

# FATMEH KASSEM

## CHIEF OF THE WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT UNIT, UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA (ESCWA)

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Assistant Editor

With the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) returning to Beirut after more than fifteen years,<sup>1</sup> I had the chance to meet Fatima Sbaity-Kassem,<sup>2</sup> Chief of the Women and Development (WAD) Unit at ESCWA.

Ms. Sbaity-Kassem joined the United Nations Economic and Social Office of Beirut (UNESOB)<sup>3</sup> in 1970 as a research assistant in international trade and regional cooperation and moved up the ladder in that field until 1990. In 1993, she assumed the functions of Chief of the WAD Unit of the Social Development Issues and Policies Division<sup>4</sup> (SDIPD) at ESCWA.<sup>5</sup> This division deals with four areas:

human development, population and demography, human settlements, and women and the family.

When asked whether she, being a woman, suffered from any discrimination during her 28 years of service at the UN, Ms. Sbaity-Kassem asserted that she faced no discrimination in the workplace. Serious efforts are being exerted in the UN Secretariat towards equal opportunity in recruitment and promotion of women in order to implement the General Assembly resolutions calling for a 50-50 target in the UN Secretariat by the onset of the twenty first century.

Ms. Sbaity-Kassem did not stop working when she got married and started a family because her mother-in-law was able and willing to take care of her kids during her absence. She admits that she would not have been able to pursue a career and raise a family had she not had her mother-in-law to help her out.<sup>4</sup> Her career, she continues, was never promoted at the expense of her family and children. There was never a trade off. Both, she and her late husband, with the help of her mother-in-law raised the children. In her opinion, the family is the cornerstone of the society and is its most important unit. Therefore, preserving the family unit and forging the ties among its individual members will, by necessity, shield the society from social disintegration and decline. Ms. Sbaity-Kassem argues that "the Arab family is the society's safety net and the source of great strength for its individual members." While elsewhere in the World people resort to "group therapy" in order to overcome their problems, in the Arab World the extended family and friends provide the therapy and are the safety net. The Arab society has many positive dimensions including its value system. Westernization and adopting Western values and social standards indiscriminately by the Arab society should be handled with caution since this is akin to introducing a foreign implant into the body which the body is bound to reject. The Western model should not be the yardstick by which we abide.

When asked about ESCWA and its objectives, Ms. Sbaity-Kassem explained that ESCWA is one of the United Nations five regional commissions: ECA for Africa, ECLAC for Latin America and the Caribbean, ESCAP for Asia and the Pacific, ECE for Europe and ESCWA for Western





Asia. ESCWA acts as an advisory body to thirteen of the 22 Arab countries located in Western Asia.<sup>5</sup>

The main objectives of ESCWA are to foster regional cooperation, promote and encourage harmonization and coordination and assist member countries in achieving growth and economic and social development. These objectives are achieved by undertaking research, carrying out field studies and surveys, executing field and community development projects, and providing technical assistance and advisory services to member States. Activities are undertaken within a regional perspective while bearing in mind the national specificities of member States. They are undertaken within a holistic, systemic approach addressing political, economic, social and cultural aspects of development in a multidisciplinary, integrated and fully synchronized manner. Similarly and in the same vein, giving priority to economic development in line with the development theories of the seventies, without synchronization with political, cultural and social development has created a gap and tension in the polity and society and barred the countries from growth and development targets. This is why the recent approaches to development take an integrated and holistic approach which is being translated into efforts at mainstreaming a gender perspective into the programmes and projects of ESCWA.

The main objective of the Women and Development Unit is to assist member states in improving the status of women and promoting greater participation in national development. The WAD Unit is the focal point

for ensuring that gender is mainstreamed into all programmes and projects. The WAD Unit was the regional coordinator for preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) which was held in Beijing in September 1995. ESCWA urged its member States to set-up joint national preparatory committees composed of government bodies and NGOs to prepare for Beijing. ESCWA assisted its member States by providing them with the standard outline and common indicators to prepare their national reports on the situation of women containing national plans of action for submission to the Beijing Conference. Towards this end, ESCWA organized national workshops to formulate national plans of action. It also convened regional

expert groups and intergovernmental meetings in collaboration with the League of Arab States and CAWTAR in order to formulate the Arab Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2005. This constituted an input into the Beijing Platform for Action. Also, ESCWA encouraged its member States to establish permanent national machineries to monitor and assess the status of women, and to follow-up on the recommendations of the Beijing Conference and implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

The activities of the WAD Unit following the Beijing Conference focused on followup and implementation of the Beijing recommendations and pursuing a multidisciplinary approach for following up on all the global conferences which took place during the nineties (Population Conference of 1994, Social Summit of 1995, Women's Conference of 1995 and Habitat of 1996). Thus, in 1996 one year after Beijing, the Regional programme for Action was adopted focusing on according priority for the advancement of women to three themes: alleviation of poverty representing the economic dimension, strengthening the family depicting the social dimension, and encouraging women to share in power and participate in decision-making marking the political dimension. And organized an expert group meeting on the role of NGOs and prospects for networking before and after the peace accords in collaboration with Birzeit University in Ramallah (West Bank) in December 1997. In addition, as part of its annual economic and social survey, ESCWA incorporated a survey on the situation of women in the ESCWA region and published, in collaboration with CAWTAR, a publication entitled **Arab Women: Trends and Statistics**. A consultant was engaged to prepare a preliminary study to adapt the Gender Measurement Index of the UNDP to the regional specificities by incorporating the cultural dimension and traditional non-quantifiable indicators into the basket of indicators put together by the UNDP in its Human Development Report.

The WAD Unit will continue to build an integrated database on policies, measures and gender-disaggregated data and indicators of impact on women and the family. The activities of the WAD Unit during the current 1998-1999 biennium will continue to focus on an

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integrated follow-up to Beijing and the priorities established for the advancement of Arab women. Towards this end, a series of regional follow-up meetings to each of the global conferences including the Beijing Conference will culminate in one comprehensive conference for follow-up to the four global conferences in 1999. The WAD Unit plans to undertake a major study on the role of NGOs in implementing the recommendations and common objectives of the Beijing recommendations as well as recommendations of the other global conferences. Another activity of the WAD Unit will entail work on operationalization of the micro credit financing facilities for poor and rural women in the ESCWA countries. A study on gender and citizenship in selected ESCWA countries is envisaged during the 1998-1999 biennium. Another study on the role of NGOs in implementing the global conferences is also envisaged. This reflects the importance ESCWA accords to gender mainstreaming, partnership with NGOs, information dissemination and gender-disaggregated databases, as we enter the Twenty First Century.

Ms. Sbaity-Kassem points out that in effect the problems of women are the same; they only differ in their intensity across regions and among countries. She argues that the status of women is directly related to the level of development in each country. In a patriarchal society and in a developing world particularly in the Arab countries, women are not factored into the development formula early on. The issues of women are added on after the plans have been formulated, as an afterthought. In the ESCWA countries, the gender paradigm is yet to be. We are still at the "women in development" phase where women are an "add-on" to the development formula. By

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contrast, in mainstreaming a gender perspective into programmes and plans, women's issues and concerns become an integral part of the development equation at the initial planning stage and are not an "added on" component to already formulated plans. In mainstreaming gender, all laws, policies and measures as well as personal status codes become "gender sensitive" or are conceived bearing in mind the impact on both women and men. Gender analysis will often reveal how policies, programmes, plans and development projects affect women differently from men while others may be gender neutral. It should be noted that, "gender" is not a synonym for "women". Gender refers to the socially-constructed and

dynamic roles that women and men play over time and across different geographic zones. This is the implication of the shift to the gender paradigm.

Moving from theory to practice and a more tangible front as that of women in national accounts, Ms. Sbaity-Kassem notes that "Women count but are often not counted"! Despite the fact that women work in housekeeping and family raising or in farming and agriculture is important; however, it remains undervalued and unrecognized as "productive" work. Women's work does not count in national accounts because their work at home and in the farm is unremunerated. However, efforts have been exerted by concerned international bodies to redress this situation by devising a formula to accord value to women's unremunerated work and to include this in the System of National Accounts. This will be reflected in a more realistic translation of women's contribution to the economy. But, by encouraging women to increase their participation in the labour market in order to raise their contribution to national development, the problematic of women's multiple roles (productive and reproductive) poses itself on the forefront. It is in this sense that, according to Ms. Sbaity-Kassem, women should be offered flexible hours in the workplace and/or pursue the "Third Choice" approach advocated by ESCWA in adapting working conditions to family needs.

The traditional male/female-labelled roles have been deeply ingrained in the minds of men and women. Women's self-perception and those of men about women and the society at large will only change slowly since social change is imperceptible and does not take place overnight. Multimedia communications play an important role in raising awareness to the changing status of women and for the need to change the negative stereotypical image of women. In addition, school curricula will have to undergo major revision in order to project an improved positive image of women and the dynamic socially-constructed roles and functions they discharge, particularly working mothers. This is when Ms. Sbaity-Kassem cautions: "One cannot move in leaps and big strides. Our steps ought to be small and measured but synchronized. This is when gender equality is attained and gender mainstreaming may be introduced."

Ms. Sbaity-Kassem concludes that what is really needed is a new research agenda on women, gender and the family to assess and monitor progress achieved, identify major hurdles and obstacles and propose action-oriented and realistic policies and measures for the advancement of women and improvement of their status in the society. The findings of future research and information databases should provide the necessary assistance and support and supply the requisite tools to national machineries for women in their efforts towards gender equality, women's empowerment and self-reliance,



and for determining the timely introduction of gender mainstreaming into the programmes and policies at the national level. Sbaity-Kassem stresses the active role women's institutes, research centres and NGOs could play in disseminating information, conducting research and acting as partners in the development process.

As a final message, the Chief of the Women and Development Unit at ESCWA calls upon universities and colleges in West Asia to accord gender studies more importance and to introduce courses on women's studies and gender into their curricula at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

**ENDNOTES:**

1 The Commission moved from Beirut to Baghdad in June 1982 and from Baghdad to Amman after the Gulf War of 1990-1991 before returning to Beirut in October 1997.

2 Fatima Sbaity-Kassem holds a B.A. in Business Administration (1965) and an M.A. in Development Administration (1970) from the American University of Beirut (AUB). Twenty years later she went back to school and acquired an M.A. in International Economics (1991) and an M.Phil in International Relations/Political Economy (1993) from Columbia University in the City of New York, where she is an 'All But Dissertation' Ph.D Doctoral candidate.

3 UNESOB, the small field office of less than 60 staff members, became in 1974 the fifth and smallest United Nations regional commission, the Economic Commission for Western Asia (ECWA). With the addition of the social component in 1984, ECWA became ESCWA embracing more than 300 staff members.

4 Fatima Sbaity Kassem is the mother of two girls and one boy. Hana (24 years) is an architect from Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) USA, currently working in New York. May (22 years) has a BA in International Relations and Art Serniotics (film) from Brown University and is doing graduate work in Script Writing at St. Joseph University in Beirut. Ramzi (19 years) is a Junior at Columbia University in the City of New York double majoring in Economics and Political Science. She has recently lost her husband, Ziad Kassem (55 years), Ph.D Economics, who also worked for the UN at ESCWA for 28 years in different capacities and was the Chief, ESCWA/UNCTAD Joint Unit on Transnational Corporations.

5 These include the six Gulf cooperation Council countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), the Mashrek countries (Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria), together with Egypt (who is also a member in ECA) and Yemen.

# Upcoming in Al-Raida

## Arab Countries' Outlook to CEDAW

## Oral History of Lebanese Woman