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Statement submitted by Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Name of institution: Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights
Title of statement: Women's Participation in the Labour Market
Submitted by: Nihad Abu al-Qamsan, Chair of the Centre's board of directors

Egypt has seen good growth rates in recent years, especially in girls' education. Graduation rates for female students at all levels of education have increased substantially. In 2013, the proportion of female graduates was 55.7 per cent for secondary education and 43 per cent for technical education. The proportion of female graduates from higher academies was 55 percent, and 54 per cent for universities. The discrepancy between female graduation rates for applied and theoretical faculties declined. Females accounted for 47.7 per cent of graduates from applied faculties and 56.5 per cent of graduates from theoretical faculties. That represents a shift in traditional trends for girls, who in the past have tended to gravitate towards theoretical rather than applied fields.

The World Economic Forum's 2014 Global Gender Gap Report ranked Egypt 109th out of 142 in education, which was "a higher rank relative to Egypt's ranking in other areas". The literacy rate for women was 66 per cent. The rate of female enrolment was 96 per cent for primary education, 82 per cent for secondary education and 29 per cent for higher education.

Unfortunately, these efforts in education have not translated into increased participation for women in the labour market, which actually declined according to the 2014 Global Gender Gap Report, where Egypt ranked 131st out of 142 States in economic participation and opportunity and 136th out of 142 in labour force participation. In 2013, Egypt had ranked 125th out of 136 in economic participation and opportunity. In other words, it ranked six points higher in the previous year's report. The data in the 2014 report also show that the female-to-male ratio in the labour force was 32 per cent, meaning that for every 100 men working, there were only 32 women. The unemployment rate for women was 24.1 per cent, while the unemployment rate for men was 9.3 per cent.

Egypt's ranking in the Global Gender Gap Report from 2010 to 2014

<i>Egypt's Global Gender Gap Report ranking</i>	<i>Labour force participation</i>	<i>Educational attainment</i>	<i>Political empowerment</i>
2014 Global Gender Gap Report (out of 142 States)	136	109	134
2013 Global Gender Gap Report (out of 136 States)	130	108	128
2012 Global Gender Gap Report (out of 135 States)	130	110	125
2011 Global Gender Gap Report (out of 135 States)	131	110	126
2010 Global Gender Gap Report (out of 134 States)	130	110	125

These problematic figures point to a number of significant issues:

I. The gap between development efforts in education and training on the one hand, and women's participation in economic life on the other

There is a considerable discrepancy between the number of women graduating from higher academies and universities and the number entering the labour market. That gap must be addressed immediately, especially when we consider the growing unemployment crisis and the lack of any mechanisms to address it now that the State has rolled back its youth employment policies and is relying on a private sector that as yet has proven unable to meet the needs of job seekers. The situation has been exacerbated by the global economic crisis and resulting recession and general decrease in employment opportunities domestically, regionally and internationally.

II. The lack of any effective strategic vision of the role of women despite the presence of political will

Even as the horizons of development have expanded dramatically around the world, Egypt's political leadership has failed to develop its vision for the role of women. It is stuck in the approach to social welfare and poverty eradication of the period 1950-1970, which focused on providing food to families and depending on women to feed them. That made women negative beneficiaries of development. The assumption continues to be that a woman's primary role is that of homemaker, and responding to her needs is done via the family. Horizons have not expanded to include equality or empowerment as an overarching principle that encompasses decision-making and freedom to choose from a range of alternatives. Consequently, a woman's decision to participate in the labour market does not necessarily lead to freedom to dispose of income, material autonomy, or even the ability to escape the cycles of discrimination and violence.

III. The impact of legislation rooted in a philosophy that regards women as a second-class member of the family

Many laws treat women as a citizen-subject of the family rather than as an autonomous actor capable of decision-making. Until recently, a woman's freedom of movement — and in particular her ability to travel — was subject to the husband's approval. A woman needed her father's or husband's approval to apply for a passport until the Supreme Constitutional Court handed down a judgment vacating the decree of the Minister of the Interior to that effect. Echoes of that attitude continue to permeate personal status law, notably when it comes to guardianship and control of finances, where the relationship of a woman to her children is that of a mere service provider. Responsibility for making decisions about children rests with the father in the first instance, and if the father is absent, then with the grandfather, the paternal uncle, and only then the mother, under the strict supervision of the probate court. A woman is not considered rational enough to handle the finances of her minor children or reliable enough to make decisions about any aspect of their lives involving finances, schooling or travel.

This perception of the role of the mother is reflected in all aspects of life, including decisions involving banks, schools or government agencies, which have inherited a culture that does not view women as rational citizens capable of making decisions. That spills over into prioritizing employment opportunities for men rather than women.

IV. Women being forced into the informal labour market because of increased economic pressures

As the economic requirements for raising a family have grown beyond the capacity of one man alone to provide for, the pressure has grown for women to engage in paying work outside the home, but without a corresponding revision of legal frameworks or a move towards development concepts such as empowerment. Family responsibilities still rest entirely on the shoulders of women even as they also take on work responsibilities. The female work force is now being exploited both inside and outside the home to raise family living standards. However, remuneration for that work is less than for men, even though women are often putting in twice as many hours as men.

V. The social impact of the rising tide of political Islam

We cannot ignore the impact of political transformations and the rise of political Islam, which has a perspective on women's work rooted in extremely conservative interpretations of the sharia based on biological function. That works against efforts by women's activist groups to expand the horizons of development to include women's empowerment.

The debate over women's labour has been circumscribed by three perspectives. The first is that of women's organizations that advocate the absolute right of women to work. The second is that of the State, which has restricted that right based on women's family responsibilities, effectively steering them towards certain professions. The third is that of Islamist political organizations and socially conservative groups that completely deny a woman's right to work, and whose influence is manifest in the many sectors that exclude women entirely.

The added value of women's work

1. The World Bank has produced a wealth of evidence that allowing women to develop their full capacities in the labour market has the potential to yield substantial overall economic gains.
2. Raising the percentage of women in the labour force increases the pool of available talent, given the rise in women's levels of education relative to men.
3. Improving opportunities for women to generate and control incomes helps to broaden economic development in developing countries by increasing girls' educational enrolment, because women are substantially more likely than men to invest family income in the education of their children.

4. The International Labour Organization has suggested that women's work, both paid and unpaid, can be a major factor in reducing poverty. Increased participation by women in the labour force and higher incomes results in greater expenditures on educational enrolment for children, including girls, which creates a virtuous cycle whereby educated women become role models for others.
 5. The relative lack of opportunities for women in developing countries holds back economic growth, while economic growth in itself improves the situation of women by reducing deprivation.
 6. Hiring women on an equal footing with men allows companies to derive greater benefit from new talents and capabilities, which has implications for growth potential. There are also indications — albeit preliminary — that women on company boards and in upper management have a positive impact on performance.
 7. Hiring women to management positions can better prepare companies to serve consumer markets that are dominated by women. Greater diversity on boards of directors improves corporate governance by providing a wider spectrum of perspectives.
 8. More women in decision-making posts means fewer high-risk financial deals, which are usually concluded by male traders, according to corporate risk assessments conducted during the 2008 economic crisis.
 9. A wife's employment contributes to family stability by providing a buffer against temporary shocks to a husband's income.
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