BACKGROUND PAPER:

SOCHUM

Women’s Rights in the Middle East

“I raise up my voice—not so I can shout but so that those without a voice can be heard...we cannot succeed when half of us are held back.” - Malala Yousafzai

Introduction: The issue of Women’s rights in the Middle East is a complicated and diverse issue, involving social, cultural, and religious controversy in a region known for sticking to traditional and cultural norms. The United Nations has been trying to handle this issue since its first year of establishment. Within the first year of the establishment of the United Nations, the Economic and Social Council established its commission on the status of Women as the principal global policy-making body, dedicated exclusively to gender equality and advancement of women. Among its earliest accomplishments was ensuring gender neutral language in the draft Universal Declaration of Human Rights. “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (The Declaration of Human Rights). In 1979, the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which is often described as an International Bill of Rights for Women. In its 30 articles, the Convention explicitly defines discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. The Convention targets culture and tradition as influential forces shaping gender roles and family relations, and it is the first human rights treaty to affirm the reproductive rights of women.

Despite action taken by the UN to improve women’s rights throughout the world, the cultural, social, and religious norms of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have prevented most UN reform to take effect. Western countries

Background & History: The issue of Women’s Rights in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) reaches farther back than the establishment of Islam. In the pre-Islamic Middle East, there were patterns of homicidal abuse of women and girls, including instances of killing female infants considered to be a liability. The Qur’an mentions that the Arabs in Jahiliya (the period of ignorance or pre-Islamic period) used to bury their daughters alive. It is generally accepted that Islam changed the structure of Arab society and to a large degree unified the people, reforming and standardizing gender roles throughout the region. According to Islamic studies professor William Montgomery Watt, Islam improved the status of
women by "instituting rights of property ownership, inheritance, education and divorce."

**Current Situation**: Since the rise of the Arab Spring, women have slowly seen more rights, but the situation is still bleak. A 2013 poll found that the worst Middle Eastern country, when it comes to women’s rights, is Egypt, with 99.3 percent of girls subjected to sexual harassment. The best country in this poll is Comoros, where only 3 women hold seats in parliament, out of a total of 33. One in seven girls in the Middle East marries before they turn 18. The highest rates of child marriage are seen in the poorest countries—Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, and South Sudan—where annual per capita incomes in 2011 were less than US $2,000.5 One-third or more of the girls in these countries marry before their 18th birthday (Population Reference Bureau). Commonly in MENA, women’s personal autonomy is severely limited due to deeply entrenched patriarchal family systems. For example, in most Middle East nations, it is exceedingly difficult for a woman to file for divorce, polygamy is often legal and socially acceptable, and there are even laws that condone “honor killings” for transgressions of perceived improper conduct.

The current UN-Women strategic plan for the period 2014-17 identifies women’s economic and political empowerment ending violence against girls and women as top priorities. Researchers fear that majority of violations go unreported due to shame, fear, or ignorance of the legal systems in some countries. More often real action takes place when there has been international attention drawn to it.

**Bloc Positions**: Many countries do not agree with the policies in place for women in the Middle East, but most have done little to actually change anything. While countries like the United States have initiatives like MEPI's (The U.S-Middle East Partnership Initiative) Women's Empowerment projects, they have done little to get direct action from the governments in the region. The EU has taken a slightly more active role, writing a European Parliament resolution that included strong language on women's rights in the region (2014/2229(INI)).

**Committee Mission**: to protect and strengthen the rights of Women in the Middle East and North African region while being sensitive to cultural, religious and traditional norms

**Questions to Consider**:
1.) Where should the efforts for change lie? Who should enact these changes and where would the funding come from?

2.) Is there one general solution to a certain issue or more of a regional or state solution? How can resolutions be tailored to fit the solution?
3.) How can the reporting of issues be improved? How can other countries help out internationally?

In your research, please consider your country’s stance on the issues of underage marriage, sexual harassment, reproductive rights, education, and unfair and biased employment, as well as the ways in which each of these issues effects the economy.

Sources for Further Research:
http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/MENARegion/Pages/MenaRegion20122013.aspx
unwomen.org
amnestyusa.org
ohchr.org