



USEF PANEL DISCUSSION NOTES

October 21, 2004

Women's Rights in Focus: Public Attitudes on Women's Freedoms

Speakers

Brian Katulis, Research Consultant, Freedom House
Naderah Chamlou, Senior Advisor, Office of the Chief Economist, Middle East and North Africa Region, World Bank Group

Moderator

Heba El-Shazli, Regional Program Director for the AFL-CIO on Middle East and North Africa Programs

The United States-Egypt Friendship Society (USEF) and Freedom House co-hosted an October 21 presentation on Freedom House's newly-released report, "The Egyptian Public's Attitudes on Democracy and Human Rights."

Brian Katulis presented the report's main findings, which are based on a series of focus groups conducted in Egypt, part of a larger Freedom House public opinion research project on women's rights in the Middle East. The focus group research provides insights into how the general public in Egypt understands and discusses women's rights and democracy. Katulis's full report and findings can be viewed [here](#).

The focus groups offered insights into societal attitudes towards women as well as the broader framework of public attitudes on human rights issues. Katulis, with the assistance of an Egyptian professional market research organization, organized sixteen focus groups in five locations. Katulis noted that the focus groups were purposely skewed to over-sample Coptic Christians, lower income classes, and people in their early twenties. Katulis noted that the study had been constrained by the limits on free speech and dissent in Egypt, which appeared to have led to some self-censorship on the part of both the participants and those conducting the study.

Katulis highlighted several of the main findings, including the strong association of "human rights" with core economic and social concerns, such as access to food, housing, employment, and education, rather than the expected association with political or societal freedoms. Katulis noted that poor economic conditions in Egypt had a profound impact on all the focus group members and dominated the groups' attitudes towards all other topics. Katulis also contrasted men's and women's perceptions about the progress in women's rights. Although both groups agreed that ideally, men and women should have equal opportunities, the women were eager to play a greater role in the economic, social, and private spheres, whereas the men were more ambiguous toward greater roles for women. The participants generally had a positive view of democracy but agreed that reforms were needed. Brian Katulis' presentation is available [here](#).

Nadereh Chamlou's presented on "Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA): Women in the Public Sphere." Her presentation focused on dispelling three myths: 1) that lack of education is keeping women in the MENA behind; 2) that MENA women do not have to work outside the home; and 3) that women in the labor force take jobs away from men and thereby increase unemployment. Chamlou's full report can be accessed [here](#).

Chamlou showed through quantitative analysis that MENA women are beginning to become as educated as MENA men. However, in comparison with other developing countries, MENA

USEF PANEL DISCUSSION NOTES

October 21, 2004

women are underemployed and underrepresented in government agencies. Chamlou's research indicated that greater efforts should be employed to increase the demand side for female labor force participation. She noted the untapped female labor force has huge economic costs to the region. Discussing the second myth, Chamlou noted that the MENA region had the highest dependency ratio of nonworking to working people in developing world. She noted that a woman's contribution to the family can often move a family from poverty up to middle class. In regard to the last myth, Chamlou stated that research shows that female participation in the workforce actually creates jobs.

In conclusion, Chamlou emphasized that Egyptian society needs to focus on fully utilizing the rights women currently possess instead of investing efforts in expanding rights. She added that Egyptian society needs to improve the quality of education and provide an infrastructure that will assist women in balancing work and family responsibilities. Nadereh Chamlou's presentation can be viewed by clicking [here](#).

Q&A Highlights

Q: Does Egyptian society view human rights as a Western-based concept or an indigenous culture-based issue?

A: (*Katulis*) While people realize that the West promotes women's rights, they generally regard their religion of Islam as having afforded women more rights than they previously enjoyed before Islam.

Q: What were differences in responses from older versus younger participants in the focus groups?

A: (*Katulis*) The focus groups were purposely skewed towards younger people. Generally, younger people (in the 20 to 29 age group) made more references to Islam than the older participants. In addition, the younger participants are more media savvy.

Q: Does the minimum age at which a child has to go to school have an impact on women's decisions and/or abilities to join the workforce?

A: (*Chamlou*) As a side note, the fertility rate in Egypt is actually declining. With regard to joining the workforce, women are aware of the high rates of unemployment in Egypt and some consciously choose not to participate if working is not a necessity and they have other household obligations.