

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Legal and Practical Aspects of Participation by Women in Arab Societies

Many Arab and Muslim countries have a long history of women's activism. Depending on location and historical moment, women activists have drawn inspiration from a wide array of sources, including both religious and secular discourses. In all cases, however, one main issue is how legal systems and processes of legal reform on the one hand, and social relations and everyday life on the other hand, relate to each other.

At this conference, held in The Hague, The Netherlands, on March 4-5, 2004, the tensions between legal systems and social life were discussed. The conference was organized by the Arabic Dutch Women Circle (ANVK) in cooperation with the municipality of The Hague and the International Dialogues Foundation (IDF). The ANVK is a Dutch non-profit organization dedicated to promoting cultural exchange between Dutch and Arab societies, and, in particular, between Dutch and Arab women. The ANVK organizes conferences, meetings, debates, and exhibitions to stimulate dialogue and exchange.

Among other things, the conference sought to clarify that class, ethnicity, political system, history, and cultural factors are of wider influence than just law or religious factors themselves. The constitutions of almost all Arab and Muslim countries proclaim equal rights for all, regardless of race, sex, language, and religion. However, the implementation of these rights is often a problem. By inviting a group of women activists and academics from the Middle East, as well as representatives of various sectors of Dutch society and of the Arab and Muslim communities in The Netherlands, the conference also aimed at stimulating discussion about Arab women's rights and practices.

The conference was chaired by Professor Annelies Moors, chair of the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) at the University of Amsterdam. The first day was open to the general public and consisted of a plenary session in which four papers were presented,

while the second day was meant as a workshop and open for a selected group of people. Around 190 people attended the first day, and about 40 people attended the second day.

Dr. Tomador Meihuizen-Hassoun, president of the ANVK; Dr. Dick de Zeeuw, chairman of the IDF; and Professor Annelies Moors, who explained the conference's aim and program, opened the conference. Then the film "Women and Democracy in Yemen," made by Khadija al-Salami, film director and cultural attaché at the Yemeni Embassy in Paris, was shown. In this film, three female candidates in Yemen's parliamentary election of April 2003 were followed, and the difficulties encountered by women seeking to be elected were portrayed. Even though women in Yemen have the right to stand as candidates, very few of them are eventually elected. The film led to a lively discussion.

The first speaker was Shirin Ershadi, of Iranian background and assistant professor at the Center for the Study of Women of UCLA. She argued that honor killings should be viewed as crimes against humanity and that, therefore, states that legalize such killings in their constitutions (e.g., Jordan and Iran) should be brought to trial before the International Criminal Court. The second speaker was Maha Najjar, a lawyer of Palestinian background and researcher about the relations between the European Union and the Middle East. She focused on the three different legal systems present in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem, as well as Palestinian women's struggle for a progressive family law.

The third presenter was Leila Jordens-Cotran, a legal expert specializing in Moroccan family law and its relationship with Dutch law. She discussed the recent reforms in Moroccan family law (the *Mudawanna*) and the possible consequences for Moroccan women living in The Netherlands. The last speaker was Mona Fadl, former businesswoman and president of the Bahrain Young Ladies Association, the first women's organization in the Gulf. Fadl spoke about women's status and labor laws in Bahrain. While the constitution stipulates equality between men and women and the labor law grants women many rights, women often earn less than men for the same type of work, are often forced to resume work before their official maternity leave has ended, and face a lack of nurseries at work sites.

On the second day, cases from different countries were presented. The first speaker was Bedour Zaki, a lawyer and president of the Iraqi Women's Rights Organization in London. Zaki discussed the Iraq's 1959 family law, one of the most progressive in the Middle East, and the possible legal changes that may occur in post-war Iraq. The second speaker was Nahda

Younis, a Palestinian researcher at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague who has done extensive fieldwork in Gaza City's Shari`ah courts. Her main argument was that judges [*qudah*] are more than implementers of Shari`ah law: They play an important role in protecting female litigants by making flexible use of the different sources available to them, such as the family law and customary law.

The third speaker was Dr. Asya al-Lamki, assistant dean of Research and Post-graduate Studies at the College of Commerce and Economics, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman. She presented the outcomes of her research on Omani women working as professionals and their perceptions about their position at work. While the Arab Human Development Report states that many Arab women suffer from discrimination at work, al-Lamki's research was less conclusive. The fourth speaker was Amina al-Rasheed, a Sudanese political scientist, women's activist, and currently a researcher at the University of Utrecht, The Netherlands. She gave a brief overview of the position of women in Sudan and focused on how the Islamist government in power since 1989 has affected them. Laws restricting their movement and mandating compulsory veiling, as well as establishing a police force primarily targeting women's conduct, are examples. The last speaker was Wadad Chakhtoura, president of the Rassemblement Démocratique des Femmes Libanaises (RDLF) in Beirut. She explained Lebanon's complicated legal system, in which each of the nineteen religious groups has its own personal status law, and the problems that derive from this. One of her organization's main aims is to devise a unified civil law.

After these presentations, a lively discussion took place between the speakers and the audience about the different issues that had come to the fore during the two days. The conference was very successful in bringing together people of different countries and backgrounds, and was evaluated very positively by the participants.

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