

Speakers call for greater women participation based on Islamic model

Saudi Gazette - 19 January, 2007

The implementation of women empowerment becomes a distant dream when the very mention of the term itself evokes strong reaction from women themselves.

It happened at a seminar held at Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry on Wednesday night. Speakers, despite their belief in the importance of women's empowerment, disagreed over the definition of the term "empowerment" as well as its Western origin.

A well-educated woman in the audience, who introduced herself as the headmistress of a high school in Jeddah, begged speakers to have mercy on Saudi society and stop promoting Western ideas that would destroy the fabric of the Muslim family.

"Have mercy on us and think of our homes and children who have been the victims of such calls as yours," she shouted. "Our children are brought up by maids and the country's treasure is exported abroad by expatriate drivers and you are still calling women to leave their houses?"

Attempts by organizers to calm her down failed.

She was only an example of thousands if not millions of Saudi and Arab women who refuse to accept good things under the false presumption that these have Western origin which might spoil their culture and values.

Many speakers, however, agreed on the fact that whatever the term "empowerment" means, it should not mean Westernization and it should be modeled on Islamic values.

They referred to the Holy Qur'an to justify their viewpoints, arguing that in Islamic history women could participate politically, work freely and have a voice in both politics and society.

"Women's empowerment is among the basic principles upon which the Islamic regulations were based," said Fatin Halawani, a professor of Islamic studies at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah. "Empowerment should be carried out within this framework with no exception," she said.

As Saudi Arabia has based its Constitution on the Shariah, women's empowerment is part of the general policy and should not be perceived as something that is invented by the West, she argued.

Halawani said the problem in Saudi society is that people are divided into two extreme groups: one, which likes to keep women at home; and the other, which likes to blindly follow the Western model of women empowerment.

She warned women against running wild after the recently introduced idea of political empowerment. She cited an example from a neighboring country, where women failed because of political immaturity. Saudi women have a long way to go before being ready to participate in politics, she said.

Nora Al-Saad, a professor of social sciences at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, took a different view. She encouraged women to regain the rights that Islam granted and which were lost due to ignorance.

Women's issues should not be discussed in isolation from those of men, she said, adding that both genders form what social scientists refer to as "individuals."

"We should not focus on bits and pieces (and forget the bigger picture)," Al-Saad added.

When issues like domestic violence are discussed, the focus should not be placed on women as a subject of violence or the incident itself, she said. On the contrary, the focus should be on the surrounding political, legal and social atmosphere that led to such violence.

Al-Saad urged Saudi women to think globally and take advantage of whatever events take place in the world around them. For instance, she said, though the Sept. 11 attacks brought disaster to the Islamic world, they benefited Saudi women by throwing the spotlight on their issues.

"Let's take advantage of the outside pressure (on Saudi authorities) to activate the already existing regulations," she said.

Reviewing the challenges of Saudi women empowerment, Al-Saad said unemployment is a result of political,

economic and monetary system. She said Saudis should use the surplus in the budget to call for more jobs for the youth and women. She also called for free vocational training and the establishment of clubs for the youth, which are a must for a civilized society.

Naila Attar, an economic consultant and a businesswoman, talked about the economic empowerment of women in Saudi Arabia, emphasizing that empowerment does not mean increasing women's power of authority.

"It means increasing women participation in various fields, both within the family and at worksite. It means providing better opportunities for women in decision making positions, and development of adequate resources that lead to empowerment of women in education, health and employment," she explained.

She reminded women attendees of their guaranteed right of alimony after divorce, urging them to ask for this forgotten or lost right at the Saudi court.

She said that these are the rights that were exercised in the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and should be regained now.

She also emphasized the potential role of women as enshrined in the Eighth Development Plan. She called for more efforts to remove obstacles affecting women participation in economic and development activities consistent with the Islamic values and teachings.

She shed light on that part of the 8th plan that gives special attention to the importance of exerting all possible efforts to raise women's participation rate from 10.3 percent at the beginning of the plan to 14.2 percent by the end of the plan period.