

Report on
Gender Discussion with Women Activists in the State of Kuwait

Date: 23 April 2008

Venue: Supreme Council for Planning and Development

UNDP is keen to further its partnership with the government and people of Kuwait. Women empowerment and gender mainstreaming is both an end in itself and a means to other ends. UNDP cooperation aims to serve national priorities and therefore the activities are executed locally in partnership with SCPD.

UNDP and SCPD consulted with Kuwaiti women to explore the challenges and opportunities, and suggest recommendations to be able to engage with the Supreme Council for Planning and Development on future interventions and eventual programmes.

We believe that such cross fertilization discussions is beneficial in studying the key gender issues and the support through this consultative exercise is a good means to bring a wider scope to our current and future initiatives in the field of gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment. The meeting served as an opportunity to make strategic recommendations to enhance the status of women in the State of Kuwait through policy formulation and action plan.

The objective of the meeting was to engage Kuwaiti women activists in a dialogue to answer the following questions on women empowerment and gender mainstreaming in the State of Kuwait:

- What are the key issues?
- What are the challenges and opportunities?
- What is needed for the recommendations to be adopted and implemented?
- What is the recommended role for UNDP and other stakeholders?

Following are some of the issues discussed:

Status of Women in the State of Kuwait

Women in the State of Kuwait have taken long strides towards a greater role in the development process. The Supreme Council for Planning and Development presented and distributed the findings of a study on 'Empowering the Role of Women in the State of Kuwait in line with International and Regional Developments'. In light of these findings, several women activists expressed their concern that Kuwaiti women are still marginalised in development planning and political participation due to gender insensitive legislation. It was also echoed that women have marginalised themselves due to misconceptions rooted in socio-cultural understanding that they are incompetent to step into the political sphere and out of their traditional role in the society.

Enhancing the Capacities of Women

Women activists pointed out that the State of Kuwait's human resources, men and women, are paramount to its development. This calls for programmes to mainstream women into human development programmes. Different views were raised on the interest of Kuwaiti women to receiving training. It was pointed that 2,500 women with secondary school education have not obtained training to enable them to advance themselves. Other views opposed this, and found that the numbers are greater because some women found difficulties in registration and some were rejecting training opportunities as they rely on the social security system.

Women in the Civil Service Workforce

Despite that women take up a large proportion of the civil service workforce, it was highlighted that very few have been able to take up senior decision making positions. It was suggested that the Civil Service Commission should take an active role to ensure women representation in managerial positions in the government. However, it was stressed that providing women with equal opportunities was more important at this point.

Legislations

In assessing the effect of legislations on empowering Kuwaiti women, legislations were viewed as gender insensitive and discriminating especially those concerned with housing, nationality, and other civil rights. Moreover, mechanisms to implement these laws are debilitating and take long to enact, for example, Kuwaiti women may wait four to five years to receive their alimony. A call to review the concept of family in the Laws was made in light of the hardships that Kuwaiti women and their children face when married to non-Kuwaitis in acquiring their civil rights.

On the draft labour law sent to the parliament calling for a four year maternal leave, it was perceived as a disincentive for the private sector to hire Kuwaiti women due to the losses that this would accrue to their businesses.

Role of Civil Society Organisation

There have been mixed views on the support of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to Kuwaiti women especially after they acquired their political rights in May 2005. A common view expressed was that CSOs have been dominated by elites who have failed to support Kuwaiti women in this period. Others pointed that the role of CSOs has been active in advocating for women's political rights, however, much needs to be done to enhance the capacities of CSOs to communicate their messages on what they do to garner public support though effective use of the media.

Role of the Media

The role of the media was perceived to be inactive. The media has an important task to play to change the picture that the media has portrayed of Kuwaiti women and to influence development policies at large. This was partly traced to the limited presence of women in the media administration.

Recommendations:

1. Awareness programmes targeting all social groups focusing on mindset change about the important role of women in the society.
2. Enhance the capacities of women to enter the political and economic sphere.
3. Systemise and integrate activities of women working from home under the informal sector only through publicised exhibitions to enable them to be entrepreneurs, develop small enterprises and participate in the economic development.
4. Establish a leadership skills training institute.
5. Establish a centre for women research and studies.
6. Revise discriminatory laws and laws' implementation to promote pro-women policies.
7. Revise Civil Service Commission policies to include work/life balance policies such as part time jobs.

8. Effective use of retirees through mentoring programmes for younger generations.
9. Use of merit based systems and equal opportunity representation mechanisms such as quotas to ensure women representation in managerial positions in the Government and in the parliament.
10. Increased accountability mechanisms through careful monitoring by relevant stakeholders of progress in enacting decisions.
11. Revision of the school curricula, with special emphasis on the image of women.
12. Programmes for political, social, economic and legal empowerment are needed.