

# Towards gender equality

**Sustained action is required to ensure equality of status and opportunity for Egyptian women. Room Lolla surveys several initiatives aimed at accomplishing this goal**

A great deal of evidence from around the world indicates that gender inequalities undermine the effectiveness of development policies in fundamental ways. Yet gender issues are often absent from policy dialogue and policymaking. The Gender and Development Donors' Subgroup (GAD) — a body that connects the UN system to NGOs and donors on gender issues in Egypt — examined the many links between gender inequality and public policy and concluded that promoting gender equality is the keystone of good development policy. The GAD consists of members representing bilateral and multilateral donors. This forum undertakes several activities, such as funding projects promoting gender issues and supporting national and international events in the field of women's empowerment.

Here are some of the efforts made by GAD members to accomplish gender equality in Egypt.

The **World Health Organisation (WHO)** has provided training courses in coordination with the Egyptian NGO, the Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women (ADEW), to educate women in unsafe food handling practices and thereby prevent diseases caused by the consumption of spoiled food. According to Joanna Vogel of the WHO, this project was implemented in Manshiet Nasser in Cairo in 2005 and 2006, targeting female-headed households. Women responded positively, taking training as a means of avoiding medical costs. "Nearly 80 women were made aware of the fact that the food they consume could negatively affect their health and the health of their children," stated Vogel. Having laid the groundwork, women disseminate their skills to family and friends, sparking a multiplier effect. Women were trained on alternative methods to food storage and handling using instructional videos. There was also a take-home guide for trainees.



The Gender and Development (GAD) sub-group of the donor community in meeting

In a parallel effort, the **UN World Food Programme (WFP)** has placed strong emphasis on implementing policies to improve conditions for food-insecure women and girls through rural development and school feeding projects. In this context, the WFP supports female-headed households through providing extra food rations and earmarking a higher proportion of government settlement land to them. According to Khaled Chatila from the WFP's Egypt Country Office, "In areas of rural Upper Egypt, where a significant gender gap exists in school enrolment and dropouts, the WFP supports the 'Girls Education Initiative' schools using two different tools. First, daily snacks to increase child learning capacity, fight short-term hunger and improve their nutritional status, and second, monthly food rations as an incentive to families to send their girls to school." On another front, the WFP contributes to the capacity building of women working in Egyptian institutions implementing WFP programmes.

The **UN Children's Fund (UNICEF)** continues to play a leading role in partnership with the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood and in cooperation with the WFP, the **UN Development Programme (UNDP)**, the **UN Population Fund (UNFPA)**, and the **UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)**, in scaling up girl-friendly schools in order to reach the most marginalised sectors in seven governorates, enhancing enrolment and completion rates. Thus far, the initiative has reached 590 schools in which there are 1,180 teachers and 86 supervisors. Experts from community schools continue providing intensive teacher training courses for supervisors and newly appointed teachers. According to Sahar Hegazi, UNICEF also collaborated with the National Council for Women (NCW) in the establishment of a media watchdog

unit to monitor media portrayal of women in Egypt and reverse stereotypes and misconceptions concerning gender issues.

Similarly, the **United States Agency for International Development (USAID)** has highlighted projects that directly affect women's lives and help improve the overall status of Egyptian women. Soad Saada, gender advisor to USAID, states that promoting women's participation and raising their awareness on the importance of gender is a positive corollary to diverse social projects, from bettering water management and promoting participation in electoral processes, to increasing training opportunities and the percentage of females as senior staff and board members in organisations and institutions. One effort funded by USAID is a school-based programme aimed at increasing school enrolment and enhancing learning outcomes for girls in three governorates through a mix of advocacy work, community mobilisation, new school infrastructure, and improved quality of teaching and learning. "Over 30,000 scholarships have been provided to girls whose families cannot afford school expenses in seven governorates — Alexandria, Aswan, Beni Suef, Cairo, Fayoum,

Minia and Qena. The Education Reform Programme provides training to youth in life skills to raise awareness of equal rights and health behaviour skills. More than 36,000 adolescents are enrolled in Life Skills classes," explained Saada.

Egypt's future female leaders require knowledge and skills to become active players in the country's development. Accordingly, USAID is offering small loans that are not normally available to Egyptians from commercial banks. Ghada Gharib, a 38-year-old woman who benefited from these loans, was very poor and supported her family by selling small items door-to-door. Gharib, who borrowed only LE200, says, "I benefit because I can make a profit. I used the loan to buy materials I use in my embroidery. My mother also took a loan that she used for beadwork and sewing; my sister too." Now Gharib has money to pay for two helpers and is using some of her profits to send her daughter to school. The low interest micro-loan to small businesses began in the late 1980s and more than 1.3 million such loans worth a total of \$600 million to more than 240,000 borrowers — mostly women — have been issued since. Less than three per cent defaulted. An increase in funding for these small loan programmes is expected to more than double the number of borrowers to 600,000 by 2007, tripling the value of active loans to \$160 million.

Women's empowerment in all fields of life cannot take root without the support of civil society. Throughout the past 12 years, the **Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA)** has supported more than 365 Egyptian NGOs and youth centres in developing non-formal life skills and reproductive health education courses for youth. Amal Gamal of CEDPA says that 37,000 individuals in 24 communities were educated on the dangers

of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). CEDPA energised local NGOs and the active youth to explain to communities how women and men are equally affected by FGM. CEDPA has

also identified and addressed the specific needs of Egyptian women and girls by enabling them and their supporters to advocate for and influence policy changes at the governorate level. Gamal stated that the project has established advocacy coalitions in six governorates that have successfully pressed for political and financial support for micro-enterprise activities, women's voter registration, the activation of women's health clubs, and medical awareness campaigns and treatment.

The **International Finance Corporation (IFC)** has also helped in implementing a number of commercial activities to preserve the delicate environmental and cultural balance of the threatened ecosystem of Siwa oasis. The project, which enables people to create economic opportunities for themselves while preserving the environment, focuses on ecotourism, agriculture sectors, and women's artisanship. According to Carmen Niethammer of IFC, the women's artisanship component has provided Siwan women with marketable skills and fostered entrepreneurship within local culture. The women learn by on-the-job apprenticeships as well as more formal training with experts. "To date, about 300 women have been trained and their products are being

sold by international haute couture," Niethammer said.

Women, especially those from lower socio-economic classes, have inadequate access to reproductive health facilities; accordingly their knowledge of HIV and AIDS is poor. Research reveals low levels of knowledge on how to prevent infection coupled with high-risk behaviour. Maha Aon of the **Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)** confirms that Egypt is signatory to the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS. Along with UNDP and UNIFEM, UNAIDS initiated a project that established the

first drop-in centre focused on HIV prevention and AIDS impact mitigation, including a free clinic where medications are disbursed and capacity-building sessions for health awareness are conducted. Data generated via this project confirms how the gender gap, when coupled with poverty, can dramatically increase the risk of HIV infection among women.

The goal of the **Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) Egypt Gender Equality (GE) Programme** is to integrate gender equality into CIDA's two main lines of investment in Egypt: namely education and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Some CIDA projects support women-operated development service providers. A CIDA project with the Ministry of Finance took the initiative of "engendering" a number of SME research studies. Another CIDA project that targeted working children was successful in enhancing the skills of working girls through innovative computer games. CIDA's GE Programme enhances the capacity of its partners — government, donors and civil society — through a GE course that is adapted to the Egyptian context and instructed in both English and Arabic.

The **International Labour Organisation (ILO)** sub-regional office for North Africa in Cairo has developed an apprenticeship programme focused on helping school dropouts acquire the skills needed by the market in a number of governorates. According to the ILO's Nihad Gohar, the pilot project was carried out in Beni Suef, Fayoum, Mahala Kobra, Minia, Sohag and Kafr El-Sheikh. The programme focuses on a number of vocations such as metalwork, electrical maintenance, carpentry and sewing, among others. Al-Gharbia governorate's pilot project focused mainly on girls. Mahala Kobra one of the main industrial towns for

the textile industry. "This project provided training to 30 trainees in the textile/clothing industry, and mainly young females. Employers gave immense support to this project," she added.

Gender and leadership are the key themes of a regional project the British Council has launched in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon addressing cultural and traditional stereotyping of women's roles in the home and at work. According to the British Council's Amina Jaheen, the council also manages the "Role of Women in Economic Life" project in partnership with the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies in Cyprus, funded by the European Commission. This project aims at enhancing women's economic participation by encouraging Mediterranean governmental and non-governmental institutions to expand opportunities for women at all levels.

The German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) organisation has made gender mainstreaming mandatory for all its development initiatives, including its current project in Egypt, "Networking for Women's Rights Organisations" (NWRO), aimed at enabling Egyptian women's rights organisations to form a coalition for joint lobby work on women's rights. Miranda Beshara, a partner in the project, stated that one joint lobbying initiative concerned the negative effects of informal marriages that deprive women and children of their rights. "In the coming three years, the NWRO coalition will closely work with relevant stakeholder groups for the introduction and implementation of a new and fair personal status law," Beshara said.

Meanwhile, the NCW and UNFPA work together on enhancing gender monitoring and evaluation capacities among national partners. According to Mona Mostafa, UNFPA assists in the effective application of gender analysis in policy and planning instruments and supports efforts of decentralising planning in line with the participatory approach adopted in the next National Five Year Plan 2007-2012. "For the first time, stakeholders from governmental institutions, local councils and NGOs work together to develop local gender plans based on actual needs," explained Mostafa. On the other hand, the UNDP has supported the NCW as it prepared its National Strategy for the Advancement of Women – mainstreaming gender in the National Five Year Plan and raising awareness on CEDAW throughout Egypt. According to Naglaa Arafa, the UNDP also works on sensitising country office staff on issues of gender equality and the advancement of women, and training on gender mainstreaming for national counterparts.

Enhancing the political participation of women is a core priority for UNIFEM, the UNDP and the NCW. Women candidates for parliamentary, local and trade union elections are supported through conducting training sessions and workshops. The NCW collaborated with the UNDP to set-up the Centre for the Political Empowerment of Women to train potential women candidates on electoral campaigning, leadership skills, and enhancing their socio-economic knowledge. The three partners also worked on enhancing the legislative and oversight skills of women MPs. "Building the capacity of Egypt's 27 women parliamentarians so that they acquire the skills necessary to perform with enhanced legislative and oversight capacities, making their contribution visible to the public, and stimulating enhanced governance through participatory development dialogue, institutional capacity building, and civil society empowerment," was the foundation of this effort, stated Farkhonda Hassan, NCW secretary-general.

One success story of 2006 was the impact of leadership training given jointly by UNIFEM and the Ministry of Manpower and Migration on the number of women elected to workers' syndicates. According to Maysa Morsy of UNIFEM, the number of women in syndicate committees almost doubled, from four per cent in the previous election to seven per cent in the 2006 election. As for syndicate board membership, elected women more than tripled in number, rising from two per cent to seven per cent. Morsy added that "UNIFEM, UNFPA, the UNDP and World Bank also support the enhancement of the culture of peace in Egypt and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in collaboration with the Suzanne Mubarak Women's International Peace Movement."