

For Beijing

Arab Regional Preparatory Meeting Adopts Plan of Action for Advancement of Arab Women

The Arab Regional Preparatory Meeting for the Fourth World Conference on Women adopted "Peace" as its aim for the achievement of development and equality, according to Dr. Sabah Bakjaji, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Executive Secretary of ESCWA. "Peace will allow resources formerly utilized for war to be channeled to development and to achieve the three goals of the conference: providing women with health services and opportunities for education and work, on an equal footing for men" he said at the opening of The Arab Regional Preparatory meeting on November 6-10, 1994, in Amman, Jordan.

The Arab Regional Preparatory meeting that took place between November 6 - 10 at the Philadelphia Hotel in Amman, Jordan, was organized into two groups: The First Segment consisting of an Expert group met between November 6 -8 to finalize the Draft Regional Plan of Action for the Advancement of Arab Women to the year 2005 which will be pre-

sented at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

The last two days of the conference (November 8-9, 1994) formed the High-Level Segment whose aim was to identify obstacles to the progress of women as well as critical areas for Arab women.

This serves to formulate a plan of action for the

coming stage at three levels: governmental, non-governmental, and regional and international.

This five day Arab Preparatory Meeting was sponsored by HRH Princess Basma Bint Talal, chairperson of the Jordanian National Committee for Women, Head of the Official Jordanian Delegation to Beijing and Member of the Advisory Group of Eminent Persons for the Fourth World Conference on Women established by the Secretary-General of the United Nations; and by H.E. Ms. Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women; and was co-organized by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the League of Arab States (LAS), and the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), opened on November 6 at the Philadelphia Hotel, in Amman. Delegations of the following ESCWA members states participated in the meetings:

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Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Non-ESCWA delegates and observers also came from Algeria, Djibouti, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia and Lebanon.

The First Segment (November 6-8, 1994).

The Draft Regional Plan of Action for the Advancement of Arab Women to the year 2005 discussed by experts in the First Segment aims to reflect the issues and concerns of Arab women taking into account the special conditions of each Arab state within the framework of the value system of Arab culture. Issues related to equality, development and the right of Arab women to participate in power and decision-making structures and mechanisms were discussed. That draft document said that despite the desire of Arab governments to improve the status of Arab women in power structures, women's participation is still below the target of the level set by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, which is to achieve a women's power structure of 30 percent by the year 1995. Some delegates objected to a paragraph recommending that all Arab countries ratify the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women as a means to help women reach power and decision making bodies. These delegates argued that adopting the UN convention was redundant as Islamic Shari'a already guarantees women's "full rights"

in society.

Changes to the draft of the Regional Plan of Action for Arab Women were recommended by delegates and observers. The modifications include replacing the term "Regional" with the word "Arab" whenever it appears in the document. They also recommended that the phrase "awareness of human rights of women" be changed to "awareness of women's rights as human rights" in an effort to counter the general perception that women's rights are separate and subordinate to human rights.

The third and last day of the First segment conferred on issues of economic power, achieving self-reliance, coping with the effects of wars and armed conflicts and violence against Arab women. It was noted that changes in life styles that would reflect a positive attitude towards working women has not been achieved in the Arab World despite some positive changes and increases in levels of employment and education. Delegates and observers stressed that women should not be obliged to work but should have the option and right to employment if they so choose. The document urges governments to enact laws and establish basic rules that guarantee equal rights for men and women in the workplace, such as equal recruitment and employment opportunities and equal social security and pension, in keeping with customs and traditions.

On the issue of coping with the effects of war and armed conflicts the

document said women should participate in peace negotiations and in the settlement of conflicts. Environment and violence against women were added to the document to ensure protection for women, and prevent women's exposure to violence in its various forms through preventive measures, education and awareness.

The High-Level Segment, (November 9-10).

The High-Level Segment accepted the Plan of Action for the Advancement of Arab Women to the Year 2005, which was reviewed by the First Segment, as the region's contribution towards the formation of the Global Plan of Action to be adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The Plan of Action was accepted after it was finalized by senior officials, joint national preparatory committees for the women's conference, intergovernmental and non-governmental organization (NGOs), United Nations agencies, and experts who reviewed and assessed the status of Arab women and evaluated the progress achieved in the past decade.

The Plan of Action, which is based on international covenants relating to human rights and religious values that respect the rights of women as human beings, includes the objectives, policies and measures aimed at enabling women to exercise fully their rights and assume the responsibilities within context of the Global Platform for Action, which

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Left: Mona Khalaf IWSAW - LAU, Lebanon.
Right: Maha Khatib UNIFEM National Project Manager, Amman.



Lebanese women experts invited to attend the Regional Preparatory Meeting.

emphasizes the elimination of the remaining obstacles to the integration of women in the sustainable development process.

The meeting also adopted a statement in support of Algerian women which was submitted by the head of the Algerian delegation. The statement expressed support for Algerian women who "are facing fierce attacks targeting their existence, beliefs, education and rights." The statement added that extremists and backward forces were trying to deny women their right to participate in the advancement and development of their country. According to the statement, extremists "who have opted for the language of violence, guns and terrorism rather than dialogue, have carried out hideous crimes against women and children in order to achieve their aims of destroying Algerian women's gains and shattering the achievements of the Algerian revolution." The statement continues that "women were effective participants who made sacrifices and became models for other Arab women struggling for the freedom, advancement and stability of their nations." All delegations, except that of Sudan adopted the statement.

At the close of the meeting, participants chose Princess Basma to head a proposed follow-up committee to coordinate among Arab states in order to ensure that the Global Plan of Action reflects the region's aspirations for the advancement of women.

Source: Press Release by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), November 6-10, 1994.