

**SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS
FROM THE ROUNDTABLE ON
ARAB WOMEN
AND THE
FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST**



**HELD IN NEW YORK
APRIL 14, 2005**

Our Mission

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy was founded in 1974 by Professor Hans J. Morgenthau and others. It is a nonprofit activist organization dedicated to the resolution of conflicts that threaten U.S. interests. Toward that end, the National Committee identifies, articulates, and helps advance American foreign policy interests from a nonpartisan perspective within the framework of political realism.

American foreign policy interests include

preserving and strengthening national security;

supporting countries committed to the values and the practice of political, religious, and cultural pluralism;

improving U.S. relations with the developed and developing worlds;

advancing human rights;

encouraging realistic arms-control agreements;

curbing the proliferation of nuclear and other unconventional weapons;

promoting an open and global economy.

Believing that an informed public is vital to a democratic society, the National Committee offers educational programs that address security challenges facing the United States and publishes a variety of publications, including its bimonthly journal, *American Foreign Policy Interests*, that present keen analyses of all aspects of American foreign policy.



Dear Reader:

On April 14, 2005, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) convened its fifth closed-door and off-the-record roundtable on the Middle East. This time the subject of “Arab Women and the Future of the Middle East” was discussed.

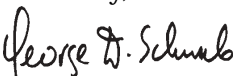
The first roundtable of Muslim scholars, former diplomats, and area-specialist journalists addressed the question “Can Muslims Accept Israel in Their Midst?” (May 9, 2001); the second examined the issue of “Militant Islamic Fundamentalism in the 21st Century” (January 10, 2002); the third analyzed the problem of “Reform and Human Development in the Muslim World” (March 20, 2003); and the fourth discussed the question of “Democratic Reform and the Role of Women in the Muslim World” (March 29, 2004).

The 2004 roundtable confirmed the fact that of all Muslim nations, Arab countries seem to show the greatest resistance to reforms, especially those regarding the status of women. Hence the subject matter of the latest roundtable confirmed many of the conclusions reached by the previous ones. It also underlined the fact that solving the problems of the Middle East hinges on democratic reforms that cannot take root in the region without effecting a basic change in the condition of Arab women.

The National Committee expresses its gratitude to the conference participants who have taken time from their busy schedules to attend the conference. A special thanks to conference organizers, Ambassador Fereydoun Hoveyda, the NCAFP project director for the Middle East, and Grace Kennan Warnecke, NCAFP trustee and conference moderator.

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy is especially grateful to Mutual of America, Kenneth J. Bialkin, Esq., Mrs. Eugenie Fromer, Mr. Thomas J. Moran, and Ms. Sheila Johnson Robbins for providing major support for the fifth roundtable. The NCAFP also acknowledges the generous support given to us by an anonymous donor.

Sincerely,



George D. Schwab
President

INTRODUCTION

In July 2002 a number of Arab experts commissioned by the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP) and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development published a report titled “Arab Human Development Report” in which they noted that “the wave of democracy that transformed governance in most of Latin America and East Asia in the 1980s and early 1990s has barely reached the Arab states.”¹ The experts also stated that based on international measurements of government accountability, civil liberties, political rights, and media freedom, Arab countries scored lower than any other regional group in the world. They defined three areas in which urgent action should be undertaken: (1) political freedom and participation in governance; (2) removal of discrimination against women; (3) inadequate education systems.

Many experts inside and outside Arab countries have expressed the opinion that only democratic reforms, especially the empowerment of women, can defuse the problems of the region as well as diminish the effects of militant Islamic fundamentalism that are at the heart of mounting terrorist activities perpetrated by organizations such as Al Qaeda and its ilk. That is why the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) deemed it appropriate to convene a roundtable on “Arab Women and the Future of the Middle East.”

The purpose of this not-for-attribution summary report is to make available to the foreign policy community the views and suggestions that were voiced at the April 14, 2005, roundtable.

PRESENTATIONS

Women and Development

It is certain that improvements in the status of women will enhance the overall situation in the Middle East. Indeed the region is a part of the world in which the level of development and modernization is lagging behind those of other regions and where the rights of women, as well as the opportunities available to them, are strictly limited.

One of the main problems in the Arab world is that the law does not support women in many cases. Interpretations of the Islamic law of sharia are often very different from what is or should be taught in religion. Therefore, many things must be done to reform the legal structures and support systems of all members of society, particularly women.

In many countries of the Middle East, women are fairly well educated compared to the educational attainments of women in other parts of the world. Yet their participation in the workforce or in the political process is low based on any standards.

In Saudi Arabia, for example, a woman of Arab origin holding a passport from a country in the West as well as documents exempting her from the company of a mahram (a relative who acts as a male guardian) can stay alone in a hotel. Women can schedule business meetings but must be completely covered when they attend them. Courtesies may be extended to non-Saudis of professional status. Saudi women control their own capital facilitated by an entire banking system that is dedicated to preserving their rights to manage their funds and segregate them from capital controlled by husbands and other family members. In other respects, women in Saudi Arabia are completely secluded and underemployed. One can only imagine the amount of productive energy that could be put to work if, among many other things, Saudi families did not have to hire drivers to chaperone women who are not allowed to drive their own cars.

According to this presenter, Palestine constitutes an example of how women can affect development. Palestinian women are very active in political and social endeavors and in civil society organizations as well. Microlending provided to Palestinian women has literally changed family life because wives, unlike their husbands, spend money on their children, on their homes, and on education. As a result their standing in their communities has improved dramatically. In Qatar's conservative and religious society, the women of the royal family have taken the lead in advancing the goals of empowering women and in establishing their country as an educational center for women in the Middle East.

One of the basic questions that should be addressed in roundtables such as this concerns human rights. Exceptions for countries that are considered as "culturally sensitive" and where different standards of human rights are said to apply should be rejected. Human rights do not change from person to person or from country to country. They are universal. The United States should apply universal standards and cease to gloss over violations of women's rights in some allied countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Negative attitudes toward America, especially those evident in the Middle East, stem from our unwillingness to apply universal standards to measure democracy and human rights in the world at large. It is very important that we cease to support or ignore situations

that put women in a disadvantaged or dangerous position.

From this perspective, America has already contributed by offering American Arab women a range of opportunities. In the strong Arab-American community in the United States, many women are studying women's rights. They are learning that the laws that have been enacted and the cultural norms that prevail to the disadvantage of women have no relevance to Islamic tenets. Women have the capability to understand and interpret texts and become knowledgeable about their rights.

Advancing women's rights is paramount to creating a more stable region, curtailing Islamist extremism, and furthering America's security.

Unfortunately, augmenting the primary role played by religious and political authorities in restricting women's rights, are a number of Arab women who resist change. It would be useful to study the origin and consequences of their fears of reform.

Contradictions and Paradoxes

Another panelist stated that the Arab world is full of contradictions and paradoxes concerning the condition of women.

First, it should be noted that one of two Arab women is illiterate. Nevertheless, one can find well-educated women in many domains, including the most sophisticated. The gap between educated and uneducated women is therefore huge.

The paradoxes are accentuated most in Saudi Arabia. There discrimination against women is institutionalized. Thus despite the fact that women are denied the right to participate in social and political life, one finds feminist journals and books by Arabs and non-Arabs in King Abdul Aziz University.

In interviews with journalists, people often say: "Don't talk about women's rights or human rights because that's coming from the West, and the West is just trying to change us." It is important to impress on the Arab public the fact that human rights and women's rights are not only Western concepts but universal standards as well. To illustrate, a participant in a recent debate on Al Jazeera satellite TV illuminated the problem by posing the following rhetorical question: "Why was the Jordanian parliament unable to propose tough sentences for so-called honor killings and pass legislation to allow women to initiate divorce?"

The two women guests were parliamentarians, one from an Islamist group and the other a leading women's rights activist. The former reiterated the notion that "the Americans are trying to change us, to introduce gay marriage" and so on. She engaged in political and cultural attacks to thwart a discussion of women's rights. The women's rights activist rightly responded that women's rights groups in the Arab world have pursued their goals for many decades, long before America was involved in the Middle East. It is very important to acknowledge the work of local groups in the Arab world and to find out what kinds of assistance they need most. Many women and men have been fighting for women's rights since the turn of the 20th century.

Another contradiction in the Arab world is represented by blogging, which exists despite the high rate of illiteracy among women and the fact that not everyone in the region has access to the Internet. Many women are turning to blogs to express themselves. On the Web they engage in the freedom of expression they are often denied in print and broadcast media. It is remarkable that one of the first women's blogs was initiated by a Saudi woman who described herself as kind of "unveiled tech-savvy."

During the past year, Saudi Arabia has become a cauldron of contradictions and paradoxes. There is a kind of push-and-pull struggle going on between the royal family and ultraconservative Wahhabi clerics. Moreover, questions are being raised about how much power the royal family has over clerics. For instance, recently Saudi newspapers were full of stories concerning a "fatwa" issued by the grand mufti announcing that it would be against the law to force a woman into marriage. Such an act, according to the fatwa, would be punishable by jailing. This development and the division that it highlights is extraordinary in Saudi Arabia where, according to most interpretations of the religion, a woman has to get permission from her male guardian before she marries or travels and is not allowed either to vote or to drive.

The contradictions in Saudi Arabia will multiply in the future, but nothing positive will happen until the international community tells the Saudi authorities that the way they treat women is not acceptable. To begin to deal with the issue, American officials would be required to present the State Department's Annual Report on Human Rights to their counterparts in the Saudi foreign ministry.

Another example of contradiction can be found in the current situation in Iraq. Although allocating to women one-third of the seats in the

elected parliament is a reasonable response to their demands to participate in political life, it should be remembered that women and children are the main victims of the ongoing violence. Moreover, a debate about the role that the new constitution should accord to Islam is stirring dissent. Some women advocate state acknowledgment of and support for the application of the sharia, or Islamic law, whereas others oppose it. In deliberating about the issue, the people of Iraq should acknowledge that the sharia is not “divine,” that it is based on interpretations of the Koran and the prophet’s sayings, as well as many other things. It can be said without exaggeration that many women are aware of the way in which Islamic law continues to be used against them.

Another contradiction concerns Palestinian women. During the December 2004 elections, many people tried to dissuade women from seeking election, but they did not succeed. As revealed in a very recent Amnesty International report, Palestinian women have been victimized by the occupation as well as kept under wraps by the largely patriarchal society. Although the male-dominated society acknowledges women’s contributions occasionally, it keeps them either at home or at the mercy of laws that have been designed to suppress their interests. As a result women are discriminated against both by the Israelis at checkpoints and by the Palestinians through the failure to provide education, the enactment of laws favoring males, and the tolerance of “honor killings” and other forms of abuse.

Those who seek to help women should contact the groups working inside Palestine and ask them what kind of help they want. As this panelist reached the end of her presentation, she acknowledged that not all Arabs are Muslims. Therefore, she stated, we should focus on culture rather than on religion and on the problems of both Muslim and non-Muslim women.

The Denial of Arab Women’s Human Rights

Another panelist began her remarks by saying that the human rights of women throughout the Arab world are systematically denied by each country in the region, despite the apparent diversity of the political systems that exist there. Although many governments routinely suppress freedom of expression and freedom of association and assembly, as well as civil society, adversely affecting both men and women, it is clear that women are subjected to a host of additional gender-specific human rights violations.

But many Arab women have not been silent victims of these abuses. They

have waged battles against them for decades. Notwithstanding the progress they have achieved, much has yet to be accomplished, especially in regard to women's access to public space. Remaining problems that have been so resistant to change undoubtedly hinder the future of generations of Arab women and the future of the Middle East as a whole.

Family laws across the region treat both Christian and Muslim women essentially as legal minors under the eternal guardianship of their male family members. These laws deny women equal rights with men with respect to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Family decision making is the exclusive domain of men who enjoy the legal status of head of household. These notions and practices are supported by family courts in the region.

Whereas Muslim husbands can divorce their spouses easily, often instantaneously through oral repudiation, wives' access to divorce is extremely limited. In Lebanon, for instance, a battered woman cannot file for divorce without the testimony of an eyewitness. A medical certificate documenting physical abuse is not good enough. In Bahrain, where family law is not codified, judges are at liberty to deny women custody of their children for the most arbitrary reasons. Bahraini women who have challenged these violations are currently being sued for slander by 11 family court judges.

Though some women's rights activists are working within sharia to promote women's rights, others are calling for a clear separation of religion from government in part because an increase in religious fundamentalism throughout the region has resulted in further violations of women's rights. Governments routinely join forces with clerics to curtail women's rights, particularly with regard to their sexual autonomy.

The relationship between a man and a woman is often mediated by a man. In many countries a woman's right to acquire identity cards or passports, to marry, to work, or to travel is granted only with the consent of a male relative or her spouse. Husbands in Egypt and Bahrain, for example, can file official complaints at the airport forbidding their wives from leaving the country. Women's unequal rights increase their vulnerability to violence. In many countries no specific laws exist to penalize domestic violence. Battered women are often told to go home if they attempt to file complaints with the police. Very few shelters exist to protect women who fear for their lives.

Women's inferior legal status in the family is compounded by penal laws and citizenship laws that also act as deterrents to their full participation in political life. Social acceptance and the enforcement of traditional and unequal gender roles, combined with the need for male authorization to work or to travel, have significantly limited women's participation in economic and political life.

In many ways, the situation that is unfolding in Iraq illustrates many of the struggles that Arab women face throughout the region. Women in Iraq seem to be fighting to maintain the status quo that is threatened by pressure from a coalition of both religious and political forces to limit the rights that women currently enjoy.

The current period obviously presents considerable opportunities and innumerable risks. It is clear that some opportunities have already been lost. In March 2004 Human Rights Watch expressed concern about some of the provisions of the Iraqi interim constitution, which is going to be the fundamental legal framework until a permanent constitution is enacted. Although such provisions as an equal protection clause and a parliamentary quota were incorporated in the interim constitution—certainly steps forward—no guarantees of women's rights—women's equal rights in family and penal laws, in citizenship laws, and so on—were accorded.

This presenter concluded that funding from outside sources to fulfill the goals of women's rights projects or to provide assistance to divorced women and households headed by women would be helpful. But she expressed concern that many benefactors, including the UN, ignore nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) by channeling funds through national government-appointed commissions for women's rights. Although government-appointed organizations have done some good work, they remain under the control of officials who have their own agendas.

Most NGOs and a number of benefactors in the Middle East have focused much attention on women's political participation, which is very important. But it would be sad if that issue were dealt with alone, excluding more entrenched issues that undermine women's legal status.

In concluding her presentation, this panelist expressed the hope that all who are involved in policymaking in the region will come to recognize that securing equal rights for women is not a threat to their collective future but an integral and inseparable part of it.

Arab Women Are the Future of the Middle East

Another panelist affirmed that the question is not Arab women and the future of the Middle East, for Arab women are the future of the Middle East. By that she meant that national development in Arab countries had been stultified by women's inferior condition; the people of the Arab world will not reclaim the Mujahedeen and suicide bombers and recall them from their gruesome deeds without the help of women; states cannot create civic consciousness, alleviate poverty, or bring forth new modes of political behavior without women.

Like previous presenters, she reminded the audience that a long history dating to before the turn of the 20th century documents the roles played by both women and men in debating women's status and trying to move them out of the "harem system" into education, the workplace, and positions of responsibility. The whole movement started with grassroots efforts. More recently there has been a pattern according to which governments have granted rights to women and even mandated percentages of parliamentary seats to them, as, for instance, in Morocco and Iraq. In many places women have gained all kinds of professional credentials. Yet in countries where one would think they would be influential, they have been absent from the political sphere. In Egypt, for example, after the 1952 revolution, the new regime, under pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood, balked at granting women's suffrage. A very determined feminist, Doraya Shafiq, organized a march on parliament that succeeded in obtaining for women the right to vote. In Lebanon for decades the only women who served in parliament were widows of assassinated members.

Women's rights have become the new official rhetoric. Its misuse has stirred many Arab women's groups to complain. Thus a Palestinian activist lamented the fact that Palestinian Authority officials continually use "buzz words" associated with women's rights before they give in to antifeminist pressures exerted by Hamas.

Some efforts have been centered in the field of legal reform. In Lebanon an optional law on civil marriage introduced by the president failed in 1999, whereas in Egypt in 2000 the president signed a law that eased divorce for women, legitimized a more casual form of marriage, and set up family courts designed to improve women's rights concerning divorce, custody, and the like.

At another level programs for women's studies and gender studies have

been set up in universities in a number of countries. At the same time there has been a mushrooming of women's associations and NGOs. A lot has already been accomplished, but a great deal more is necessary. Indeed efforts to achieve modernization in the Middle East have been fragmented and have not addressed change in the social order.

Also, some demographic shifts have played themselves out amid the collapse of the philosophy of Arab socialism. All this has led many people to identify with religious movements or at least to express more religiosity, which often impedes efforts aimed at achieving women's rights. The nationalization of education during the 20th century eroded class distinctions and improved opportunities for many. But today a large number of graduates are unemployed in most Arab countries or else work in jobs that have nothing to do with their training.

In Saudi Arabia about 30 percent of the population is poor. The traditional method of "zakat" and philanthropic private efforts impede coordination. As a result there are areas that leave out women. For instance, divorced women who need to learn skills quit college to be married. Yet in a number of Arab countries one finds a very good enrollment for girls at primary and secondary school levels. Actually their grades surpass those of boys. Nevertheless, their education is not necessarily a stepping stone to a career. It is rather a new prestigious accoutrement to use to highlight one's eligibility for marriage.

What significance is given to the presence of women in the workplace? Why, for instance, do the Lebanese still believe that men are the primary breadwinners and that women's salaries are just for "lipstick"? This attitude affects pension plans and causes many other problems, which will constitute the next area of women's rights. They result from the refusal to see discrimination against women as a human rights issue. The culprit here is not only society but also governments whose committees have to send formal responses to UN inquiries. The complaint is that the international community is imposing on them norms that do not accord with sharia, or Islamic law, and their own family values.

In terms of the actual laws, a number of small NGOs work to educate women as well as judges. Many people attend law schools but have no idea how the laws that affect women came into being and what part of them devolved from sharia, tribal codes, and the pre-1975 Napoleonic French law that switched responsibility from the woman's family to the husband. As an example, the procedure that led the police to encourage a

woman to marry her rapist was cited. That proposed way of dealing with a sexual attack comes from tribal law and was incorporated into sharia as a measure to protect the woman from being killed.

An increasing number of parliamentarians possess Islamist or tribal affiliations, and their voices are unfortunately louder than those of women's groups. External pressure to change laws relating to "honor killings" and optional marriage would be helpful.

A lot of other new issues are springing up. For example, there is a great deal of migration by women and men outside the region and within it for the purpose of marriage. Many Palestinian women move in order to marry. Some even emigrate from the United States to the region. An increase has occurred in various nonsharia forms of marriage. Polygamy is on the rise. One should also mention a form of informal marriage called urfa, which was legalized in Egypt in 2000; it facilitates relationships but wipes out the whole system of financial protection and the family's role in negotiating the marriage.

In conclusion, this panelist said that the so-called Arab spring offers a unique moment for propelling change in the Middle East, especially a change in favor of women's rights.

In March, along with a number of Saudis in Riyadh, she watched a televised speech in which the president of the United States affirmed that Washington did not wish to prop up tyrants. People took heart or became anxious about his statements about women, stating that if this signals a commitment to women's rights, it should be expanded and undertaken as an international cooperative effort.

DISCUSSION

Microloans

An observer sought information about microloans and the kinds of businesses the recipients can engage in. A panelist answered on the basis of her experience with the Gaza Women's Loan Fund that was created in the late 1990s and has already granted hundreds of loans ranging from \$500 to \$2,500. The recipients were working-class women who needed second incomes or whose households were not headed by men. Some loans were made to finance farms or to fund traditional women's work such as making dresses and clothing, as well as service businesses such as taping videos of weddings and the like. Elsewhere

loans went to women who had learned to recycle paper or make cards or engage in similar kinds of work.

Another observer inquired about the possibility of the recipients working together in cooperativelike businesses; he also asked whether it would be reasonable to expect their sons or husbands to speak out about the women's successful efforts in a way that would change social attitudes. Are efforts being made to help these women take more active professional middle-class roles and reach higher levels of community leadership?

One panelist mentioned the creation of cooperatives, especially in the West Bank. She mentioned a group of women who started a bee and honey business. They developed flower plants for the bees and expanded the business to include selling flowers in the market. These women have not become members of the middle class, but they have expanded their businesses and know a great deal more about what they can do. The theory is that this is empowerment. This panelist added that in the Bekaa region (Lebanon), women produced drugs until drug production was cut off. There is no way for them to make money because they live where there is a low water table, and what they can grow—cucumbers, potatoes, and tomatoes—competes with nearby Syrian products. This panelist is trying to get the World Bank interested in this area of the world where women need loans on the order of \$15,000 to \$20,000. Everything is stagnating. The sad result is that nobody in Beirut wants to invest in the Bekaa because of fear of the Hezbollah in neighboring villages. Hezbollah brought them bees that died because of the winter climate.

Another panelist added that microloan programs need to be combined with “know-your-rights” education and training that would help women learn about their legal rights.

Temporary Marriages

A question was asked about temporary marriages and how they relate to the Shiis and Sunnis. A panelist explained that there are “urfi” and “sigheh” temporary marriages. The latter is called muta in Lebanon. Muta was not allowed for Sunnis after the conquest of Mecca. It is a form of temporary marriage in which the partners avoid living in sin because there is a contract between them that can extend from 3 days to 99 years and involves an exchange of money. Consequently, it is a kind of “licensed” or “legalized” prostitution, which is why it has been criticized in many places. But it has also made it possible for divorced or widowed women to obtain incomes that maintain their families.

Muta became more prevalent in Lebanon during the civil war. But it is not something everybody wants to acknowledge. Actually some women have been killed when their family learned about what they were doing. Muta is easier in the cities where people are practically anonymous. Even in Algeria during the fighting, some Islamist groups claimed the right to muta because they wanted to rape the women in the villages they captured.

Also within urfi before 2000, the man bore no legal responsibility for any children of that kind of marriage. But after catching a man who avowed having contracted 63 such provisional marriages, the authorities recognized that something had to be done about “temporary marriages.” Included among several other kinds of temporary marriages is “mizyar,” as practiced by the Saudis and other Gulf Arabs in Egypt. A man who participates in mizyar does not have any legal responsibility toward the woman and their child. The children of such temporary marriages are not considered as Egyptians and are excluded from the advantages of citizenship. In Saudi Arabia the Council of Clerics has issued a “fatwa” stating that such marriages are not preferred but are allowed because there are precedents for them.

These relationships are increasing because many men are trying to avoid the high cost of standard marriages. In Egypt, for instance, it takes six to ten years of an uneducated man’s salary to afford marriage and everything that goes with it (the purchase of a flat and a lot of goods and gifts). Because people cannot date, they resort to a relationship of that kind. A case involving a woman who entered an “urfi” marriage with the son of a famous actor was mentioned. The latter refused to accept the paternity of the daughter who was born of the temporary marriage. The woman, backed by her family, took the case to court and asked that a DNA test be administered to prove paternity. The grand mufti of Egypt sided with the young woman. As a result many Egyptian women are hoping that these kind of marriages, which have been kept secret and frowned on though allowed by law, will eventually be accepted.

The Workforce and Workers’ Rights

An observer raised the question of workers’ rights and the dependence of some Arab countries on foreign labor. In some countries such as the Persian Gulf’s sheikdoms, the authorities face a dilemma. They want to “Arabize” their workforces both for security and economic reasons.

As revenues dwindle and unemployment increases, they want to limit foreign elements and create opportunities for their own citizens. But the process, which is very slow, is generating a significant contradiction: These countries do not use half of their own workforces, namely women. This observer asked whether this situation might become a lever for obtaining a change in the condition of women and their rights.

A panelist expressed doubts about the use of foreign workers to enhance Arab women's rights. On one hand, these foreign workers need the jobs they were offered in order to support their families back home. On the other hand, there are problems that foreign migrant women workers face in the Arab world in general and more particularly in Gulf countries. Most of the foreign women are domestic workers. They take care of households and of children in wealthy families. They are invisible and suffer abuses in the Gulf region. The law does not protect them because domestic work does not fall under labor codes. Also, a host of problems concerning the justice system became evident in the case of foreign women workers when they were divorced from nationals. The panelist was not sure that any segment of the workforce could be used as a lever to ensure women's rights in the region. Instead, she would prefer to fight to expand the fields in which native-born women are allowed to work, at least in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. Moreover, there should be a kind of "affirmative action" for the employment of women.

Politics and Democracy

A question was asked about the extent to which Arab women have been able to participate in the political process that would enable them to try to change some of the laws of society and even the autocratic rulers who hold sway over society as a whole.

One panelist said that under President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, it was decided that 30 seats would be set aside in the parliament for women. Moreover, a series of laws in favor of women's rights were promulgated while parliament was in recess. Known as Jihan's laws (Sadat's wife's name), they were intended to address some of the problems experienced by women under personal status or family law. Islamists as well as secular conservatives sparked a backlash against the legislation. The "Jihan" laws were rolled back and replaced in 1985 by a new series of laws, which were revised and moderated in 2000.

Most of the proponents of these reforms were lawyers, not women politicians. No longer contending for seats that had been reserved for

them as women, women campaigned against male candidates. The competitive nature of the struggle made it impossible for them to single out women's issues. Instead, women in parliament who are affiliated with political parties are obligated to promote the platforms of their parties. Some work quietly on legal reform issue. The situation evolved in a different way in Lebanon, where there is a very complicated "list system." A number of women, including a 15-year-old girl, have won seats on municipal councils. But they are identified with religious or political groups, not with women's issues. Although it is important for women to be legislators in the region, they have not altered the political space, which remains repressive and restrictive. Moreover, there are only a handful of countries in which parliamentarians are not under the thumb of the government and where decisions can be made independently. In fact the ability to push issues depends on the political will of the president or the king. In Egypt, for instance, talk was heard for years about why there were no women judges. According to rumors, Suzanne Mubarak was embarrassed on this issue at an Arab Women's League summit by her Jordanian and Lebanese counterparts. President Mubarak then appointed by decree one woman judge to the High Constitutional Court.

According to the International Parliamentary Union, the number of women in Arab parliaments has almost doubled in the past five years, increasing to 6.5 percent from 3.5 percent in 2000. Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia have advanced the most. The number will continue to rise because of political developments in Iraq, where a third of parliamentary seats have been reserved for women. Also, in Palestine, women won 51 seats in the December 2004 elections, 32 of them not seats reserved by law for women. In Saudi Arabia about four or five women wanted to run in the municipal elections but were not allowed to do so at the last moment. Unfortunately, because of oil and American foreign policy, Saudi Arabia will probably be the last country to be shamed and humiliated because of its exclusion of women from the political space. Furthermore, the Muslim world would not want to embarrass the kingdom, which has custody of Mecca and Medina. But change will finally come to Saudi Arabia because of all the contradictions that have been discussed, including that underlined by the fact that 55 percent of university graduates are women, whereas only 5 percent of women are in the workforce.

Referring to the information in the presentations about Saudi women keeping control of their capital, an observer wondered whether withholding their capital from investments could produce effective

political results for women. A panelist said that this could not happen now. Another panelist described her encounter with the Saudi minister of social affairs who gave the standard answer that the government couldn't issue identification cards to women because of the religious interdiction that they not show their faces. The panelist reminded the minister about the recent case of Afghanistan, and he said that the government would first initiate a campaign for women's identification cards and then voter registration. While she was there, the annual Saudi cultural festival was held. It was open for "women-only attendance" for a few days. Nevertheless, the religious police hassled women on their way into the festival. There was an argument when women were told they couldn't go into the main hall. One woman screamed from frustration. Other women said loudly that what is wrong with Saudi women is that they have become accustomed to not making demands. They wait for things to happen. True, Saudi women have a great deal of social power implicit in the control of their own capital, but they have not yet been involved in collective efforts to generate reform. They also fear backlash.

Another panelist said that in the past 10 to 15 years, Saudi Arabia experienced some public situations in which people demanded their rights, as in the procession of women who drove their cars and later suffered for it and, six years ago, when a delegation of Saudi business people came to the United States. Their number included a few women who found retribution on their return. As to asserting power through the use of their capital, it should be noted that a parallel banking system has been reserved to women because the sexes cannot mix in Saudi Arabia. This system gives women opportunities to work in banking and on the investment side, providing services to women investors and depositors. Nevertheless, male bank officials don't believe women have the capacity to understand complicated investments.

The possibility that women could use their capital for political and social ends is a fascinating idea, especially in view of the fact that women, according to Western estimates, hold almost half, if not more, of Saudi Arabia's wealth.

It was said that Saudi Arabia is a case in which money and financial support have been used to silence an entire population. When things were good and money flowed into the country, there were no protests. It is only now, when poverty has increased, that unease has been expressed and even some demonstrations have taken place. Moreover, the government has sufficient revenues from oil and does not require

its citizens to pay taxes. In effect, it requires nothing from its citizens and gives nothing in return. It has no interest in being representative, for it acquires almost all its budget from elsewhere.

Muslims, Arabs, and Theology

An observer said that he was not clear why a distinction was being made between Muslims and Arabs. It seemed to him that the problems concerning women's rights were similar in all Muslim countries.

It was observed that the NCAFP convened a roundtable last year on "Democratic Reform and the Role of Women in the Muslim World." The report was published and is available.² Moreover, the "Arab Human Development Report," compiled by 22 Arab experts and published in 2002 by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), noted that "the wave of democracy that transformed governance in most [of] Latin America and East Asia in the 1980s and early 1990s has barely reached the Arab states." The report also mentioned the "lack of women's rights" as one of the three main causes that have kept the Arab world "behind all other regions."³ It seems that the tribal-patriarchal structures of most Arab nations, which give privileged and dominant roles to men while keeping women in inferior and segregated situations, constitute the main obstacle to change. Indeed in non-Arab Muslim countries where the tribal component is absent or very loose, patriarchy seems more malleable; in any case, many changes have taken place in the past two decades in regard to the status of women in non-Arab Muslim countries.

A question was asked about Irshad Manji's book titled *The Trouble with Islam*. She participated in the NCAFP's roundtable on "Democratic Reform and the Role of Women in the Muslim World."⁴ A panelist said that she is not an Arab woman. She is a Canadian of South Asian background. This panelist found the book useful but had a few differences of opinion related to Ms. Manji's analyses of the situations in Egypt and Palestine. She agreed with Ms. Manji's statements about the position of women in Islam and how sharia has been used to abuse women. Ms. Manji's book reflects her appreciation of the fact that many things need to be changed regarding the way women are perceived within a Muslim framework.

An observer mentioned a book recently published by Faisal Abdul Rauf, a Sufi sheik, that presents a moderate version of Islam and a much more positive opinion about the role of women.

It was said that the question of women has more to do with the social organization of countries than religion; it is better to keep aloof from theological considerations. In any case, it would be wise to avoid discussions about theology and the reform of Islam because they would be endless and would immediately provoke strong accusations of bias from Islamist fundamentalists. The status of women is a political and social problem.

It was remarked that many incipient reforms concerning the status of women favored a kind of “paternalistic” approach, for they were conceptualized as being bestowed as “presents” by leaders. It should be remembered that tactical retreats by leaders are always possible. Therefore, women themselves should fight for their own rights.

What the United States Can Do

A panelist observed that if the United States were going to export anything to the Region in terms of women’s rights, it would probably be know-how. It would be quite interesting, for instance, to have American lawyers who have worked in the domestic violence field provide information about ways to proceed. Experts should also train lawyers in the region as well as police forces to be gender sensitive and not turn away women who file complaints. Obviously, those sorts of things are less politically charged than others but would have very positive results. Members of American women’s groups who have been very effective in lobbying the government should go to the Middle East and train activists about how to lobby.

The roundtable was reminded that such training was completed by Ukraine’s militia for the antitrafficking projects funded by the State Department and U.S.AID. It changed the way the law enforcement officers looked at women.

A panelist informed the roundtable that there have been a number of similar programs in parts of the Middle East. She participated in a program designed to train judges and members of the Bar Association in Jordan. Another program concerned the training of candidates who ran for parliament in Morocco. Women need to be taught how to organize a campaign and what to do if elected, how to protect themselves against media attacks, what to wear, how to speak, and so on. These programs should involve exchanges. Moreover, the issues that should be addressed ought to be holistic. There should be a way to demonstrate how the economic connects with the political, how the political connects with the social, how the lack of responsibility by national governments, or the lack of coordination by NGOs connect to these issues, and so on.

The roundtable was also told by one panelist that whoever wants to improve the status of women in the Middle East should contact local groups that have been working on the ground for decades, especially in impoverished areas. She gave the example of a school that she came across in southern Egypt. A local group found that despite all the government's efforts to keep girls in school, parents preferred to send the boys rather than the girls, who were expected to marry sooner or later and move to other families. Members of the group, as well as teachers, met with the villagers and discussed the matter with them. The families said that the girls had to help in the morning, both in the fields and at home, and so school hours were moved to the afternoon, enabling the girls to attend school. The teachers explained to the parents and to girls who were old enough to understand the dangers involved in female genital mutilation, which is frequent in Egypt.

An observer asked where the issue of improving the status of Arab women fits in the framework of U.S. interests. A panelist remarked that the U.S. government has determined that change in the Middle East would end tyranny and contain terrorism, which is in the security interests of the United States. Therefore, because women constitute 51 percent of the population of the Arab world, improving their condition is paramount to effecting change in the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Direct Aid and Cultural Exchanges

One panelist expressed the belief that many opportunities now exist in the United States for Arab-American groups to advocate women's rights and to impress on foreign policymakers how important they are to the success of democratic change and development in the Middle East. She reminded the roundtable of the dangers that can arise when movements dedicated to achieving women's rights and democracy in the Middle East are accused of being Western or American influenced. In effect, in the present anti-Western atmosphere, they can lose their credibility and their ability to effect change. Policymakers should therefore be wary when providing assistance to local groups.

She maintained that help directed toward changing women's situations should start at the microlevel and provide education and training that will sharpen their ability to advocate for their rights and learn how they can improve their conditions. Aid should be used in an instrumental way to effect greater economic development for an entire population rather than just a few. This aid should not be funneled through

governmental organizations. The United States should play a more proactive and critical role in deploying aid. Whether we like it or not, America exerts quite a bit of power in many countries of the Middle East. If we are going to deploy capital in the region, we must also promote our democratic values, which include recognition of the right of women to participate in political and economic life. Being culturally “sensitive” does not mean that we should close our eyes to violations of women’s rights and other human rights as well.

It was observed that if U.S. aid were given to local NGOs for distribution to a targeted population, the method chosen for delivering aid might be perceived by the countries in which the recipients live as interference in their domestic affairs. The panelist said that she was not sure that deploying capital directly to local NGOs is the best way to proceed. Nevertheless, she noted that the United States is involved in basic and educational projects that offer opportunities to generate the participation of women. We should also remember that some of the negative reactions on the part of people in the Middle East do not reflect their rejection of our democratic values but rather their perceptions that America frequently fails to apply those standards equally across the world and especially in the region. Our foreign policy, she stated, should be consistent.

This panelist agreed that bringing more Arab women to the United States and sending women from here to there in the framework of various kinds of professional exchanges would be extremely productive. Despite the negative aftereffects of certain missions, cultural exchanges are critical to the promotion of women’s rights in the region. The panelist was surprised to hear that women from Egypt and Iran have said that as long as the United States is exerting power because it is the only superpower, it should include women’s rights in its demands for change. Their comments were tantamount to asking that outside pressure be exerted in order to attain improvements for the women of the Middle East. Therefore, despite all the rhetoric about America’s determination to impose its values on Arabs, women in the Middle East welcome Washington’s action directed toward improving their status.

It was noted that if women from the United States or other Western countries visit the region, they should also discuss the plight of women in their own countries, the obstacles they face, and how they are trying to overcome them. They must be open-minded to understand the complexities of women’s lives in the region. Adopting the stereotypical

way in which Arab women are represented in the media and in some parts of the United States would not be helpful.

Arab-American Women's Organizations

It was asked whether Arab-American women's organizations that exist in the United States could be enrolled to help to improve the condition of women in the Middle East.

One panelist expressed the opinion that there were a lot of barriers between Arab-Americans and Arab women in the Middle East because of the dominance accorded to men in the national arenas of the Middle East over specific women's issues. One of the oldest groups in the United States is the Union of Palestinian Women's Associations, which has branches in most of the states. It is part of the union organizations that operated under the umbrella of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which may impede cooperation with them. But the organization has been in existence for so many decades that its members have many contacts in the Middle East.

There are larger Arab-American associations, but nobody in the region knows them. Coordination with existing NGOs would be a useful undertaking. But there are more than 14,000 of them in Egypt alone, and many of them are associated with the National Council of Women, which was formed under government auspices. Nevertheless, quite a few NGOs have produced shadow reports and attend international forums. It would be beneficial for women's groups to learn about their agendas and what they think irrespective of whether the acquired knowledge is something to act on or not.

Among a number of Arab-American organizations, the ADC is the largest grassroots group. All of them, for the most part, have criticized (although not as forcefully as they should have) many Arab governments for their lack of democracy and transparency. In addition, one can find numerous U.S.-based charitable or developmental organizations that are either American or Arab-American and have done or are doing work in the region. The American Refugee Aid Organization, for example, has been active in Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan. It has excellent relationships with the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government. It has deployed microfinance for women as well as educational tools throughout society. Another organization based in the United States is called Karamah. (Its head was invited to this roundtable but could not attend because she had made plans to be out

of the country when the roundtable convened.) Also, there is a new American Research Center in Iraq; it has offices in Amman and Chicago.

Most American-Arab women's groups (and other American-Arab organizations, for that matter) have no connections with the people in the region probably because of the nature of immigration that goes back to the 1870s in some cases. Indeed such associations were formed to represent the interests of immigrants rather than those of the people in home countries. Nevertheless, the women's organizations in the Arab world have evolved in different ways. Either they are associated with political parties (for example, each of the four women's committees associated with the four PLO groups) or have been around for a long time (like the Mar'a Gadida—the New Woman—in Egypt). Many of these groups have had terrible problems under the emergency laws that allow security services to interfere with registrations. Defending their existence in courts leaves them little time to connect with Arab-Americans. Arab-American groups, for their part, have their hands full right now because of the climate propagated by the “war against terror” and the prejudice that often affects Muslims in the United States. As a result the time for networking seems limited.

An observer asked whether Europeans can be more effective than Americans in supporting NGOs in the region. The European Foundation and a number of other European organizations have been funding women's groups and a lot of NGOs. He gave the example of a network of NGOs and several family planning associations that are state funded. The goal is to determine whether discrimination against women is based on their status as women and the perception of sexual rights. These groups have been rather anti-American recently and are much more comfortable with European funding. The overall effect of this network, which underlines the importance of coordination, has been beneficial.

It was asked whether the creation of an American-Arab organization devoted to promoting women's rights in the Middle East would be useful. A panelist remarked that Karamah does promote that goal within an Islamic framework. It is trying to do things that will fulfill that objective. But one should not forget that the Arab-American community is a relatively young immigrant community and has to do a lot of things to safeguard Arab women's interests in the United States. Many organizations in the United States are focused on asserting or improving the lot of Arab-Americans by supporting their participation in political and economic life. Others are charities that are focused on development

and similar work in the Middle East. Many other pressing problems seem to overshadow women's specific issues.

Another panelist agreed and added that she did not know of any organization that brought together Arab-American women of various religious backgrounds to undertake work in the region. She said that she is involved with another organization, called the Progressive Women's Union of North America, that uses a Muslim approach rather than an Arab approach to gender issues. Another panelist said that she had contact with the "Association of Muslim Social Scientists." To her it seemed extremely conservative and not supportive of a feminist perspective.

At any rate, the message of women's rights has more currency in the region when it is proposed by Arab women rather than others who are deemed to be foreigners. The idea of forming a network of professional Arab-American women who have financial backing to support different projects in the region is very good.

The Arab Women's Association was mentioned as one organization that is composed of different national groups. But its branch in the United States has been divisive. The consensus is that it would be very hard to form a new organization. But if certain groups were to focus on specific issues such as domestic abuse or the lack of voting rights for immigrants, some delegates from these organizations could join together to form a broader organization or a coordinating committee.

A question was asked about university exchanges. The Fulbright programs are still functioning, and there are new types of "short Fulbrights" under which one can bring scholars from an Arab country to a university or institution for two to four weeks. Thus Dickinson hosted an Afghani scholar for a short time. Afterward the young woman studies at several other educational institutions. Academic exchanges follow the reverse route too: from the United States to the Middle East. But there is not enough targeted academic exchange undertaken for the sole purpose of enhancing the skills of the beneficiary in a particular area. Such programs exist in various professions under the name of vocational exchanges. For example, there is a group of Egyptian nurses who go to California every year for six weeks to participate in a targeted academic exchange program.

Literacy Volunteers of America was mentioned as an organization that had succeeded in fulfilling its objectives. It started as a HEW-funded

program to teach American illiterates to read. The organization grew rapidly and now numbers 60,000 strong in the United States. A network of Arab and American women and men could be built in a similar way. The members would learn about one culture and then connect to their sisters and brothers in the other culture. This organization should not be formed in the United States but in Europe in order to avoid the accusation of being American tainted. The panelist added that she wondered whether this kind of organization could function like an umbrella organization to pull in the divisive organizations that already exist. She thought that it could really work and that the Literacy Volunteer Program could be the basis for a making a special effort to promote women's rights.

Gender Apartheid and Corporate Responsibility

One panelist mentioned the political pressure generated by a film documenting the "honor killing" of a Saudi princess. The film was produced by ITV in Britain and by World for PBS in the United States. The latter received phone calls from the State Department and Mobil whose representatives pleaded with the producers not to show the program because of Saudi sensitivity. After the Saudis cut diplomatic relations with London, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sent Lord Carrington to Saudi Arabia to plead with the Saudis to forgive them.

The panelist added that the violations of women's rights were worse in Saudi Arabia than in other Arab countries. In effect, the treatment of women there constituted gender apartheid just as the treatment of black people in South Africa constituted racial apartheid. Why isn't the world community, which forced South Africa to end its discriminatory, segregationist racial policies, taking the same approach to Saudi Arabia? The United States, no matter the level of criticism it (and all the other Western democracies, for that matter) would face, should remind the Saudis that it is 2005 and that their UN membership will be revoked if they continue to violate the Charter and deny women their human rights.

Answering a question by an observer, the panelist said that the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women meets in New York. The convention that led to the creation of the committee, although garnering a large number of signatories, has nevertheless more reservations than any other international document. Almost all the reservations are from the Arab world. The committee is paralyzed because of those reservations. Actually because the convention is about the elimination of discrimination, the reservations must be considered

null and void because they contradict the purpose and the objectives of the treaty.

The panelist addressed the question of corporate responsibility. When Starbucks or Pizza Hut opens branches in Saudi Arabia that feature family sections and male-only sections, nobody shames them. They pretend to be “culturally sensitive.”

An observer said that as a human being, a corporate board director, and an American, he was sympathetic to such concerns and would try to do whatever he could to further the promotion of women’s rights. But telling the president of Starbucks or the board of directors of Pizza Hut that they should not do business in Saudi Arabia because of the way that country treats women is the wrong way to proceed. The companies won’t comply.

It is true that the real battle is to be fought by women in Saudi Arabia. But private enterprises have influenced behavior and practices in other venues. The main concern, though, should be centered on what the American government can and should do.

Two panelists recommended that a roundtable on corporate responsibility be held in the near future. One of them said that corporations have a responsibility to abide by the same labor practices that are in effect in the United States. For instance, if they don’t recruit 11-year-olds here, there is no reason to do so in a foreign country. Another panelist added that under Title VII, if a company is incorporated in the United States, it has a responsibility to address discrimination against women, to open an affirmative action office, and to train its employees about discrimination. Such antidiscrimination programs are not being implemented in Saudi Arabia. Although many American corporations have developed practices to circumvent abuses, some recognized that a point had been reached, for example, with the Taliban in Afghanistan, and that American companies operating there would have to be prevented from doing business as usual. In contrast, the Saudi government has experienced no serious repercussions because of its treatment of women other than occasional embarrassment because of media attention paid to the problem or the issuance of critical reports such as those published by the International Commission on Religious Freedom or by Human Rights Watch. Instead of venting anger over being criticized, the Saudis should realize that consequences will ultimately result from violating the rights of women. They may want to ponder historical accounts of the ending of the slave trade. It was banned

in America in the 1860s. It ended much later in the Arab world and was abandoned only in the mid-1960s in Saudi Arabia. In any case, no one needs to remind them that Wahhabism, the state religion of Saudi Arabia, begat the Taliban.

An observer, referring to the example of South Africa, said that companies that applied the Sullivan Principles to their operations there had a very positive impact on creating change or encouraging it within the country. Another observer remarked that many corporations learned how boycotts actually worked. After they boycotted Israel, their products, in turn, were subject to substantial boycotts in the United States. If women said that they would not buy another cup of coffee from Starbucks until it respects women's rights in Saudi Arabia, the company would react positively. But corporations respond economically, not in other way. At any rate, corporate responsibility is not the subject of this roundtable, although it is worthy of discussion in a subsequent forum.

The Flow of Oil

An observer reminded everyone that the recommendations of the roundtable should take into account the national interests of the United States. It is in American national interests to maintain the free flow of oil. There should be a balance between the need for oil and ways of doing justice to all rights, including those of women. He thought that establishing the right balance was a major problem for Americans as well as Western Europeans.

A panelist observed that the Saudis have to sell their oil. They cannot afford not to sell it. And America needs to buy it. There are ways other than those relating to economics to pressure the Saudis. For instance, the United States can stop inviting the Saudi princes to the White House. That exclusionary device was used against Arafat. The point that is raised again and again is that women's issues are not considered serious enough to provoke a controversy. It is argued that no American diplomat would sit down with an Arab government official and say, "You are no longer welcome in the White House because you treat half of your population terribly."

Consistency is the most important aspect of handling the problem of women's rights in the region. The United States cannot give the impression that it cares about Iraqi women but not Kuwaiti women.

Another panelist remarked that at the moment the United States is pressuring Saudi Arabia to stop harboring and fomenting Islamist

terrorism. The Saudis are reacting the same way they reacted to U.S. questions about education and other subjects. Now there is a kind of stalemate. If there is no further prodding, nothing will happen. Oil remains a risk. It is true that the Saudis have to sell their oil. But there are buyers other than the United States. In the future America may not be the largest consumer of Saudi oil, for China and India are becoming major users. On women's issues, it is argued, if the United States pushes too much, the Saudi government may become destabilized. The time has come to convince the Saudis that doing nothing will still be destabilizing. The United States should not return to the policy of doing nothing in the case of Saudi Arabia.

A panelist added that the day on which change happens in Saudi Arabia for Saudi women will be the day that change occurs in the rest of the Muslim world.

Action through the United Nations

In recognition of the fact that equality between men and women is inscribed in the Charter of the UN and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it was proposed to ask the secretary general of the United Nations to identify in his annual report to the General Assembly the countries that practice discrimination against women.

An observer remarked that the UN has appointed a special rapporteur on violence against women. One panelist said that UN official would do nothing because action would be impeded by all the reservations that had been made to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. During the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population, as well as the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women, the Vatican, many Catholic and Muslim countries, and the American right-wing Christian Coalition got together and decided that female sexuality and women's rights constitute a huge problem. Since then they have disrupted almost every UN meeting (or those of other international forums) on women's rights.

Another panelist mentioned the annual State Department report on trafficking of women and children in which countries are ranked in several categories according to the gravity of the situation and the political will of governments to address the problem. It is not a perfect report, for U.S. allies are often ranked highly, but it is a mechanism that is taken seriously by countries and governments that want to find out to which category they have been assigned and determine whether

their responses have been convincing. A similar report about discriminatory laws and practices against women—whether included in family law, in penal law, in citizenship law, and so on—would certainly prove to be effective. There has been some debate about whether to create in the UN a special rapporteur on discriminatory laws and practices against women. This would certainly be a useful initiative.

It was remarked that Turkey recently revised its penal and human rights codes not for the sake of women's rights but because it wants to join the European Union. It would be better to establish a Commission on Women's Issues, modeled on the Commission on Religious Freedom, for the purpose of publishing a report that would publicly shame countries that practice discrimination against women. It won't target Arab countries alone; others need to be identified too, for women in those countries need to know that people are paying attention to their plight and problems—knowledge that will galvanize them to take action. A student in the American University of Beirut recently said that the Lebanese have been demonstrating against the Syrian occupation of Lebanon since 1989 but only now are people paying attention because of what he calls an intersection of interests. We must let the people in the Middle East know that our interests and theirs intersect and that we are paying attention to them.

An observer wondered whether expanding the special section about women in the annual report that the State Department issues would take care of the problem. A panelist expressed doubt, observing that the State Department's reporting downplays the negative aspects of some of the practices followed by U.S. allies. It was also observed that a U.S. government report would have a questionable impact given the anti-American mood in the Middle East.

Follow-up Conference

It was stated that the NCAFP envisaged holding a briefing on this roundtable for its general membership. It would feature some of the panelists who were willing to talk and to answer questions. This briefing will probably be held in September.

Though welcoming the idea, a participant said that the roundtable has started a dialogue whose importance needs no underlining. The question of the role that Arab women can play in changing the Middle East is certainly going to dominate all discussions in the near future. This participant concluded that it would be useful to have a larger follow-up

conference with the same panelists and others who were not able to attend the roundtable. She added that some women from the Middle East should also be invited, especially those who are here to attend UN meetings. Such a conference would catch the attention of the media and have a great resonance both here and in the region.

An observer asked whether it would be advisable to invite some women from non-Arab countries. It was remarked that the problems faced by women in the Arab world are more acute than and somehow different from theirs. Actually the situation of women in other Muslim countries is changing, though often slowly. Inviting all the Muslim countries in the world would confuse the issue. Once change is triggered in the Arab world, it would certainly be useful to have a conference, including women from all over the Muslim world.

It was agreed that a follow-up conference would be held.

Women's Rights as "Charity"

With reference to information mentioned during the discussions, some doubts were expressed about action taken by the kings of Jordan and Morocco in order to improve the condition of women. Women's rights are not "gifts" that can be bestowed by leaders. They are part of universal and mandatory human rights. The same comment applies to measures dictated by presidents who often appoint their wives or other members of their families to deal with the rights of women. In fact, if they really wanted to improve the status of women, leaders would encourage women's organizations to work in the open to obtain their rights. "Rights" bestowed from on high can be taken back when there is a change of leadership. Paternalistic acts perpetuate tribal-patriarchal structures and help to convince the leadership that they are dispensing charity to specific target groups that are not entitled to rights stemming from their status as humans. That does not help to reinforce the language of human rights.

It was recalled that the NCAFP is basically concerned with U.S. security interests. The Committee maintains that the solution of many of the problems in the Arab and Muslim world should focus on the status of women. The more freedom women have, the more democratic or civil institutions there will be. The growth of civil society in Arab countries is in the security interests of the United States.

NGOs dealing with women's rights should be helped in their fight to

implement those rights.

Women's Rights and Islamic Law

It was remarked that notwithstanding the fact that the roundtable should avoid theological discussions, it is obvious that some aspects of women's condition are governed by Islamic law (sharia). Consequently, shouldn't the roundtable address the problem of reforming those aspects of sharia?

A participant answered that we should tell Arab governments that human rights are universal. They are included in the Charter of the United Nations. Countries that want to go back to the strict observation of some or all parts of sharia that pertain to human rights should be reminded that the practices that they want to adopt are in contravention of the UN Charter. Sharia is not our problem. Our problem involves spreading human rights. If countries want to remain in the UN, they must respect human rights.

Agreeing with that statement, a panelist added that the existence of sharia is one of the excuses countries use in order to make reservations regarding anything they sign in the UN. It is always the excuse of sharia or culture or tradition. In fact, sharia is interpreted differently in different countries. It is often used only against women. Giving Egypt as an example, she said that sharia is mostly used in the case of family law that concerns marriage, divorce, the custody of children, and the like, whereas the rest of the Egyptian legal system is governed by a mixture of civil law modeled on European laws and remnants of the Ottoman codes. Human rights conventions have to take precedence. Many Muslim scholars living in the West, as well as a number of others who live in the region, say that this is a side point. They reiterate that contention by stating, "We are not going to get into the world of sharia and discuss how to change it. We have to understand that what takes precedence here are universal human rights."

This panelist added that it was important to include in this domain young women and young people in general because they constitute more than 60 percent of the Arab world. A number of young people should be included in future roundtables.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- American foreign policy should be consistent: The United States must apply human rights standards uniformly in its relations with

all the countries of the region.

- When dealing with officials of Middle East countries, U.S. officials should always remind them of their obligations to respect human rights and women's rights enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- The State Department should expand the section concerning women's rights in its annual report.
- Financial assistance designed to foster change and empower women should not be funneled through organizations that are under governmental control.
- Exchanges of professional women between the United States and countries in the region should be expanded to cover various fields of activity.
- A network of Arab-American professionals possessing enough financial backing to support different projects in the Middle East should be created.
- University exchanges designed to enhance the skills of beneficiaries should be expanded.
- Corporations doing business in the Middle East should abide by the same human rights standards that they observe in the United States.
- The NCAFP should convene a roundtable on corporate responsibility.
- In his annual report to the General Assembly, the secretary general of the UN should identify the countries that do not respect human rights and especially those that discriminate against women.
- The UN should appoint a special rapporteur on discriminatory laws and practices against women.
- A Commission on Women's Issues, similar to the Commission on Religious Freedom, should be set up.
- The exception based on "cultural sensitivity" should not obscure human rights violations.
- Women should be encouraged to boycott the products of companies that gloss over the violation of women's rights in Middle East countries where they do business.
- A larger conference on the role of Arab women in the Middle East should be convened by the NCAFP.

Notes

1. Arab Human Development Report. Creating Opportunities for the Future. New York, the United Nations Development Program, 2002.
2. National Committee on American Foreign Policy. Summary of and Recommendations from the Roundtable on Democratic Reform and the Role of Women in the Muslim World, held in New York, March 29, 2004.
3. See note 1.
4. See note 2.

LIST OF ATTENDEES

NCAFP Hosts

Dr. George D. Schwab, President
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

The Honorable Fereydoun Hoveyda
Roundtable Cochair, Project Director
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Ms. Grace Kennan Warnecke
Roundtable Cochair
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Presenters

Ms. Farida Deif
Middle East and North Africa Researcher
Women's Rights Division
Human Rights Watch

Ms. Mona Eltahawy
Journalist and Commentator

Ms. Mona Aboelnaga Kanaan
Vice Chairman, Senior Managing Director,
Head of Strategic Development and Acquisitions
Overture Asset Managers, LLC

Dr. Sherifa Zuhur
Distinguished Visiting Research Professor of National Security Affairs
Strategic Studies Institute
U.S. Army War College

Participants

Mr. Steven Chernys, Member
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Ms. Jane De Falco, Member
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Ms. Jesse D. Gass, Assistant to the President
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Dr. Susan Aurelia Gitelson, Trustee
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Professor George E. Gruen, Adviser
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Ms. Judith Hernstadt, Trustee
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Ms. Madeline Konigsberg, Trustee
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Ms. Edwina McMahon, Senior Fellow
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Donald S. Rice, Esq., Senior Vice President
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Mrs. Genie H. Rice, Member
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Ms. Sheila Johnson Robbins, Member
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Mrs. Edith Rudolf, Member
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Mr. William M. Rudolf, Executive Vice President
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Ms. Monica L. Scott, Program Director
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

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320 Park Avenue

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