



Arab Reform Forum
Alexandria Conference on Women
"Steps Toward Achieving Reform" (STAR)

1. PROPOSAL ABSTRACT

2.1 Problem Identification

The main aim of the project is to emphasize the role of women in Arab Reform. Despite the progress achieved by the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) launched by the U.S. Department of State, and the Arab Reform Conference held in March 2004, by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (BA), all of which addressed the issue of the role of women in Arab reform, much more work on the subject needs to be undertaken. Critical areas of concern include the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women, unequal access to education and training, violence against women and the effects of armed conflicts on women.

2.2 Solutions

The Arab Reform Forum (ARF) proposes a three-day conference entitled "Steps Toward Achieving Reform" (STAR) to take place in early 2006 with two follow-up seminars for policy-makers and media representatives. The proposed conference is designed to raise awareness of what has been done so far, address the practical steps toward the implementation of previous recommendations aimed at the empowerment of women and debate the obstacles that have hindered progress. The conference will be action-oriented, divided into panels to address the following topics:

1. The Alexandria Declaration and the Status of Women
2. Education and Training for Women
3. Women and the Economy
4. Women in Decision-Making
5. Women and the Media
6. The Female Child
7. Women Trafficking

2.3 Sustainability

The BA is qualified to sustain and follow up on the Conference activities. The Arab Reform Forum's national and regional partner associations will help ensure the implementation of ensuing policy designs and programs from the Conference seminars. Also, the media's role will result in a multiplier effect in its wide-reaching dissemination of information.

2.4 Funding Requirements

The total budget can be divided into 5 main areas: 1) Conference and administration; 2) Authoritative papers; 3) Conference and seminar publications; 4) Conference participants; 5) Two follow-up seminars

The total budget required for the conference and two follow-up seminars is USD 223,760 excluding BA in-kind contribution. (Detailed budget attached).

2.5 Organizational Expertise

The BA, an institution devoted to pluralism, tolerance, dialogue and learning, has been breaking new ground through holding a variety of well-targeted reform related activities. It has become a rallying point in the Arab world for all who believe in democratic values, freedom of thought and expression. There is now an agreement among the region's political analysts that a fundamental reassessment of their existing systems is necessary and that the future of any reform will be largely determined by the ability of reformers to attract popular support, hence the importance for the reform discourse to continue and that the issues are kept before the public at all times.

The BA is well positioned to carry out such activities through its unique facilities and its close ties with private sector and civil society groups committed to realizing reform and promoting open dialogue in the region.

This proposal, for a three-day Conference and two follow-up seminars on women's issues, is based on previous international efforts and recommendations as well as the Arab world's realization and determination to implement a plan of action that would result in the actual empowerment of women.

2. BODY OF THE PROPOSAL

3.1 Background and Strategic Fit

The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) set an agenda for women's empowerment, striving for the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women and assuring the equal share between women and men in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making. Critical areas of concern include the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women, unequal access to education and training, violence against women and the effects of armed conflicts on women. Other issues include inequality in economic structures and the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels, the stereotyping of women in the media, and the persistent discrimination against female children.

This was followed by the "Beijing + 5 (200)" meeting held in New York at the UN Headquarters which adopted a political declaration and document for "Further Actions and Initiatives to Implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action." This document consisted of three main sections:

- Achievements and obstacles in the implementation of the Platform for Action.
- Current challenges affecting the full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action.
- Actions and initiatives to overcome those obstacles.

Despite progress achieved, much still remains to be done, taking into account the need to face new challenges caused by globalization and the spread of armed conflicts across the world. These challenges add new dimensions to the implementation of the Platform.

In November 2003, the U.S. Department of State launched the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) which adopted the empowerment of women as one of its four main pillars.

Across the Arab world, many civil societies and the private sector groups are as committed as governments to promoting developmental goals concerning women. Since 2000 the Arab world has witnessed the establishment of several Arab women's organizations. At the national level (National Council for Women, NCW) at the regional level (Arab Women Organization, AWO) and at the international level (The Suzanne Mubarak Women's International Peace Movement, (TSMWIPM).

Finally, at the Arab Reform Conference held in March 2004, by the BA, the challenges facing Arab women and their role in Arab reform were among the

major issues addressed and were prominently featured in the “Alexandria Declaration.”

The Alexandria Declaration focused on the need for women’s empowerment to enable women to take an active role in their society. It was realized that such reform requires the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, developing a new ‘female culture’ that encourages equality between the sexes in education and employment – a prerequisite for full social, economic and political participation by women.

It is therefore clear that there is a convergence of interests between the Alexandria Declaration, the Beijing Platform of Action and all other international movements.

3.2 Technical Approach

3.2.a Goal/objective(s)

In light of the above, the ARF has placed the role of women in Arab reform as a priority on its agenda. The ARF therefore is proposing a three-day Conference entitled “Steps Toward Achieving Reform” (STAR) to take place early in 2006 with two follow-up seminars for policymakers and media representatives.

It has been the mission of the BA to publicize the aims of the Arab Reform vision, amplifying this vision through research and dialogue, identifying all participating stakeholders while facilitating communication among them with the purpose of ensuring the execution of proposed resolutions and the creation of a fundamental tie between Arab governments and their respective private sectors and civil societies.

Many conferences have already taken place to discuss similar issues, ending only with recommendations but without a tangible action/follow-up plan for implementation. The goal of the proposed conference is to raise awareness of what has been done so far, address the practical steps toward the realization of previous recommendations and action plans aimed at the empowerment of women, and debate the obstacles to their implementation.

The Objectives of the conference will be to provide a forum for in-depth and candid debate of the obstacles toward implementation of previous recommendations. Furthermore, Conference participants will seek to design policies for implementation and adoption by governments, private sector and civil society as appropriate.

As for the two follow-up seminars, one will study the recommended policies and what steps should be taken towards implementation and the other will address media representatives in order to raise public awareness of the issues at stake and the recommended policies and action plans. This will ensure a wider multiplier effect of the conference activities.

3.2.b Strategy/Methodology

The conference will be an action-oriented activity and its schedule will be designed to reflect this objective by allowing for only an opening, a closing/wrap-up session, and one plenary session to set the stage for the break-out sessions where most of the debate, policy and program designs will take place.

These sessions will address the following topics:

1. The Alexandria Declaration and the Status of Women
2. Education and Training for Women
3. Women and the Economy
4. Women in Decision-Making
5. Women and the Media
6. The Female Child
7. Women Trafficking

Another new strategy the Conference will adopt is that of follow-up activities which will be comprised of two seminars. The first seminar will engage government officials and parliamentary representatives concerned with policy formulation and legislation and the other will address media representatives to ensure wider dissemination of information to create a sound public awareness campaign around these issues.

3.2.c. Activities

The main work of the conference will be done in the break-out sessions addressing the following topics:

1. The Alexandria Declaration and the Status of Women

The Alexandria Declaration stressed the importance of the empowerment of women through generating job opportunities, empowering women via education and in-service training programs to participate effectively and by “developing a pattern of family relationships that would help create an independent, distinct, and free individual capable of taking responsibility for his/her choices.” Equally important is fostering partnerships and networks between women’s organizations in Arab countries and the rest of the world for the implementation of items concerning women’s issues in the Alexandria Declaration.

This Panel will be tasked to address the following issues:

- Determining the area(s) of cooperation between the ARF and women's organizations in the Arab countries and the rest of the world.
- Surveying the achievements of women's organizations in advocating women's issues.

2. Education and Training for Women

In spite of the efforts exerted in carrying out educational programs in the Arab countries for women, there is still a high percentage of illiteracy among young girls and women. This in turn hinders women from effective participation in development and decision-making at all levels. There is also an essential need to invest in formal and informal education and training for women so that they can gain new skills and abilities and hence contribute to achieving sustainable development and economic growth.

This Panel will cover the following issues:

- The importance of eradicating women's illiteracy at all ages, especially in rural areas (through flexible non-formal education and awareness programs)
- Ensuring the sustainability and active participation of all family members to help overcome the social barriers related to girls' education
- Stressing the importance of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and E-learning, and the advancement in science and technology to serve women's health issues.
- Carrying out gender awareness programs for occupational training and developing appropriate curricula and teaching materials and methodologies for the implementation of such programs.

3. Women and the Economy

Women's employment is one of the main challenges facing the Arab countries. In many instances some customs and traditions hinder women's participation in the labor market. There are significant differences in employment opportunities between women.

This Panel will be tasked with finding ways that could enhance women's participation in economic activities, such as:

- Support of micro-credit schemes and similar programs in capacity building that would empower women economically and promote women's entrepreneurship, especially in rural areas.
- Support female access to credit from financial institutions and equality in promotion opportunities and salaries.

- Build networks that would influence financial institutions, private sector and self-help programs to support lending mechanisms and practices when dealing with women.
- Establish a data base to provide information for women on opportunities and access to trade in local, regional and international markets.
- Find ways to encourage women to participate in international exhibits and fairs.
- Encouraging universities and academic institutions to offer scholarships/internships/training to young women for capacity building that would enhance women's effective participation in economic activities.
- Offering role models by inviting outstanding Arab women, representatives of the UN Platform for Action Committee and others from different countries to present success stories that would highlight women's economic independence.

4. Women in Decision-Making

Women's participation in decision-making is vital for women's advancement which in turn will contribute to sustainable development and the promotion of democratic values.

In order for this to happen, there is a great need to remove all barriers that discriminate against women's full participation.

This Panel will be tasked to address this issue by:

- Inviting parliamentarians, civil society activists, policy-makers and diplomats to address and discuss challenges facing women to exercise full participation in political life.
- Exploring ways to enhance women's effectiveness in the political arena and to strengthen their role in the decision-making process.
- Examining the possibilities of building a network to support women's access to leadership positions, their role in strategic decision-making and equal opportunities for managerial posts.
- Designing programs for career development, guidance to enhance negotiating skills and encouraging more on-the-job training programs.
- Reviewing laws that permit gender discrimination.
- Launching national awareness programs that emphasize the importance of women's political participation.

5. Women and the Media

The image of women in the Arab media, whether positive or negative, is considered an important factor in establishing women's role in society. Media can play a vital role in raising public awareness of the importance of women's

participation. Images of Arab women in the national, regional and international media should avoid negative stereotyping and misconceptions.

This Panel will consider ways to address this issue by:

- Presenting factual information to media that represent Arab women favorably throughout history.
- Encouraging women to participate in media programs, thereby establishing the importance of their role in society.
- Encouraging the establishment of research units that would prepare background material on women's achievements as well as the obstacles they face which can be presented to the media.
- Stress the importance of the role of media in the promotion and the advancement of women's causes.

6. The Female Child

In many of our societies the female child is subject to and suffers from many aspects of discrimination. Often she is treated as inferior to the male child. Such treatment has detrimental effects on the girl's future in terms of access to education, health services, levels of self-confidence, respect and responsibility in the family. Discrimination is a result of family members' attitudes, tradition and some cultural aspects prevailing in the society.

All international conventions on children's rights ensure no discrimination between girls and boys. This should also be reflected in all national policies dealing with children including children with special needs.

This seminar will work on discussing means to:

- Ensure girls' access to all levels and forms of education.
- Develop awareness programs for parents on girl's needs and rights.
- Design programs that promote positive attitudes and practices towards girls.
- Design programs that encourage equal treatment for girls and boys for families and young couples.
- Design and promote programs that deal with girls' health issues highlighting the risks to early marriage and other health practices towards girls.
- Promote girls' rights to full participation in cultural and sports activities.
- Pay special attention to programs that deal with high risk girls such as the homeless or those who suffer from disabilities.

7. Women Trafficking

Women's trafficking is the fastest-growing business of organized crime in the world. According to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), it is estimated that two million girls between the ages of 5 and 15 are trafficked every year.

This problem has become a significant phenomenon in many countries including some Arab states. Its prevalence has been highlighted in the annual "Trafficking in Persons" report published by the U.S. State Department in 2005. Often trafficking victims are exposed to sexual exploitation and forced labor.

Women's trafficking is nothing less than a modern form of slavery, and it is crucial to raise public awareness of this phenomenon.

The Panel will address this issue by:

- Determining means of cooperation between the ARF and women's organizations in the region and the rest of the world that promote women's human rights and combat exploitation in all its forms.
- Bringing international attention and developing awareness campaigns to all forms of sexual exploitation of women.
- Presenting factual information to the media.
- Reviewing laws in the Arab countries protecting women and girls from gender-based violence, abuse and sexual exploitation.
- Discussing initiatives such as regional resource centers on anti-trafficking.

3.2.d. Staffing/Administration

The Bibliotheca Alexandrina has a dynamic, multi-talented and gender balanced young staff. More than 79% of the staff is below 35 years of age, of whom (excluding security and custodial staff) 48% are females. They are working closely with and guided by experienced consultants. The BA is also in the unique position of drawing upon the expertise within its ARF partner organizations: the Arab Academy for Science and Technology, the Arab Business Council, the Arab Women Organization, the Economic Research Forum and the Arab Organization for Human Rights.

The BA is a unique institution: It was given an independent status by Law No. 1 for 2001, which placed it outside of the government and the Presidency, attaching it directly to HE the President. It has its own detailed statutes governing personnel, financial transactions, procurement, and other administrative matters, to the very highest international standards. The transparent nature of its functioning is well recognized by the third annual audit by KPMG Hazem Hassan.

The BA is well positioned to carry out activities dealing with concepts of democracy and reform in the region through its unique facilities and its close ties with private sector, civil society groups and partner organizations. The Arab Reform Forum, the organizer of such activities, has become a key player in promoting debate on critical issues on the reform agenda.

3.2.e. Sustainability

The BA, through the Arab Reform Forum and the Arab Reform Observatory, which aims at measuring and recording the process and progress of reform in the Arab countries, has established mechanisms in place to sustain and follow up on such conference activities.

Furthermore, the ARF's national and regional partner organizations can take the lead in the adaptation and implementation of the ensuing policy designs and programs from the Conference seminars. Also, the involvement of the media will have a positive multiplier effect in that it will ensure a wide ranging outreach in the dissemination of information which will be an informal mechanism of monitoring progress.

3.2.f. Gender Considerations

As mentioned earlier in the staffing and administration section, the BA has a clear policy on gender balance in its staffing pattern.

The conference and seminar activities will address women's issues and policy recommendations to their empowerment. However, the mix of participants will represent a wide spectrum that will include all sectors of society. Invitations to the conference and dissemination of conference related material will also reflect the BA's commitment to female participation and empowerment.

3.3 Organizational Qualifications, Effectiveness and Past Experience

The BA encompasses a vast complex including the Library, research centers, museums and exhibition spaces. Although young, (inaugurated in October 2002), it has managed to hold some 500 events each year and receives approximately 870,000 visitors each year.

The Bibliotheca has become experienced in organizing far ranging and open dialogue through its on-going programs and activities on a variety of topics ranging from freedom of expression, to human rights issues and educational reform. The BA's efforts have opened the floodgates of discussion about sensitive topics which are in need of immediate attention. The Arab Reform Forum in particular has become a key player in promoting debate on critical issues on the reform agenda.

3. PROPOSED OUTCOMES AND IMPACT INDICATORS

The conference and its sessions are designed to produce policy papers with implementation guidelines.

- Policy papers will be discussed (by approximately 120 participants) at the conference.
- The two follow-up seminars will offer a venue to discuss these policy papers with those concerned with their implementation and define ways of overcoming obstacles to implementation.
- Policy papers will receive wide publicity through the conference and the follow up seminars with media representatives. This will offer wider dissemination of information and will create a greater public awareness of women's issues.
- Publication of conference and seminar papers.
- Posting of conference and seminar activities, reports, documents and news on the ARF Website.

4. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

There are several ways to ensure proper monitoring and evaluation of the Conference and the follow-up seminars policy recommendations.

- The BA partner organizations are a natural source of information on progress in women empowerment issues in their respective domains and countries.
- The Arab Reform Forum and the Arab Reform Observatory will be used as a mechanism, in Egypt and the other Arab countries, to monitor the conference's progress and the seminars recommendations.
- The involvement of the media will be another monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that will keep the issues on the forefront of the reform agenda in the participating countries.