

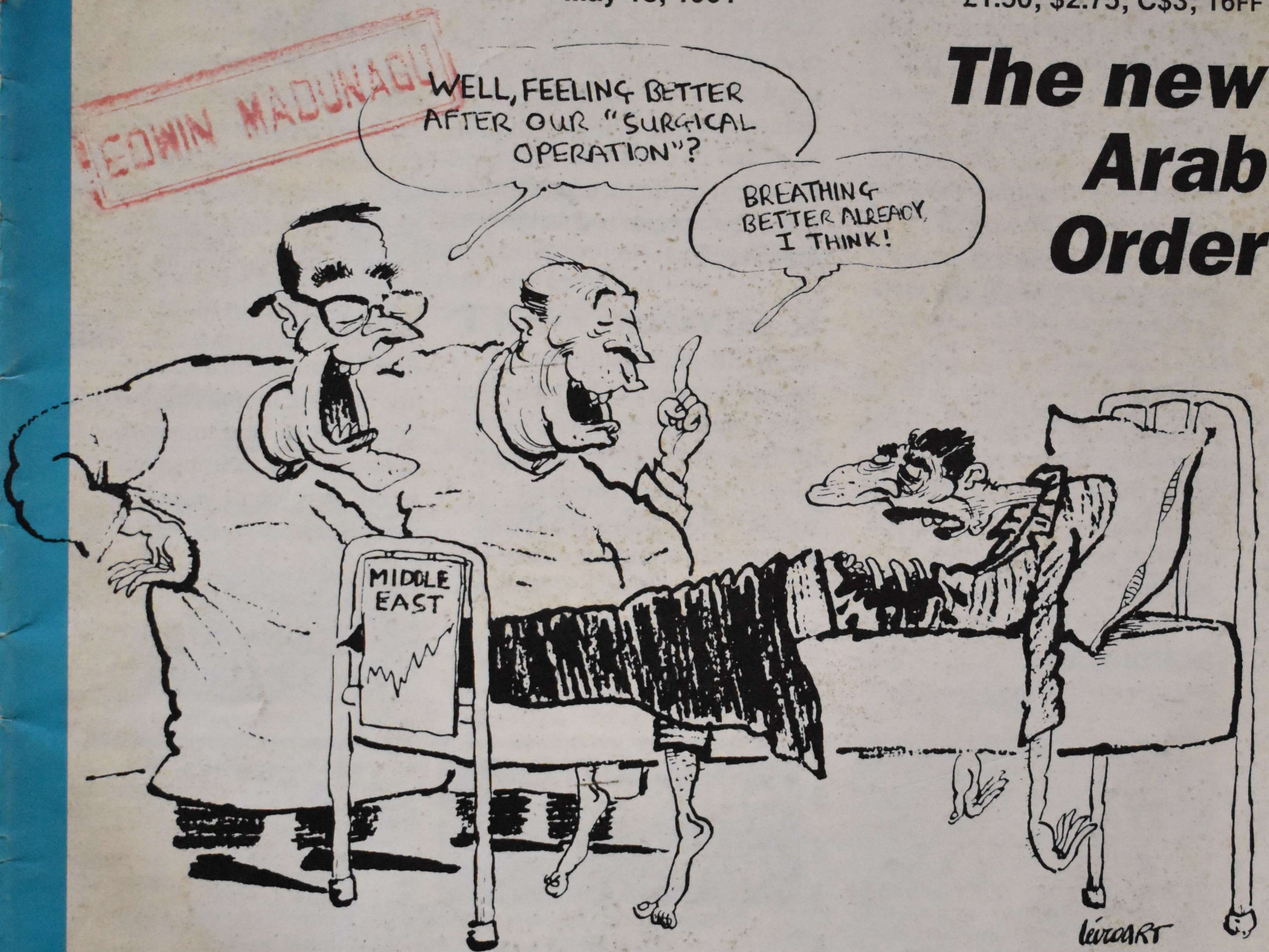
International VIEWPOINT

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The new Arab Order



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MIDDLE EAST

The New Arab order
and the Israeli obstacle

— *Salah Jaber*

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compared to 69 years).¹³

How is the combination of strong economic growth and a deterioration in the situation of women to be explained? The reason is that the "responsibility system" which went into general effect after 1983, which means that each family disposes of its own surplus product above a fixed norm, while it has permitted appreciable gains in productivity, has developed to the detriment of social gains of which women were the prime beneficiaries. For example, the disbanding of the work brigades and rural communes has meant the collapse of health organization in the countryside.

Decline in paid work

At the same time the new organization of work has meant a decline in paid work for women and thus of economic recognition within society. "The responsibility system has displaced the sources of women's income from work outside the home towards domestic activities, where there is no way of evaluating their contribution." Between 1978 and 1985 the share of net income of peasant households derived from individual plots has risen from 26.8% to 81.1%.¹⁴

Furthermore, the new insecurity contributes to reinforcing the preference for male children, as a guarantee for the parents' old age. In this context there is nothing astonishing in the fact that the authoritarian measures introduced in 1979 to promote "one-child families" led to an increase in the infanticide of girl children. According to some authors, infantile mortality of girl children went from 37.7 per thousand in 1979 to 67.2 per thousand in 1985.¹⁵

Even if these figures are exaggerated, the tendency clearly exists: indeed it has been recognized by the authorities who today authorize a second child if the first is a girl. To these factors it is necessary to add a political element: since 1979 the improvement of women's lot has ceased to be a government priority. On the contrary, the authorities are calling on women to "reinforce the domestic economy".¹⁶

Neither traditional prejudices, nor the place of women in "oriental" civilizations, nor under-development provide a full explanation for the missing women in vast regions of the Third World. In fact, we can see that egalitarian economic development, and the participation of women in paid work, reduces the demographic anomaly.

This participation, however, is not only determined by economic factors. For example, the level of education plays an essential role in the demographic outcome. And while there is a connection between levels of education and participation in social economic activity, this is neither automatic nor one-way. Thus, as we have seen, in India's Kerala state there is a particularly high women/men ratio

(103). Furthermore, female life expectancy at birth is 72 years there, as against 67 for men. However, the participation of women in economic activity is not especially high. On the other hand, there is a level of literacy (71%) which is higher than in any other Indian state, the average being 26%, or even China (56%), where two thirds of the illiterate are women.

This specific case has a long history, which provides some insights into the role of the family structure in relation to the property system. In a large part of Kerala, inheritance is matrilinear, which strengthens women's position. In the north of India on the other hand, the right of succession discriminates against the girls. In fact, since the 19th century, "in Travencore [part of what is now Kerala] as in other populations in the south, the proportion of the sexes has been closer to European standards than to those in the north."¹⁸ In the same period, female infanticide was very widespread in Punjab.¹⁹ We can see from this that ancient socio-cultural peculiarities can work either in favour of (as in Kerala) or against (as in northern India and China) women.

Political action

Political action, including efforts by public authorities and a level of mobilization and organization among women themselves, is an important factor. In 1817, the Queen of Travencore noted that "the state must take charge of the total cost of its people's education in order to avoid any backwardness in the diffusion of education."²⁰ At the start of the 19th century, the independent kingdoms of Travencore and Cochin, which are at the origin of Kerala state, enjoyed a public education system ahead of its time. It should be added that in the last decades of this century this heritage has been systematically developed by the left-wing forces that rule the state (the Communist Party won power in 1957), by putting emphasis on education and health services, and giving special attention to the position of women.²¹

The example of Cuba also shows the relative autonomy of political factors; if the male/female ratio is still one of the poorest in Latin America, the trend since the 1950s has nonetheless been favoura-

ble to women. The ratio was 91.6 in 1950, 94.8 in 1960, 95.1 in 1970, 97.8 in 1980 and 98.8 today. We have observed a similar tendency in China before the reforms of the 1980s.²²

Examples such as Kerala, Black Africa, Cuba or pre-1980 China show that under-development does not inevitably lead to the inequality of women in the face of death. Ancient socio-cultural prejudices can be combated by political measures backed up by the mobilization and self-organization of women. On the other hand, economic growth unaccompanied by appropriate social and political measures can lead to growing inequality of the sexes as is seen in northern India and in post-1980 China.

In the last analysis

However, it is impossible, in the last analysis, to escape from economic determinism. While non-egalitarian growth can reinforce discrimination against women, generalized impoverishment certainly has even more dramatic effects. As can be seen currently in Sub-Saharan Africa, where "stabilization programmes" and "structural adjustment plans" are causing unprecedented misery and leading to a deterioration in the lot of women, through the dismantling of public services with the consequent effects on women's employment, education and health, the exodus from the countryside and the swelling of the informal sector in the big cities and all the rest.²³

In this field, that of the inequality of women in the face of death, as in all others, Third World countries have ever less room for manoeuvre. Nonetheless, Amartya K. Sen has shown that the growth of the overall resources of a poor country does not necessarily reduce the misery of the majority of its inhabitants, notably of women; for this to take place there must also be a more just distribution within society and the family.

This is not just a moral issue, but a political necessity. A real alternative to dependence and "the development of under-development" is impossible without the mobilization of the great mass of the disinherited around unifying egalitarian objectives, which must by their nature also be feminist.★

13. World Bank, op. cit., table 32.

14. Nahid Aslanbeigui and Gale Summerfield, "Impact of the Responsibility System on Women in Rural China, An Application of Sen's Theory of Entitlements", *World Development* 17 (3), 1989, p. 344.

15. Banister, *China's Changing Population*, table 4.12.

16. Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed; Women in Contemporary China*, Stanford University Press, 1984; Aslanbeigui and Summerfield op. cit., p. 347.

17. Drèze and Sen, op. cit., p. 222. H. Qi, "Do Women Hold up Half the Sky?" *Beijing Review*, 29 (9), 1986, p.4.

18. Quoted by Drèze and Sen op. cit., p. 224.

19. Monica Das Gupta, "Selective Discrimination Against Female Children in Rural Punjab, India", *Population and Development Review*, 13 (1), 1987, p.88.

20. Quoted in Census of India, 1931, XXVIII, Trivan-

drum, 1932, p. 301.

21. On socio-cultural policies in Kerala, see *Vivant Univers*, 383, Sept-Oct 1989 and *Monthly Review*, January 1991.

22. *Anuario Estadístico de Cuba*, 1987, p. 57.

23. Janice Jiggins, op. cit., pp. 953-963; Andrée Michel, "African Women, Banks and Development. A Feminist Approach", *Peace Research* 22 (3), 1990, pp. 23-32.

The present situation in Sub-Saharan Africa can be summed up in several figures. 25 countries are under the control of World Bank and IMF loans. The impact: 25% of food consumed, there are 1 billion starving people (of 450 million inhabitants), 50% of import income goes on servicing the debt and there was a decline of 25% in living standards between 1980 and 1990.