



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

www.pomed.org ♦ P.O. Box 25533 ♦ Washington, DC 20027-8533

Project on Middle East Democracy

What Women Want: Voices From the Middle East

1319 18th St NW, Helderf Publications, Reid Ballroom
June 24, 2008 12:00 - 2:00 PM

The Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and the Heinrich Boll Foundation hosted a panel discussion regarding the role of women in the Middle East and strategies that could be pursued to improve their participation in society. Panelists included **Rama Chakaki**, Founder and CEO of the Dubai-based Baraka Group, **Lama Hourani**, Advisor to the PLO Secretariat General and former Gaza Branch Coordinator of the Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development in the Gaza Strip, **Rahma Hugaira**, Co-Founder and Chairwoman of the Yemeni-based Media Women Forum and former President of the Yemeni League to Defend Journalists, and **Laura Schulz**, Civil Society and Rule of Law Manager in the Office of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) at the State Department. **Andrew Albertson**, Executive Director of the Project on Middle East Democracy, moderated the discussion.

Chakaki stated that developments in the Middle East are posing challenges and opportunities for women in the Middle East. The economic growth in the Gulf States, as well as a large population explosion, has changed the role of women. Population growth has made it more difficult for women to enter the economic sphere as women's employment displaces men from the workforce. However, in the Gulf, many more women have been integrated into the economy, particularly in NGOs. She suggested that in order to improve their condition, women should take a vital role in NGOs and use the position to **gain support for broadening a regional partnership with other women, push for corporate social responsibility, and encourage the media to promote positive images of women in the society.**

Hourani acknowledged that the position of women in Palestine was much different than the region as a whole. With the focus on the struggle for independence, women's rights were never an issue, although women did play a very prominent role in this struggle and did take on leadership roles. With the establishment of the PLO, women were able to advance women's rights through the political process, but substantive change was always subordinate to the greater struggle. She asserted that for the U.S. to credibly help women in the Middle East, the U.S. must show respect for all human rights in the region and not act selectively in order to gain trust. However, she concluded that **women's rights are still important because human rights cannot be protected unless the rights of women are as well.**

Hugaira stated that encouraging women's participation in the political process was difficult to

achieve, as the political environment encourages women not to act and abstain from political activity. Furthermore, women are also hindered by exclusion from the education system and the social realm by powerful cultural and religious norms. **She advocated that women target this culture of discrimination to gain protection by society.** Broader measures such as pushing for greater legal recognition and a more independent judiciary, in conjunction with grassroots work through religious institutions and media, would help spark a push for women's rights.

Schulz commented that the U.S. role in pushing for greater women's rights in the Middle East is meant to go beyond mere political inclusion and that it includes providing greater social, educational, and economic opportunities. Without this broad inclusion, women face continued marginalization from arbitrary legal practices and social norms. She stated that MEPI attempts to best help women by forming a partnership with local NGOs in order to be sensitive to the political and social environment, and to strengthen women's participation. This is the best role the U.S. can play in assisting the women of the region because it does not attempt to impose reform; it helps amplify already existing grievances; it builds an agenda and goals; and it opens up regional dialogue between women.