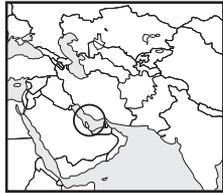


## ■ BAHRAIN

# Rights acknowledged, changes pending



Advances towards recognition of women's rights are still not accompanied by significant social changes such as women's participation in electoral processes or relevant positions. In addition, the Government has not taken steps against income distribution inequity even though poverty is on the rise and unemployment - which mainly affects women - could reach 35% in 2015.

### The Bahraini Human Rights Society (BHRS)

In early 2005 the Bahraini Supreme Council for Women (SCW) issued the *Report of the Kingdom of Bahrain on the Follow-up of the Beijing Platform for Action*. The Report was published when the SCW launched the Strategy on the Advancement and Integration of Bahraini Women. However none of the government ministries or agencies has issued a report on the implementation of the Copenhagen Summit or the Millennium Development Goals.

Since the 2001 Reform Project there is a better climate for government policy assessment, regardless of the controversy about it. Within a reasonable atmosphere of freedom of expression and association, relative transparency of official information and the cooperation between the Government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), it is now possible to properly assess the Government's performance.

Apart from the Reform Project, no event has been organized by any official agency or NGO to review Bahrain's performance on the implementation of both the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) and World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995) programmes of action and resolutions. However some events will be organized by civil society organizations (CSOs) around the third Arab Human Development Report (TARHD)<sup>1</sup> since the publication received substantial media coverage.

The focus of attention on the TARHD could demonstrate the Arab obsession with politics, and in particular economic and social issues. However contradictory it may be, concerns about development, poverty, marginalization, and women's issues are not treated seriously within the context of socio-economic policy. Nor are there any credible or official vital statistics or indicators on the poverty line, population groups by income, or the per capita share of unsatisfied basic needs.

This might explain why it is very difficult to measure Bahrain's accomplishments regarding both the Copenhagen and Beijing programmes of action. In this analysis we will compile information taken from various sources including the Government, research

centres, academics and NGOs. Apart from empirical measurements, we will also rely on journalistic reports.

We will examine selected indicators for Beijing and Copenhagen simultaneously. The official *Report of the Kingdom of Bahrain on the Follow-up of the Beijing Platform for Action* accounts for both the accomplishments and the obstacles of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. We will examine the Report and other government sources using an objective and critical methodology. In addition we will refer to some official documents and research work not only relevant to Beijing but also to Copenhagen.

### Poverty and the poverty of women

The Report is an account of the official welfare and social policies which address poverty reduction and the improvement of living standards, including the policies designed for women. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Index, Bahrain ranks 40th worldwide in 2003, and experienced an increase in gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (in PPP USD) from USD 16,060 in 2001 to USD 17,170 in 2002.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile a study by the National Studies Centre<sup>3</sup> in 2002 established the poverty line at BHD 337/month (USD 894) while 53% of Bahrainis employed in the private sector earn less than BHD 200/month (USD 530). According to the study, the average family size is six people and 16% of the population live below the poverty line.

The large difference between official GDP per capita and actual GDP per capita is due to the income gap between the small number of wealthy people and the large number of poor, the absence of comprehensive social insurance including unemployment insurance, the State's relinquishment of responsibility to provide basic services such as housing, and inadequate poverty alleviation policy.

Since the 1980s, there have been UNDP plans in Bahrain to address poverty and to encourage small-scale projects. Education and training, health, welfare, unemployment, marginalization and family policy have helped counter poverty and vitalize productive work rather than charity. The civil society sector (women's

societies, charity funds, etc.) has also collaborated with the Government and the UNDP in programmes such as Microstart<sup>4</sup> and craft production.

### Public programmes

The government-run Bahrain Development Bank and the Bahrain United Nations Industrial Development Organization project for entrepreneurs have helped launch several small industrial businesses. The Ministry of Labour established the Institute of Vocational Training and financed training projects in areas such as hospitality services and the beauty sector.

The Mackenzie Plan<sup>5</sup> to reform the labour market proposes a gradual tax on the employment of foreign workers in order to make employment of locals more attractive and to finance a fund which could be used for training locals and supporting the unemployed.

In order to address the increasing number of poor families and alleviate their current meagre assistance, the Government increased funding allocated to families with monthly incomes less than BHD 150 (USD 400) from BHD 6 million (USD 16 million) in 2003 to BHD 20 million (USD 53 million) for 2005.<sup>6</sup>

### More poverty and more income concentration

Nevertheless, the number and the percentage of poor people have increased. The number of unemployed, especially women, is alarming and is expected to increase from its current level of 16% to 35% in 2015, unless a policy shift is made.<sup>7</sup>

His Highness The Crown Prince, sheikh Salman bin Hamad Alkhalifa raised the alarm in his speech on 22 September 2004, in a seminar on Reforming the Labour Market, when he said "I am concerned that the economic boom which our country will witness in the coming years will bypass the ordinary Bahraini". During this seminar a plan by Mackenzie

1 This is the third report in a four part series written by an independent group of Arab scholars, and sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development Organizations.

2 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 2004*, 2004.

3 Hameed Gafar, "Workforce and standard of living in Bahrain". National Studies Center, Manama, Bahrain, 2005.

4 MicroStart Project for Development of Micro-finance Sectors in Bahrain. [www.undp.org/bh/undp/default.asp?nc=7055&id=60](http://www.undp.org/bh/undp/default.asp?nc=7055&id=60)

5 Economic Development Board. "Reforming the Labour Market". Manama, Bahrain, September 2004.

6 The Parliament, minutes of meetings, statement by the Minister of Social affairs, April 2005.

7 Economic Development Board, *op cit*.



on the current and future labour market was unveiled.<sup>8</sup> It warned that current poverty, inappropriate jobs and youth unemployment, will worsen if profound and conclusive reform is not initiated.

The plan set out the need for wider reform of the economy and of the educational/training system. This is considered to be more difficult than reforming the labour market. Although implementing the Mackenzie Plan may reduce the rate of unemployment, and thus partially reduce poverty, there are doubts concerning the total eradication of poverty. This is because the Bahraini economy is characterized by contrasting factors. It is dominated by the State because the business and government elite in Bahrain are inseparable and many of the major enterprises are family-owned. As a result, basic government policy favours businesses over the population's well-being. And in the absence of corporate and personal income taxes, the redistribution of gross national product to ensure social justice is not foreseeable. Furthermore, more and more small and medium-sized businesses at present are being crushed by big business.

A privatization programme of government enterprises was launched in 2002. Among the businesses privatized were public transport, public sanitation and the Port of Mina Salman. More government services and enterprises will be privatized and more economic activities will be open up to foreign competition in accordance with World Trade Organization rules. This will worsen unemployment problems, at least in the short run.

## The integration of women

### *Reservations about Beijing and Copenhagen*

The empowerment of women and their integration into different aspects of society such as politics, economy, state, sport, education, culture, and civil society are integral objectives of both the Beijing and Copenhagen programmes of action.

The Government has reservations about both. The implementation the Beijing and Copenhagen programmes of action acquired strong momentum after the initiation of the basic document of the Reform Project (The National Action Charter). The document stipulates the equal political rights of all citizens (males and females), and eliminates the ambiguity of the 1973 Constitution which had been used as pretext for the denial of women's political rights. The 2002 Bahrain Constitution declares men and women to be equal. The regulating municipal and parliamentary elections clearly stipulate equal rights in voting and candidacy.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

### *Amendments for equal rights*

The establishment of the Supreme Council for Women headed by Her Highness Sabika Alkhalifam, His Majesty's wife, has been fundamental in the advancement and empowerment of women. The well-financed SCW embarked on a project for the empowerment of women in fields such as political participation and business engagement. The SCW acts as a watchdog on equal opportunities and women's rights, evaluating the performance of the different government ministries and agencies. As a result of their work, laws on public housing and public service regulations were amended to qualify women for similar rights as men. The SCW is a driving force behind the Family Code legislation which faces strong religious opposition.

### *Limited opportunities*

The incorporation of women into the labour market has steadily increased in both the public sector where women represented 43% and in the private sector where they had 26% participation in 2004.<sup>9</sup> However we must take into consideration that foreign workers represent 68% of the total labour force, and women only represent 15%. Also, women on average get lower pay than men in both the public and private sector. Women are ill-represented on the boards of corporations and family-owned businesses, and occupy few executive or senior posts. They are denied the opportunity to be judges, and are scarcely employed in the judiciary, public prosecution, defence security and foreign affairs jobs.

Despite the affirmation of women's political rights, no woman has been voted into any of the municipal councils or the House of Representatives, and only six of the forty members in the Alshura (appointed) Council are women. This reflects the masculine bias of society, which echoes the religious establishment's long-established policy of marginalizing women. In 2005 two women were appointed to ministerial positions: Dr. Fatama Albolishi to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Dr. Nada Hafad to the Ministry of Health. Meanwhile the only female ambassador, Ms Hya Alkhalifa, resigned from her post.

In political society more women are being elected to the leadership of political organizations. The same is true in CSOs such as trade unions, professional associations and other public societies especially youth organizations.

There have not been many advances with regards to anti-discrimination, anti-repression, wom-

en's empowerment or women's integration legislation. Some members of Parliament brought forward a proposal to issue special anti-discrimination legislation, which included discrimination against women in its definition, but the motion failed. The Family Code Law is stalled at the level of the legislative committee of Parliament due to threats from the religious establishment. There is also a proposal before Parliament on violence against women.<sup>10</sup>

Amnesty International chose Bahrain to launch and coordinate its campaign on combating violence against women in the Arabian Peninsula countries (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain Qatar, Emirates, Oman and Yemen).<sup>11</sup> A coalition was formed among CSOs to implement the plan of action. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia has decided to hold a conference in Kuwait in June 2006 on violence against women in the region.

In general there is popular awareness of women's rights (especially among women) and determination to secure these rights. Social policy indulges women's rights but there are many obstacles that must be overcome in order to eradicate discrimination and fully integrate women. ■

<sup>9</sup> National Bureau of Information, National Statistics, Manama, Kingdom of Bahrain, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> The Parliament, Annual Record, Manama, Kingdom of Bahrain, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Amnesty International, "Our Destiny in Our Hand", London, 2004.