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Women and Civil Rights in Islamic Countries
View from International Organizations
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Good morning/afternoon everyone. It is a pleasure to be a part of this panel discussion.

My own experience is with women issues globally, not specifically in Islamic countries. That said, I must stress that the progress regarding the advancement of women's rights globally fully acknowledges that women in Islamic countries were part and parcel of the world women's movement. At the United Nations, throughout the 61 years of action against discrimination based on sex, the women's movement demonstrated a common front.

The history of women's movements at the UN can be seen in four stages. The beginning in 1945 was marked by an initial outburst of energy, followed by a second stage of immobility until 1975, and then came a third vibrant period marked by many developments and activities that started in 1975 which culminated with the Beijing Conference in 1995; the fourth stage continues till today – where we are witnessing a period of consolidation of past efforts.

Let me take you back to the seventies, which were a key decade for women's rights. It was then that the new weight in international politics that is, the importance of the countries of the South was emerging. With the decolonization and their subsequent entry into the United Nations, the questions of development took on a new importance. The analysis of the means for ending under-development clearly showed that women's participation was essential and necessary to find solutions to problems of poverty and hunger.

Women's movements, on their part, had long been torn between different ideological positions – on one side were western women and a few representatives of the developing world; on the other side, there were the

non-aligned and Soviet Bloc countries. At a certain point in the seventies, they managed to come together with a common agenda – to work towards themes of equality, peace and development.

The International Federation of Democratic Women proposed an International Year of Women in 1970. It was accepted by the General Assembly in 1972 and was observed in 1975. At the same time, the First World Conference on Women was taking place in Mexico in 1975. The biggest achievement that came out of Mexico was that a number of issues were put prominently on the table and the conference established that equality between men and women was the only way towards achieving real peace and development. From that point on, there was an international legitimacy to the question of equality. It was at this time that UNIFEM was created as the UN agency that would handle women's rights and development. The decade 1976-1985 was also named as the 'Women's Decade'.

Held one year after the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the 2nd World Conference followed in Copenhagen in 1980 and outlined the concrete measures to be taken to make equality a reality in the core fields of education, health and employment.

The 3rd conference held in Nairobi in 1985, where I served as spokeswoman, decided on Action Strategies to change the status of women at the national level, recommending the establishment of well-resourced mechanisms. This time, the conference included political issues like Palestine and women under apartheid, which were until then, not considered to be in the realm of discussion of women's issues. Until Mexico, women's issues were seen as welfare issues. Women were not considered a part of the political and economic agenda. Many issues came up at Nairobi at a time when the cold war still existed. The Question of Palestinian women became a very divisive issue at the conference. Maybe even more so than the one of women under apartheid as Israeli women were present while women representing the apartheid regime were excluded from the conference. Nevertheless, the women from Palestine and other developing countries pointed out that political and economic issues were inextricably linked with women's rights and had a place on the agenda. Because otherwise, it would not be a conference with any impact on real life.

Ten years later came the Beijing conference, where I served again as the spokeswoman. This was a milestone in international efforts to improve the status of women worldwide. In Beijing, the inclusion of the concerns of women living under foreign occupation were included in the Platform for Action expressing the international community's continuing support of Palestinian women in their struggle for independence and freedom. However, there was not much of a discussion as the Oslo process was in full speed and everyone assumed that the negotiations between the Israeli government and the PLO would soon bring a just and durable solution to the question of Palestine.

It was also there that 189 countries adopted the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, recognizing gender equality and the empowerment of women as a key to development, peace and human rights. It was in Beijing, in 1995 that Hillary Clinton, the then first lady of the United States spoke about 'women's rights being human rights.'

The years following the Beijing conference have unquestionably brought us to a new stage in understanding women's participation in the political, economic and social agendas. There is no doubt that the ten years since Beijing have yielded some advances.

Gender has been mainstreamed into the agenda both nationally and internationally the world over. In addition, stronger women networks and activists have emerged everywhere, and of course also in Islamic countries, to stand up and ask for a comprehensive policy approach to ensure gender equality. As I said earlier, the era after Beijing is not a time to create new legal instruments or to promote new norms, but an era to implement what has been obtained previously at the rhetoric level. In other words, it is one of consolidation of efforts.

On the poverty front, inequalities based on sex continue to be a pervasive feature of all societies. Women's economic activity rates have been rising everywhere, but they are mostly over-represented in marginal, unregulated and poorly paid jobs such as domestic jobs and sweetshops. Women's position on the bottom rung of the labour market make them vulnerable to exploitation. Definitely, little has been achieved on the poverty front ten years after Beijing. This is why the Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000 and reaffirmed at the 2005 World Summit are so important, both as instruments of the world community to reduce poverty and as benchmarks to keep governments accountable to their action for development.

The situation is a bit more favourable on the peace and security front, at least at the level of rhetoric. In recognition of their vulnerability in all stages of war, the UN Security Council's landmark Resolution 1325 in 2000 urges member States to ensure the representation of women in all mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict, in order to promote actions necessary for the protection and support of women.

Now when we look at the present situations, we see how difficult it is to translate these principles into action. One positive indication, nevertheless, comprises the first-ever prosecutions of perpetrators of violence against women in wartime by the Tribunals dealing with war crimes in former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda. Rape of women is no longer accepted as a fact of life -"men will always be men"- but as a war crime. Furthermore, in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court of 1998, article 7 makes it very clear that "Rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy and forced sterilization or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity" are crimes against humanity.

In March 2005, the Security Council took an important stand against impunity in Darfur when it decided to refer charges of war crimes, including rapes of women by "armed men on horses and camels" to quote the UNHCR, since July 2002 to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Finally, on the human rights front, the picture is a mixed one. The International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, which entered into force in 1981, is one of the most widely ratified international treaties with some significant exceptions. It is often described as the international bill of rights for women. It consists of a preamble and 30 articles and defines what constitutes discrimination against women, engages State parties in a regular dialogue with an expert committee and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination.

While most of Arab and Islamic states, have ratified CEDAW,¹ a lot of them have included reservations to the conventions -- sometimes negating the actual substance of the Convention.

¹ As of 11 August 2006, 184 countries have ratified CEDAW. Exceptions include: Iran, Qatar, Nauru, Palau, Tonga, Somalia, Sudan and the United States of America

For instance, Tunisia included reservations immediately on adoption and Algeria added a reservation right after Beijing. Saudi Arabia has a reservation which says that every eventual divergence between the Sharia and the Convention is null and void. In the same vein, countries such as Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco and Syria have reservations based on religious law.

While it is true that the reservations to the CEDAW may negate part of the content, I share the view of those who opine that it is better to leave countries within the Convention and use this as a leverage to bring them to the table. The United Nations works to be as inclusive and universal as possible rather than exclude those who are far away from what is seen by the majority as ideal norms.

I would now like to briefly touch on a dangerous trend that has been developing in the last years regarding women's rights globally -- the threat of a rollback, of a reversal.

A key instance, is the issue of abortion: the Beijing platform for action was instrumental in clarifying once and for all the reproductive rights of women and their right to control their sexuality, including the fact that while abortion is not a method of family planning, it should be dealt with in a more humane manner and governments were to review laws that punished women for abortion. But in March 2005, the Commission on the Status of Women in New York, was plunged into controversy when the US insisted that delegates declare that women have no right to abortion and requested that it be put in writing that the Beijing document could not create any new human rights, such as the right to abortion. A few Arab countries supported the US position. Other delegates agreed that the Beijing Platform for Action did not imply a right to abortion but was meant as a recommendation stating that abortions, wherever illegal, should not be the subject of punitive measures. Eventually the United States withdrew its anti-abortion amendment when all delegates recalled that the declaration was a recommendation as other General Assembly resolutions and, unlike a treaty, did not create international rights.

At the 50th session of the Commission of the Status of Women in March 2006, member states once again failed to adopt the kind of bold document that could accelerate the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. However, there was a focus on how the Commission does its work, which left advocates hopeful that some of the new approaches

adopted will check protracted negotiations and keep the spotlight on implementation.

Continuing its focus on implementation of the Critical Areas of Concern in the Beijing Platform for Action, the Commission's themes this year were 'Equal Participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels' and 'Women's participation in development, specially in the fields of education, health and work.' The Commission expressed concern at the obstacles that continue to hinder equal participation in decision making including violence against women, feminization of poverty, stereotyping, conflicts, unbalanced share of family responsibilities and unequal access to employment and resources.

While we have continued to reaffirm the vision of equality over the last three decades since the first conference in Mexico City, we have a long way to go in ensuring the implementation of commitments at the national levels.

Now I would like to address the growing divide between the Western world and Islam. This subject and the vision of a new Alliance of Civilizations, a project that goes far and wide beyond the idea of a dialogue among civilizations as proposed by the Islamic Republic of Iran, will be addressed by Dr Nafis Sadik, who is like me a Board Member of the Suzanne Mubarak Movement and also a member of the High-Level Group established by Secretary-General Kofi Annan in the fall of last year to reflect on the subject.

According to me, a possible beginning of the solution to the West-Islam divide is one that is both gender-based and United Nations-related. The Western peoples' perception is that the Islamic world undermines the status of women and the Islamic peoples' perception is that the Western world does not care when it comes to protecting or promoting the inalienable rights of Islamic nations. If not addressed, these strained perceptions may threaten stability in our world.

An ideal point of departure on the way to bridging the divide would be to find some real-life solutions to the plight of Palestinian women. The West would be pleased with the focus on women while the Islamic world would see a true willingness from the West to redress an historic injustice suffered by the Arab people.

I would like to recommend that our Meeting include as a prominent feature of its conclusions that the two-state solution included in the Roadmap put together by the Quartet in 2002 be revived and be swiftly implemented. The conditions are ripe as public opinion in Israel is increasingly accepting the idea of two States living side by side within sure and recognised boundaries. Of course the devil is in the details and a lot of negotiations will have to take place. However, settling the 60-year old Question of Palestine would go a long way toward demonstrating to the Islamic world that its just demands are being heard and followed through.

Such a course of action should contribute to abandoning the present vision of the Islamic world as being part of an entrenched fortress and ultimately facilitate women's advancement.

In turn, we must trust the women of the Islamic world. It is very likely that once their primary demand such as that for self-determination would have been satisfied internationally, Palestinian women who have been at the forefront of the world-wide cause of women liberation will turn to their men and claim within national and local institutions their rightful position, contributing to the establishment of a just and equal society.

Thank you.