

Bahrain does not have a written family code. Bahraini activist Ghada Jamsheer, *President of the "Women's Petition Committee", Bahrain*, delivered this speech to the House of Lords, United Kingdom, December 2006.

## **Women in Bahrain and the Struggle Against Artificial Reforms**

*By: Ghada Jamsheer*

"It is my pleasure to address this meeting. I consider myself a liberal Muslim, but I am obliged to clarify that I belong to a Sunni family, in order to refute the allegation that only Shia stand for freedoms and rights in Bahrain.

I am going to talk briefly about aspects of women's rights in Bahrain. This is an issue which has become increasingly complicated.

For, on the one hand, there is a lot of talk about progress and achievements in regard to women rights, especially concerning human development or participation in the elections and acquiring high governmental positions.

While, on the other hand, the injustice and suffering continues. Women have become victims of the power struggle, sectarian differences, mismanagement of the government, and unfair distribution of national wealth and resources.

In regard to political rights, women in Bahrain have participated in elections as candidates and as voters. However, only one of the female candidates made it uncontested to the house of representatives, thanks to the sectarian division of electoral areas. The government arranged for her to be the only candidate in Hewar island where hardly anybody lives. Ten other women out of 40 members have been appointed in the "Shura" council based on their loyalty to the ruling family.

But what does that mean in regard to women's rights?

Are these elected or appointed persons, be they men or women, able to defend women's rights when it comes to legislations and policies, or to monitor the practices of the government?

The past experience indicates that the national assembly failed women, partially because the assembly was under the control of the government. In regard to the new assembly, and as a result of government manipulation of elections, the majority of the new House of Representatives are members of Islamist groups who have other priorities than women's rights. Many campaigners for human rights, including women, lost the election to Islamists backed by the government, as a result of using the floating votes of military men and newly nationalized persons.

So, what is the point of participation in elections if it does not give more influence and empowerment for the voters in legislating and decision making, whether they are men or women?

Women in Bahrain have been getting education and participating in elections for eighty years now, so the mere participation in elections is not the ultimate goal that Bahraini women hope for, especially if it does not lead to real political participation and empowerment.

In regard to the equal rights to acquire public jobs, you will hear that we, in Bahrain, have women in high government positions. Namely, as ministers of health and social affairs, and the head of Bahrain University. You will also hear us speak proudly that Bahrain and other governments of the region have nominated a Bahraini woman to become the head of the United Nations General Assembly.

In reality, women in Bahrain make up less than 8% of high government positions, and in most cases, these women are either members of the ruling family or appointed based on their family and sectarian relations. So, how could that reflect equality and promotion of women's rights?

When speaking about living conditions, the UN report on development places Bahrain in a relatively high rank in the region. That is because the report wrongly assumes that the wealth of the country is distributed fairly among citizens.

While the reality in Bahrain is that half of the citizens do not have adequate housing or enough income to cover their basic needs. And women are in the heart of this problem, struggling with the needs of their families and trying hard to keep their families from falling apart.

Official reports have shown that more than 10 thousand families get scarce financial support from the government. Charity Funds, help support several other thousands of families.

Furthermore, there are more than ten thousand falling houses, and more than 45 thousand families who have been waiting for government loans and leased houses for as long as 12 years.

The poor living conditions have been a major factor in the fact that one out of every three marriages in Bahrain end in divorce. That is why Sharia courts and family law have great effect on the lives of thousands of families.

In Bahrain, thousands of women and children are under the mercy of an incompetent judicial system and the unwritten family laws, struggling for years to get a divorce or child custody, and living under social rejection and hardships.

These were the reasons behind starting the Woman Petition Committee six years ago. The committee has had a non-stop campaign calling for

reforming Sharia courts and adopting a family law that promotes women and children's rights. The response from the authority was dismissing seven incompetent judges, but appointing others based on political affiliation rather than competence.

The government is using the family law issue as a bargaining tool with opposition Islamic groups. This is evident through the fact that the authorities raise this issue when ever they want to distract attention from other controversial political issues. While no serious steps are taken to help approve this law, although the government and its puppet National Assembly had no trouble in the last four years when it came to approving restrictive laws related to basic freedoms.

All of this is why no one in Bahrain believes in Government clichés and government institution like the High Council for Women. The government used women's rights as a decorative tool on the international level. While the High Council for Women was used to hinder non-governmental women societies and to block the registration of the Women Union for many years. Even when the union was recently registered, it was restricted by the law on societies.

**To conclude:**

The struggle for women's rights in Bahrain has become more difficult. That is because of the new government approach and policies, which pretend to be the protector of women's rights by implementing artificial and marginal reforms.

Finally, I would like to thank Lord Eric Avebury and all those who are supporting the struggle in Bahrain for human rights in general and women's rights in particular.

I would also like to thank those who supported me and the Women Petition Committee especially during the many legal pursuits and other hardships which we still undergo.

Thank you all for your patience."