



Princess Sabeeka bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa, Wife of the King, and President, Supreme Council for Women

Ensuring equality

OBG talks to Princess Sabeeka bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa, Wife of the King, and President, Supreme Council for Women (SCW)

How has the role of women in Bahraini politics progressed following the recent elections?

PRINCESS SABEEKA: Bahraini women's progress in political life started in 2001, after King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa announced reforms and a political modernisation process. Support for women from the leadership and the people is evident in the overwhelming 98.4% vote in favour of the National Action Charter, which ultimately led to an increase in the representation of Bahraini women internationally and locally in ministerial and decision-making posts. The charter was reflected in the constitutional articles that guaranteed the participation of women in political life and public service while preserving a balance between their familial roles and their work in society. It also emphasised the importance of ensuring the principles of equality and justice. The SCW was very aware from the outset of the need to launch special programmes to politically empower women, encourage them to exercise their rights and present them as a valuable and influential force in the decision-making process.

The recent increase in the number of women in the legislative assembly (four women were newly elected to the Council of Representatives, and 11 women were appointed to the Shura Council) is considered a significant boost to women's contribution to political life in the Kingdom of Bahrain. This rise further proves the amount of support that Bahraini women receive today and the trust they have earned in their capability to contribute to the national development in different fields, particularly in issuing legislation related to women, family and society as a whole.

Where do you see the greatest opportunities for women to enter the workforce to further accelerate economic development in the Kingdom?

PRINCESS SABEEKA: As a result of specialised programmes, Bahrain has been able to decrease the rate of unemployment amongst women and men. The SCW is very keen to contribute to this effort by offering

comprehensive programmes aimed at the economic empowerment of women to create new opportunities for them in cooperation with the concerned organisations in the Kingdom. We have recently launched several projects to assist low-income families to start their own businesses, taking into consideration the need to make new business choices that are compatible with market demand. Since then, we have succeeded in attracting a significant number of women from different areas of the country to participate in these economic empowerment programmes.

Increasing the number of Bahraini women entrepreneurs in different areas is a great step forward towards economic empowerment; however, there are many other opportunities available to Bahraini women that can contribute to both personal gain and the economic development of the country. Opportunities in the field of medicine, law, architecture and consultancy are always available to women with the right level of education, training and guidance. Therefore, by developing long-term plans to offer the right tools and skills to Bahraini women, in accordance with the country's economic vision, the SCW will be better able to empower women and simultaneously strengthen the economy of the Kingdom of Bahrain.

Why is the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) important for creating opportunities for women?

PRINCESS SABEEKA: SMEs offer a certain type of economic independence for Bahraini women that allow them to play an important role in developing the national economy. These businesses can also further develop when the proper platform for growth is provided. In the Kingdom, many public and private organisations such as Tamkeen, Bahrain Development Bank, UNIDO and Ebdaa Bank are strategic partners in implementing economic empowerment programmes for women with the council. There are also a number of examples and success stories of women who managed their own

businesses and, today, are regional businesswomen. Such projects, if sustained, should allow women to participate in developing the economy while controlling capital and managing their lives.

The SCW is currently working on an economic empowerment programme using a comprehensive economic system, either by administering training programmes and providing qualifications in managing small businesses and projects, or by providing financing opportunities that can be facilitated through funds that offer capital entrepreneurs need subject to basic rules and regulations. In addition to establishing a fund, financing can be provided through the launch of economic incubators that offer a number of consultative services such as training, financing and promotion all offered under one umbrella called the “Bahraini Women Development Centre”, which is currently in its early stages. Being established by SCW in cooperation with the Bahrain Development Bank, the centre is expected to be fully operational by the end of 2012.

How is the SCW working to increase training for women and further develop their skills?

PRINCESS SABEEKA: The SCW operates according to a national strategy approved by the King. Such a strategy has been translated into a practical workplan that includes programmes and projects that accomplish a great deal for Bahraini women, while at the same time empowering and developing their skills further so they can add value to the process of the development of the national economy. The council also introduced a number of initiatives and awards that encourage government and public sector organisations to empower Bahraini women in their organisations. These initiatives have managed to create a substantial impact on the status of women in the workplace and achieve the desired balance that ensures equal opportunities and eliminates discrimination against women. The council has also signed a number of memorandums of understanding with local and international organisations that

contribute to the financing of different programmes and projects in efforts of implementing the national work plan of the Council.

Today, the SCW is working on incorporating women’s needs into the government’s workplans to guarantee that the programmes set for women are implemented; especially those that are concerned with services provided to women and their status in the workplace.

Looking forward, what are the greatest challenges to the advancement of women’s rights in Bahrain?

PRINCESS SABEEKA: There are bound to be challenges in every work environment that serve as lessons to grow from. Furthermore, Bahraini women’s aspirations are continuously developing, which adds impetus to our goal of providing them with the tools necessary to pursue their ambitions.

Perhaps one of the most significant challenges confronting women today is the issue of the availability of opportunities that will allow them to become valuable resources at the national level. It is equally important to guarantee the enforcement of the constitutional laws that ensure women, given their social roles as mothers, can balance between their family lives and continue working and contributing to the broader society. This matter requires a significant amount of work and a great deal of follow-up to ensure that women are given this opportunity in a way that preserves their role as an important part of the workforce today while also allowing her be a key player in ensuring family stability as a wife and mother.

Further to ensuring equality and the empowerment of women, the Family Law in Bahrain remains a challenge that needs to be actively addressed and looked after, specifically because the law sets a standard to protect women’s rights within the court system. The fact that it has only been partially passed shows that, despite some very important and crucial progress, the journey towards the advancement of rights and opportunities for women in Bahrain is far from complete.