

Nabeela al-Mulla

Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Kuwait

“Women in Diplomacy”

17 February 2007

I would like to address, first, the report itself. Rima—I said it to you privately once and I hope you don't mind if I mention it here in a very general sense—you know my opinion on the reports and in my very humble opinion I think that it is a landmark for the region. I don't think that there has been a comparable report on other regions that has received such attention and sensationalism. I know that there was one done on Latin America and other regions we discussed before, but because the Middle East is very much the focus of attention for various reasons—our political problems, our economic resources—I think that is the reason why these reports gained so much attention in the media. The ownership of the reports, free from officialdom, is to the credit of the people of the region, and I credit all of you who participated in writing the report in that aspect. This is the first time that we own our own reports; it is not from the outside, it is our own. “Question of ownership” is often a term used by the United Nations in terms of development and empowerment. You have to own your own process of development, and I think that we are on the right path, at least by setting the ground with this kind of analysis.

That was the good point. The bad news, however, is that as with previous reports my major concern is the focus on the totality of the Arab world. You mention the fact that there was difficulty in considering MENA or MESA or whatnot, the Arab world from the ocean to the Gulf. The region is of such diversity in political development or political stability, in economic development, as well as cultural values, to interpret statistical findings or figures in a uniform way and to chart the way ahead. I'll give you one very simple example and that is with the genital mutilation. I hadn't heard of genital mutilation due to my ignorance and the fact that I am far away. I didn't know that such a thing existed and is attributed to the Arab world. I think that it is an African culture rather than an Arab culture, but it affects Arab populations that it is put there in this report and it is an issue that we have to discuss. I'm only underlining the diversity to

show that some issues pertaining to a certain region that has more in common with other regions than with the rest of the Arab world.

The current status of women in diplomacy: women ambassadors are scarce. We are a scarce commodity on the global scene. When I was in New York recently, a couple of months ago, we were 18—the largest number ever in the 60 year life-span of the United Nations. There are now 14 out of a membership of 192. Most of these 14 come from countries of the South. I have never seen in my career (and I don't think if you go back to records you would see it either) a French ambassador to the UN or a British ambassador. The only two Americans were political appointees; they were not career, Jeane Kirkpatrick and Madeleine Albright. And, of course, China and Russia are not represented by women there. I remember a Belgian ambassador one time, and I think her colleagues in the European Union resented the fact that she was in their midst because they couldn't tell jokes anymore since there was a woman with them. I was quizzed lots of times about the representation of the women in Kuwait and their participation. One time there was a lady from the East, from Japan to be specific, when I was presenting the report of Kuwait a little bit too harshly about women and their participation. I was a little bit fed up with countries that judge me too harshly compared with what they are doing to their own. I think in all my career I met one Japanese ambassador, of course there are others, Madame Ogata is one well known figure, but not as career ambassadors. I look and I don't see them around. Where are they? That's why I'm saying the women ambassadors are really scarce globally and not only on the Arab scene. We as member states of the United Nations, we often demand of the UN that the Secretariat should include a higher percentage of women. I believe we always say 35% of employment; that it has to be women. But the member states, the states themselves, do not apply that criterion to themselves. We demand as member states of the UN Secretariat what we cannot perform ourselves, of having that kind of number in our midst.

I would like to focus on the region that I know best, if you would allow me, it's not being parochial but I know the figures better, that is the Gulf Cooperation Council. We note the relative rapid rise of women in this profession, diplomacy. I take pride that I was the first woman ambassador in 1993 for the region and in 2004 Kuwait was the first Arab country to be represented by a woman since the establishment of the UN. I often

look at my colleagues at the UN when they welcomed me in 2004: "Oh it's very good that we have a woman diplomat." And I look at my Egyptian colleague and my Moroccan colleague, that have been there since the inception of the UN, and what happened to your women? They've been there in the service years before we even got our independence in 1961, so where are you? Please encourage them to come along. I believe lots of strides were made since then. Since 2005, speaking again about the GCC, Oman sent the first Arab woman as ambassador to DC. The current president of the General Assembly, Sheikha Haya, she's the first Arab woman to occupy the high position of being the president of the General Assembly. Most Arabs that presided over the GA were men from various countries.

I have to give credit to those countries that have quite a number of women in this service, primarily Egypt. In all my career I see Egyptian women everywhere I go. I worked with them in South Africa, in Mozambique, in Mauritius, New York as junior diplomats, quite a number of them. I think they were the first, and they are all over. There is a lot of regard for the women that are in the profession. I recall Amr Mousa one time told us he wanted to make the rotation of the ambassadors around and there was a lady ambassador to Rwanda. He said to her, "Your next rotation will be in Stockholm." She turned around and said, "Why? You're not satisfied with my work?" He thought that he was making her a favor, sending her to a place that would be more enjoyable as a way of life. But she thought that she faced the challenges so well why should she have to go to an easier place when she can perform so well in a difficult posting. That is to the credit of the Egyptian Foreign Service. I've met lots of women and I have very high regard to those I worked with from Tunisia, from Morocco, from Syria, Lebanon (I think I met one only). Iraq, I think they were under the thumb. When I met the Iraqi Chargé d'Affaires when I was posted in Vienna she complained to me that she was so high up in the hierarchy and only recently have they started to recognize the women in the service. You can get a high position only if you were associated with the party and whatnot, but if you were only career that is not necessarily a way for you to get to a higher position. I am very glad to see them all around. I see them in lots of conferences and I'm very gratified that I can work with them now.

The current figures for the GCC in the diplomatic profession: I am told that in Bahrain 10% of the diplomats are ladies. There is one that is nominated for ambassadorship and we have a couple of them that work in London, Cairo, and Kuwait. Kuwait has six diplomats. We have one of them who is Deputy Chief of Mission in Brussels with the GCC Mission to the European Union. There are others working in Washington, Geneva, and New York. In Oman, 20% are women. They have two ambassadors. As I mentioned earlier, one is in DC and the other one is in the Netherlands. A third one is at the level of Ambassador Director at Headquarters. For Qatar, I heard recently after I left, there is a new Deputy Chief of Mission in New York. The United Arab Emirates has six: in New York, Tunisia, Germany, and Geneva. I mention these figures without addressing the fact that the women are also occupying a very high position. We have one of them here, Sheikha Lubna, who is a very energetic minister of the cabinet who helped a lot in getting the agreement between the GCC and the European Union to go on fast track. We hope to be signing the free trade agreement by May if all goes well. I should not forget our own Minister of Transport, Dr Masouma al-Mubarak, who is a university professor of economics and a graduate of Denver. The fact that Condoleeza Rice recognized her over and above Prince Saud al-Faisal might be to her credit not for anything but because she came from the same university. I am very happy and I think that in the years ahead we will see more participation by women. In addition to that we have Dr Thuraya Obeid, the head of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities. For Kuwait we have quite a number of representatives. The chief representative of FAO in Rome, Lamiya Saqaf, she is also chairman of the Group of 77 and China. Dr Sabeeka Abdul Razzaq in Geneva, she is the head of our compensation office. The head of the information offices in DC and in Lebanon and we have others that we did not count here because they are not in the foreign ministry, but they are all over. The same applies to the other countries of the Gulf and to the other Arab countries. Mentioning that, I want to pay special recognition to Rima Khalaf. Rima, it is such a pride to be working with you at UNDP. You've been of tremendous help to us when we networked about representation. I'm very gratified that another woman of the Arab world, Amat al-Alim, took over and I wish her good luck, but thank you for all of the work that you have done on this report.

What are the barriers to advancement? Previous speakers talked about the societal, personal difficulties as being major barriers. The question of balancing family duties with the profession is a premium issue, noted globally, especially for married women in terms of estrangement, relocation, and schools for the children. Of most of the women that I came to know in my profession, there were very few that were accompanied by their husbands. It's either that their husbands were back and forth or they were divorced or they were single. I think that the profession does not appeal to the traditional standard of a family relocating for job abroad. It takes a lot, not only for the women but also for the men themselves. They have to come to grips with the fact that it is the woman who is the center of attention. How can you address an invitation and say, for example: "Dr. Rima Khalaf and Partner"? Some of the men will not accept it. It's not as dignified. It's very difficult to do that. It's really something personal that we have to work out ourselves, to work it out for our own personal satisfaction as well as for the value of that entity which we call family: to stay together, to satisfy the man and to be really a partner, and not to be criticized for being just a tag-along. There was an interesting comment made by a colleague from Botswana. She was the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps in Namibia when I went there in 1994 and she told me that her major difficulty with her husband was that he insists on attending the spouses' meeting and he was the only man. It's not only that he was attending, but also that he asked her for the recipes. She told him, "Okay, fine, you want to be part of the spouses' meetings, then take the responsibility of preparing the dish." But she ended up doing the two chores. It's these interesting things in life that you see around and you really have to be very careful what you choose as a profession. Do you want it? Is it good for you, not only as a career but also as a human being? I know in some foreign ministries, it changed only recently in India, I was told that if a single woman is planning to get married she will submit two pieces of paper, one for a resignation and one for a request of marriage, and one of them will be accepted and she can stay in the service. And this is for India, which has a long tradition of civil service, so it's not an easy thing to maneuver. You have also the question of moving the children around and the system of education, especially if it is a hardship post. I know, for example, some of my colleagues when they go to Tehran, they will leave the women and the children back in Kuwait so their education is not

disrupted. That is not the case when you have a *lycée* or an American school or an English school. The relocation becomes easier. So that's one major aspect to think of in the profession.

The other aspect of it is that of values and outlook, especially by other colleagues. I will tell you about my own experience that I went through. The diplomatic profession is usually associated with the social policies. When I went first to the United Nations, I was assigned to the third committee that deals with social and humanitarian issues. Every committee at the United Nations has a label. The third committee was the "Ladies Committee." The first committee was "Disarmament." You hardly see any women there except, I remember at the time and I was really very proud to meet her, Mrs. Myrdal, who got a Nobel Peace Prize for her work in disarmament. The economic commission has very few, legal as well. You mostly find the women in the third committee. That changed when the third committee started to be politicized. We had the resolution on equating Zionism with racism. Ah...all the male ambassadors attended our meeting. We even had the media covering it. Patrick Moynahan thought it was the best opportunity to start off his campaign for senator. We started to feel shoved aside because, oh really, this is a political committee. Since then the committee has had more of a political flavor. To give you an indication, I started with the third committee but I graduated, I would say, to be Chief of Kuwait Delegation to ACRS, one of the multilateral committees following the Madrid Peace Conference—Arms Control and Regional Security. I think there was enough confidence in my performance that I became chief negotiator on Arms Control and Regional Security. Not that I have anything against refugees, but I was glad that I wasn't put on the committee for refugees. It is asked of woman to prove herself more than of a man in order to be confided in and to have that high profile.

The other aspect of the difficulties that face women in our profession is the competition or the marginalization internationally, especially if you come from a small country like Kuwait. There is always jockeying for higher posts or for a committee. If Kuwait wants to be a chairman maybe I will be put aside if Iraq wants to be chairman because Iraq is bigger, or if Egypt wants to be there. This kind of marginalization, unfortunately I see it in lots of aspects and not only in the professional field. Sometimes it is said that women are their worst enemies. We don't have that solidarity with each

other to help against this idea of being marginalized. I think we are getting there, through personal effort. I think we might succeed to get over this hurdle.

Suggestions for empowerment? We go back to the perennial question of education—education by setting an example, by enticement, to have an appreciation for participation in the diplomatic profession. I'm not saying I set myself as an example but I think being there helped in a way, even if it was in a small way, for others to come into the profession. I'm really glad to see youngsters; one of them was under my patronage. I fought for her to join me. I assigned her to a very difficult task and that is following the work of the IAEA during the crisis of the DPRK and Iran. And I told her, "I'm so happy that you are already there. You are on a faster track than what it took me. And I hope you will be there and you will bring others on a yet faster track." So I think setting an example is very important thing. I'm satisfied also to see women from all GCC countries. For the first time ever, they were all represented in the 60th session of the General Assembly. I invited all of them, only the ladies; the men were really upset. One of them, the Saudi delegate, was a very interesting person. She was a professor and it was her first time to see how she can tailor the attendance of women in such a way that it will not infringe on the sensitivities of the officialdom. My advice is that you don't have to go through the front door. Come to the window. It is wide open, and you can make your way into the room. Once you prove that you are an asset here you can encourage the officialdom to relent and it will be easier to change their views. I was very happy to see all of them there, all five.

Another suggestion is to encourage informal quotas. I don't agree with quotas at all. I think quotas create a very bad reaction on the part of our society. The minute you mention quotas, up in arms! Introduce it informally. We did that with the program that UNITAR introduced to train young diplomats. I must say to the credit of UAE, they were the first one to negotiate this program with UNITAR. For a period of two to three weeks all the young diplomats were coming to the UN. We were the second GCC country to join them. The first year that we joined I noticed that in our delegation there were no women, so Ambassador Kamal turned to me and said, "How can you do that to your own people, your own women?" I said that I didn't realize it. It all happened when I wasn't yet in New York. What Rima calls "moral-suasion"; I told the undersecretary,

“You can't have all the 10 men. Have at least one woman. And if you want to bring up the number, okay, have 11, two of them women.” We succeeded in doing that, so now in our delegation it's the norm that we have at least two women part of the delegation that comes from headquarters. It was greater satisfaction to see that they were married women with children. One of them was pregnant at the time and I said, “How fantastic! She can prove here's womanhood in all its glory, being a career person.” That is the biggest satisfaction one can get, if she can get that kind of accord back home.

Another suggestion is to institutionalize the guidance locally or under the supervision of educational institutions abroad. Here I want to put in a word, Serra, what you have done with this program al-Muthabara. I think that is one of the things we can work on. Starting on your grounds with the UAE, maybe we will join you as we did with the UNITAR program. It is great to have a focused program that will have the help of institutions, maybe the Center here, and to have training courses for women of the region in particular fields like diplomacy or finance. I think that is one of the ideas. Knowing you, how you got this thing off the ground, all of you, I think you will succeed in doing it.

My last point is networking. Every time I meet my new staff in any embassy I say, “We'll have to do three things: network, network, and network.” Network within the embassy; network between the embassy and headquarters; network between us and other embassies. It's very important. For what we can't follow, we will ask a friendly embassy what happened in that meeting, so you don't have to waste your time. Network with the women. Everywhere that I go, usually women meet as spouses. It's the wives that meet rather than the woman ambassadors, the professionals that meet. But slowly this is taking ground and I'm doing it now in Brussels. Defying all protocol I asked for the list of women ambassadors. They are on my priority list to visit because I think we can work together to break these artificial barriers of the regional groups, of the agenda set. I had a fantastic working relationship, without naming them, to ambassadors to the European Union. I was alerted to problems before they arose or became issues between the Western and the non-aligned groups. We can work together. Once you set in your mind that you have friends and you don't have rigidity, you can do better in your career and in your life.