



## Our Families: Conflicting Values

by Shaheen Anam

THE UN is observing 1994 as the International Year of the Family. They have also coined a very appropriate slogan for it, which goes: Building the smallest democracy in the heart of society. This refers to integration and equality within the family.

The concept of family cohesion is very strong in traditional societies such as ours. Most of our values, norms and traditions are centered around the family which is considered to be the most powerful vehicle of communicating norms and traditions from one generation to the other. The devotion of sons towards their parents even in the most difficult times is a part of our folklore. Even today, in spite of object poverty we often hear of how

the maid servant saves money and sends back to her parents, or the 10 year old boy working in hard labour to provide income to the family. We say with a lot of pride that unlike the decadent West, we still have our family values intact.

But is this the reality? Are our families really the bastion of stability and strength that we so proudly profess? Are our families in a collective sense living up to the responsibility that society has given them? Is the traditional definition of family which is defined as "a group of people living together, who care, give and receive nurturance, protection, security and affection still true for us?"

A careful review of the current situation of families in our societies will reveal that all is

not well. Here we must remember that by families we should not mean the few thousands middle class families living in cities. The majority of our families live in the rural areas where the concept of the family as providing security, affection and stability is slowly becoming a myth. Our families are disintegrating faster than we would like to admit. The reason given is of course poverty. While that is true to a large extent, sometimes we are a little too quick in jumping to that conclusion. In the midst of breakdown of families and support system guess who are the victims? The women of course, they are the ones who bear the greatest burden of family disintegration.

The biggest example of our disintegrating families is the rising spectre of Female Headed Households. According to latest estimates, the national average is 8 per cent and in certain places goes up to 16 per cent. The reason for the rise in women headed household is mainly due to abandonment of women by their husbands, although rural to urban migration of male members and widowhood are also factors.

Let us then examine the case of abandonment as a factor of family disintegration. In a traditional family system like ours, how is it that women can be cast away from the family so easily? What about the support system that once provided women at least some semblance of security. What about the village elders, salish or family courts. How come no one is being able to come to the rescue of abandoned women. Men are, on a regular basis taking and leaving wives without bothering to pay the mandatory "mehr" however insignificant the sum may be. Children are also abandoned with the mother unless the man thinks the child will be of some use to him. Most of the women beggars we see in the streets are victims of this want on abandonment. Left with no options these women are driven to begging, maid's work if they are very lucky, while many are forced into prostitution. A recent survey show that

poverty for women headed household is much greater than for male headed households. They face much more vulnerability in terms of income and employment.

The causes given for the rise in violence against women are the same for the rise in abandonment which is a kind of violence. When a woman is left with no resource to support herself with, what can one call it but violence? The low status given to women and the perception that they are easily available, are dependent, docile and will take any kind of treatment from men are the main causes of abandonment of women. The social acceptance of multiple marriages whereby men know that they face no punishment for leaving one and taking another wife is also a factor. Ask any maid servant in your house, chances are that she has been abandoned at least once in her lifetime. Unfortunately, the social pressure to get married is so strong that relatives force women to remarry no matter what the consequences might be.

One cannot help but ask the question "Why is it that women always become victims of any social disorder? Be it poverty, riot, war or political turmoil, it is always the womenfolk who have to bear a disproportionate burden of hardship. Poverty is often cited as the reason for abandonment. But in a society where family cohesion is given so much importance, why are women cast off so easily. Sons go to great lengths to care for their elderly parents because he feels responsible for them and values the sanctity of the family. So then why are women such unimportant members of the family that they can be thrown out at will?"

Celebrating the Year of the Family is indeed a noble effort towards family cohesion but sounds hollow in the backdrop of the prevailing situation. Unless the wife or the women in the family are accorded the respect that they deserve, unless their contribution is appreciated the family, cannot function as the abode of security, stability, love and affection that it is supposed to be.

## Innovations in Quality Education for Girls' and Women

by Schrezad Joya Monami Latif

*The main reason is that although there have been plenty of innovations, they have all been dropped in various buckets. What is needed is wide knowledge of these innovations so that they may be copied and used by others in their areas, according to their contexts.*

national problems in a country's context, so that national capabilities for development are improved and potentials and visions expanded. (UNESCO-PROAP)

To a lot of laymen it sounds boring and drab, just another regional/international seminar in Dhaka. Many are scoffing at seminars and workshops as the latest "business" along with the NGO business. For NGOs and governments of the participating countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Thailand), these meetings and seminars are anything but businesses. They are mediums for exchange of knowledge, forums

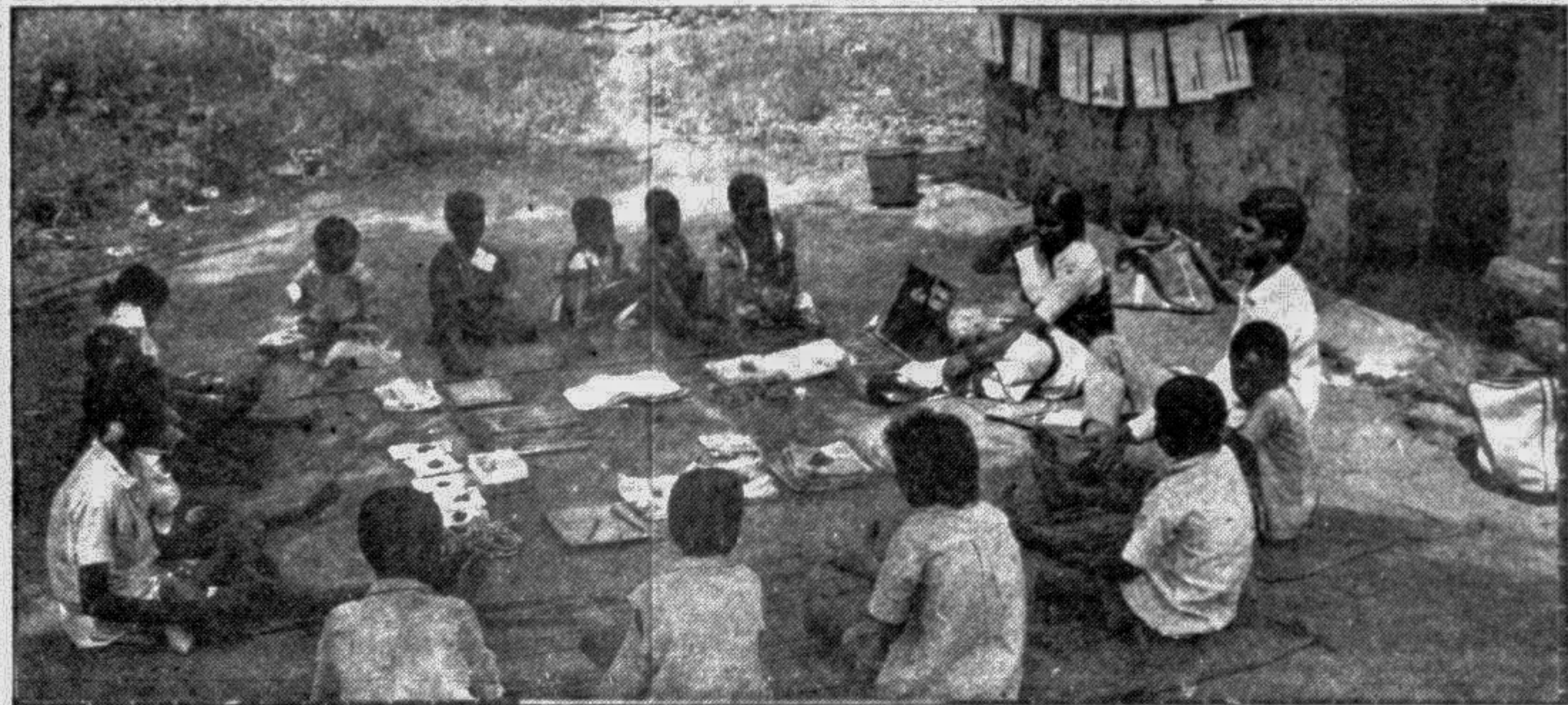
where men and women if indeed these NGOs are so effective?

The main reason is that although there have been plenty of innovations, they have all been dropped in various buckets. What is needed is wide knowledge of these innovations so that they may be copied and used by others in their areas, according to their contexts. In fact, what is needed is that all the drops in all the buckets around the region be solidified in one bucket. Of course, government is essential to this process. Without government, undeniably the most important bodies in our Third World countries,

they can sustain their literacy skills. Depending on whether they have graduated from their literacy classes or are now in the midst of learning to read and write, the women meet daily, and are given loans in groups.

The women of Saptagram are eager to learn, thirsty for knowledge. An Indian participant, representing the PROPEL project from the south of the country was moved, when an old lady at least 60 years old told her story. "When I first started learning, they laughed at me, asking me what I could possibly do by becoming literate, a burfi like me, but by learning to read and write I have been able to push my daughter and grand children to attend school and these classes, now I know a little more about my identity that I am somebody in this village, among my family. I will take my literacy with me when I go to God."

The government participants all agreed that NGOs and governments should all work



PROPEL - A new window on living and learning

of the Indian government's direct initiatives such as one where there is empowerment of the teachers and another, Shiksha Karmi, where teachers need little qualifications to begin with and are trained on the job to teach primary age children of their rural community.

In Bangladesh, the NGO Gono Shahaj Sangstha (GSS), works with primary class students and adolescents, teaching classes based on government curriculum. But the teaching methods are child centered. The children are taught Mathematics, Bengali, English and Social Science subjects at their own paces and looked at individually or in small groups of two or three, somewhat similar to the tutorial system in Oxford or Cambridge. The children make their own play time. They study and then wander off to the playground for a game of pass the ball or jump rope and then come back and finish their work, assigned by the teachers, each day. Homework is a no-no in these GSS schools. The belief is that all the learning needed can be done in school.

The above are all innovative projects showcased in the UNESCO workshop, "Across the Divide: Innovations in Quality Education for Girls' and Women", that took place in the BRAC centre in Rajendrapur last week. Educational innovations are important in solving the massive literacy problem. They are creative solutions to existing and anticipated education

where men and women, all dedicated to education. They exchange ideas and options and go home to their own to replicate and implement some ideas or practices they may have picked up from another country's project.

Education is essential, no matter where, no matter for whom. If today, Bangladesh remains in abject poverty and one of the least developed countries of the world it is due mainly to the fact that our literacy rate remains ridiculously low. Illiteracy is 77 per cent among females and 52.9 per cent among men. The rest of the countries in the region are not faring too well either. The gender gap in literacy in Pakistan is 45 per cent in India 48 per cent. Sixty per cent of the world's illiterate adults are women, more than half of which remain in the Region of Asia.

A large number of NGOs are doing innovative work to solve illiteracy, especially centering on girls and women. The governments too are working to eradicate illiteracy. As in Bangladesh, countries are dedicating larger and larger amounts of the budget to education, especially girls' education. It is by now a common fact that the investment with the highest rate of return in this region is the investment in girls' and women's education. Yet our statistics are deplorable. What happens to all these innovative projects, that are so successful in their own right? Why isn't there more

ours being no exception, none of this can happen. Governments need to work together with NGOs in order there to be wide encompassing effects to educational innovations like GSS's, or Mahila Samakhya's or any others. This is where organizations such as UNESCO and seminars such as the one they just conducted (co-sponsored by Save the Children, USA) come in.

The participants were representatives of governments and NGOs and all were in turn impressed and inspired with each others work. Most impressive by far were the projects they were able to visit in Jessore and see for themselves.

Saptagram Nari Parishad Swantir's rural women were literate, assertive and eager to share their experiences with visiting *bideshtis*. When, in one learning village we were hurried to move onto the next, one woman said to me, "where do you think you are going, without giving us your *porichol* (identity, introduction)?" *Thikhana* (address, identity) and *odhikar* (rights) are essential elements to Saptagram's literacy classes, the first things they are taught. They know that knowing our *thikhana* was their *odhikar*.

The women all get together with their groups each day in the middle of the day, to discuss issues such as how they could make money by traveling to the north to buy cheaper rich and sell it in the city, and read materials so that

## Justice Rachid Achieves the Unthinkable

Tariq Butt writes from Islamabad



Court judge at the same time.

Says Rachid: "The timing of my appointment was just a coincidence. My promotion was due because I was No 3 in the seniority list."

In addition, she points out, my passion for hard work to go high brought prompt promotions.

She feels she deserved her progress. This profession, she notes, "does not belong to men alone, and women must take the initiative. I am confident that women can outmatch men."

She might not have got her new job had not a religious-minded citizen petitioned the Federal Shariat Court a few years ago for a ban on the appointment of women judges. The court dismissed the plea.

She recalls that after the judgement her colleagues were sure should become a High Court judge. They were right. Would she like to go one step higher and become a Supreme Court judge? "Who wouldn't" she replies.

Rachid, who is 43, is from a well-off, liberal family in NWFP. She was educated in prestigious co-educational institutions. This gave me immense confidence with the result that I experience no problem in working with men.

While graduating in law and political science she was an active sportswoman, and was captain of the volleyball team. "I still love sports but have little time left for them now," she says, though she joins in with her three school-age children, a daughter and two sons, whenever possible.

She did not meet her economist husband before their arranged marriage in Canada, where he had lived for

23 years. "He is a nice, cooperative and accommodating fellow," she says. "He never interferes in my sensitive professional duties."

They returned to Pakistan after three years of marriage. He now works in Peshawar with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

After returning to Pakistan in 1986, she was appointed solicitor to the NWFP government, before becoming a district and sessions judge in the city of Kohat and then a special judge for banking, customs and anti-corruption.

She advocates greater participation of women in all spheres of life. "Women must be comprehensively involved as they work more devotedly and honestly." "Nothing is impossible for women to achieve if they show audacity and dedication," she says. "In my view, a woman has more courage and stamina than a man in many respects. If she is a working woman, she raises children, looks after them and cares for her husband beside doing her job."

— Gemini News  
The writer is chief reporter on The News in Islamabad.

## NGO Statement on Culture and Religion

the elimination of all forms of sexual harassment, exploitation and trafficking in women, the elimination of gender bias in the administration of justice and the eradication of any conflicts which may arise between the rights of women and the harmful effects of certain traditional or customary practices, cultural prejudices and religious extremism.

We reiterate human rights and freedoms particularly of women, which are guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Declaration on Violence Against Women and other international human rights instruments.

We wish to emphasise that universal rights standards are rooted in many cultures and religions of our people. However, we wish to draw a distinction between institutionalised religion, perpetrated by the state, religious

institutions and religion in people's movements. Religious movements to be empowering must adhere to principles of non-violation of human rights.

While we advocate multiculturalism, all cultural and religious practices, which deviate from universally accepted human rights including women's rights must not be tolerated.

Culture and religion have been used systematically to violate women's fundamental human rights and their access to power and equality. Women's rights are increasingly threatened and violated by militant assertions of religious and ethnic identity, in normal and in crisis situations.

We are concerned by the use of religion by governments in the region and by political forces wanting to gain political and cultural control that had pitted state against people and communities against each other and is played out intensely against women.

We hold our governments

responsible for the failure to accord protection to women and children in crisis situations.

### We Call on our Governments

To ensure that the cultural, religious and ideological diversity of all communities is given expression in media and education in ways that do not include or violate the rights of women and minority communities.

To ensure that the army, police bureaucrats and other state apparatus provide effective safeguards to minorities and women.

To ensure that "Asian values or culture, religion and traditions" do not violate the rights of women and other repressed communities. While cultural and religious specificities may impact on universal standards, they cannot be used as a pretext to justify violations of rights of women, or be used as an excuse for non-ratification or making of reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

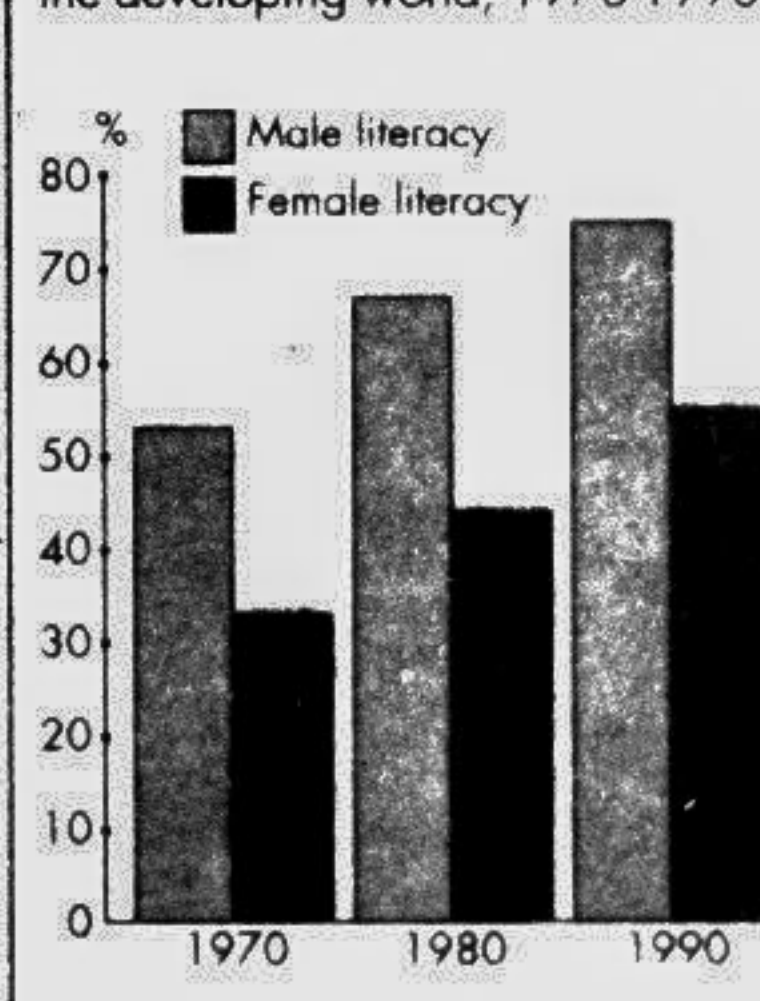
Statement was read out by Ms Saibah Ahmad for APWLD and APWAN.

— Ain O Salish Kendra

## The literacy ladder

### Gap persists

Male and female literacy rates for the developing world, 1970-1990



Source UNESCO, World education reports, 1991 and 1993.

### The big 10

Female literacy rates for the 10 most populous countries of the developing world (representing almost three quarters of its total population)

	% women literate 1990
Philippines	93
Mexico	85
Viet Nam	84
Brazil	81
Indonesia	75
China	68
Nigeria	40
India	34
Bangladesh	22
Pakistan	21

Sources: Literacy: UNESCO, Statistical yearbook 1993. Population: United Nations Population Division, World population prospects: the 1992 revision, 1993.

### Catching up

Twelve countries have lifted female literacy by 30 points in 20 years

	% women literate 1970	% women literate 1990	% pt. rise
Saudi Arabia	2	48	46
Jordan	29	70	41
Kenya	19	59	40
Tunisia	17	56	39
Zaire	22	61	39
Libya	13	50	37
Turkey	34	71	37
Algeria	11	46	35
Ghana	18	51	33
Indonesia	42	75	33
Iraq	18	49	31
Syria	20	51	31

Source UNESCO, Statistical yearbooks, 1993 and earlier years.