutions proposed to address the challenges that stand in the way of improving women’s role, status, and effective participation in Arab society.

Moreover, the Institute should become a repository of significant sets of data relating to women’s issues, a resource center professionally maintained, and to which scholars, practitioners, and government experts can have access and consult for the purpose of learning and pursuing women’s equality in Arab society. Achieving this goal would make the Institute a place where scholars, practitioners, and government experts can gather for defined periods of time to do their research and learn from what the Institute will have to offer.

Further, I am of the opinion that Al-Raida should become a refereed journal, publishing excellent research articles on women’s issues. My reason for taking this position is that nothing can put a center or an institute on the regional as well as the global map except well-researched, scholarly, and peer reviewed articles on important topics. And nothing is more important than the fate of half the population of the world.

Finally, in all the research done on women in the Arab world, and in an effort to collect and store reliable and useful data in that regard, I would recommend the use of the Gender Related Development Index (GDI), and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). The first helps us understand the inequality of achievement between men and women, and the second helps us account for the participation of women in decision making across all levels of society (UNDP, 1997, p. 106).

Allow me, colleagues and friends, to conclude by saying that even women who achieved a great deal in developed societies continue to experience major difficulties in their drive for equality at all levels between men and women. The achievements of and remaining challenges for women in developed societies clearly point to how much work Arab women will have to do in order to gain their proper role and rightful place in Arab society. Let LAU and the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World lead the way. Let both become a shining beacon of hope for improving women’s condition and role in the Arab World. And let both help Arab men and women complement each other in the exciting task of building a better Arab society for ourselves and for future Arab generations.

Thank you.

Endnotes

2. Ibid., p. 11.
3. North America, over 0.6; Oceania 0.5; Europe 0.5; Latin America almost 0.4; Arab countries, not even 0.3; and sub Saharan Africa, a little over 0.2. Arab Human Development Report 2002, p. 28.
5. For details, see Orientation Program, Lebanese American University, Board of Trustees Meeting, May 12, 13 and 14, 2005; and Lebanese American University, Academic Catalogue, 2004-2005, pp. 3-4.
6. See a document entitled The Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World, Lebanese American University, no date given.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

References

- Katz, N. Can women break the glass ceiling? Available at: http://www.allinfoaboutwomensissues.com/can_women_break_the_glass_ceiling.html