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Lives of Arab women restricted

by Lynn Stow

The lives of the vast majority of women in the Arab world are still narrowly circumscribed by entrenched male attitudes and social traditions. A recent report produced by the Minority Rights Group* examines the current situation in various Arab countries and documents the progress that has been made, notably in the areas of voting rights and educational opportunity. Such positive signs are counterbalanced by an extreme reluctance on the part of many governments to reform discriminatory laws relating to marriage and the family.

Women are caught in a Catch-22 situation: governments are anxious not to provoke unrest by introducing law too far in advance of public thinking, and men will have no reason to change their attitudes until such laws exist. In addition to this barrier, ideological arguments against the liberation of women are employed from differing political perspectives. Countries with avowedly socialist governments, such as Algeria, Iraq and Syria, see such liberation as following a "western bourgeois" model. In Egypt, on the other hand, it is claimed that women's emancipation "opens the door to communism, socialism and foreign ideologies".

The need for concentration on economic development undisturbed by radical social change provides a further rationalization for the low priority given to legislative equality for women. Both Egypt and Algeria use this argument, while Tunisia and South Yemen have succeeded in instituting far-reaching reforms without serious repercussions.

In the face of all these obstacles, what real achievements have been made, and who has benefited from them?

An educated woman has become less of a rarity as educational programmes



have expanded in recent years. In Oman, for instance, the number of pupils in primary schools grew from 900 in 1970 to 35000 in 1974. Of these, about 8000 were girls. In some other countries with similarly dramatic growth rates in education the proportion of girls to boys in school has dropped as absolute numbers have climbed.

Even the handful of girls who manage to push through to higher education may suffer discrimination at the university level. In Saudi Arabia, where women make up only 7% of the university population, the quality of their education is lower than for men. For example, the university at Riyadh offers no library access to women and books are brought out to them. Many of the women's classes are given by television for lack of suitable women teachers.

Educated women however represent only a small elite, and liberation cannot be measured in terms of their prospects, limited as they are. The overwhelming majority of women in Arab countries are illiterate, except in Lebanon, which has a female illiteracy rate of only 20% (men 13%). This compares with 75% illiteracy in Syria, 80% in Egypt, 85% in Jordan and 96½% in Libya. (The figures for men are 59% in Syria, 60% in Egypt, 50% in Jordan 62% and in Libya).

In 1975 all Algerian women sociologist described the situation of a typical Algerian woman in a rural or poor urban area in the following words:

"Their fathers, brothers, or paternal uncles, and later their husbands and sons, decide everything for them and manage their property. If a man abuses his authority, the woman will become his slave, in the strictest economic sense of the word...If he is good, she will have to give thanks every day of her

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World unions oppose apartheid

Trade unionists throughout the world joined in a protest against the racist apartheid policies of South Africa last week, Jan. 17-22.

The Canadian Labour Congress has urged Canadian trade unionists to contribute to a special fund to support black and coloured unionists in South Africa in their battle against apartheid.

The international protest was organized and supported by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the World Confederation of

Labour and the World Federation of Trade Unions.

The WCL stated that "the protest" should not be a symbolic action for one week only, but a sustained effort which will affect the economic and strategic interests of South Africa (a boycott on South Africa produce, cessation of arms deliveries and investments, etc.)"

CLC president Joe Morris has said that "South Africa is now at war. Lives are being lost daily and to the extent that if we do not act we must accept respon-

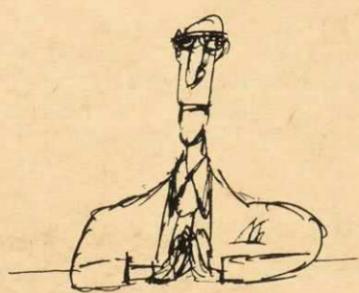
sibility for this situation."

"Apartheid is a crime against humanity and a threat to world peace. It is a whole network of discriminatory laws which deny human dignity to a majority of 20 million people, bestowing privilege on a minority of four million and, of course, yielding super profits to vested interests.

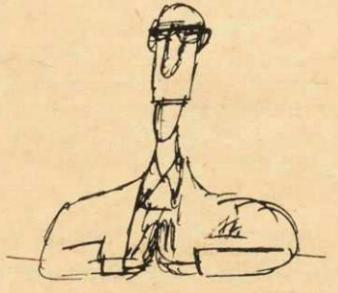
"Thus if we condemn apartheid, we must also condemn those investing in it who are directly and indirectly helping to maintain this rabid system."

The labour protest did not appear well organized or too active in Canada, however, throughout most of Europe protesters were quite active and "consciousness was high."

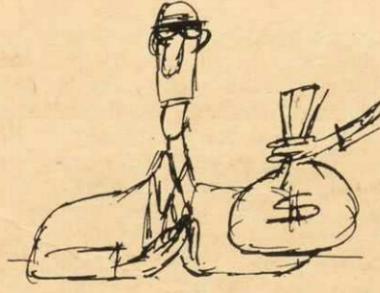
Dockworkers in Australia and Holland refused to handle ships transporting South African cargoes. In Italy, service to South African airlines was refused. Rallies which were held throughout the world with the best success in Western Europe.



AS A CANADIAN I FIND APARTHEID ABHORRENT TO MY DEMOCRATIC SENSIBILITIES



AND, AS A BUSINESSMAN I SEE MY SOUTH AFRICAN SUPER-PROFITS A DIRECT RESULT OF THAT VICIOUS SYSTEM!



IN FACT I FIND THESE PROFITS SO DISTASTEFUL THAT...



I SPEND THEM AS FAST AS I CAN!

MC