

Princess Zahra Visits Canada for AKFC Book Launch

In early September, Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC) was graced by the presence of Princess Zahra Aga Khan, who came to Ottawa to launch a new book co-published by AKFC and UNIFEM entitled *Speaking Out: Women's economic empowerment in South Asia*.

Over 250 volunteers, donors, dignitaries and development practitioners attended the launch and dinner at the Chateau Laurier. Guests included Huguette Labelle, President of the Canadian International Development Agency; Janet Zukowsky, Vice-President, Partnership Branch, Canadian International Development Agency; Ameer Esmail, Chairman, AKFC National Committee; Aziz M. Bhaloo, President, Ismaili Council for Canada, and Member, AKFC National Committee; Maxine Olson, Deputy Director, UNIFEM; and Maureen O'Neil, Chairperson, International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development.

Several diplomatic representatives also attended including: Mufleh R. Osmany, High Commissioner for Bangladesh; P. K. Budhwar, High Commissioner for India; Farouk Rana, High Commissioner for Pakistan; Fadhil Mbagi, High Commissioner for Tanzania; and Tibamanyawmene Mushanga, High Commissioner for Uganda.

In her remarks, Princess Zahra pointed out that Canada had "long been a pioneer and an active participant in women's development."

Princess Zahra praised the editors of the book, saying that "they have written a volume which is perceptive, innovative, of high intellectual standards, and yet accessible. It is a much-needed addition to development literature and an important tool for practitioners. It will doubtlessly become a part of the canon for women's development projects in the future."



Address: Princess Zahra on women's economic empowerment

Princess Zahra said: "The woman of the developing world is strong. She works hard, and gains little. She is a world expert on poverty, frugality, selflessness and domestic tragedy. She is also an expert on resourcefulness, courage and perseverance. She represents a large percentage of the earth's population, thus shaping much of our planet's future. She deserves our support, both through our understanding of the struggles of her daily life, and through our sharing of the tools which we develop to ease these struggles."

Speaking Out breaks new ground in the understanding of gender and economic development issues by focusing on the economic empowerment strategies used by women in South Asia. It is the result of a research project initiated by Aga Khan Foundation Canada and carried out by a team of women researchers from South Asia, led by Marilyn Carr, Chief, Economic Empowerment Section, UNIFEM; Martha Alter Chen, Director,

Program on Non-Governmental Institutions, Harvard University; and Renana Jhabvala, former Secretary of the Self Employed Women's Association in India.

Women make up the majority of the world's poor, but too often they are invisible and silent. Although there has been much debate about women's empowerment at the theoretical level, until now, very little has been written about the actual experiences of women's organizations working at the grassroots.

The authors examined seven women's organizations and found that economic empowerment cannot be separated from overall empowerment — it is often the first step in achieving political empowerment and structural changes which will lead to long-term and sustained benefits for women; and that the role of women's organizations in achieving economic empowerment is critical — they help increase women's



Speaking Out: Huguette Labelle, Ameer Esmail, and Princess Zahra

income, provide an economic safety net, and increase women's bargaining power in the household and with public policy-makers.

As governments around the world cut back on the services they provide to their citizens, non-governmental organizations are taking on an increasingly important role in providing basic social services.

Noting that many women in Muslim societies in which the Aga Khan Development Network works have been denied opportunities, Princess Zahra explained that "one of the Aga Khan Development Network's aims is to return to the Islamic tradition of structuring society around the equality of women."

Princess Zahra stressed that "their empowerment is a crucial step in engendering the self-confidence to demonstrate that the highest reaches of female education and professionalism are compatible with social morality and thus returning women to the place of

honour which Islam accords them . . . The Muslim world must once again seek its own answers to the difficult questions of modernization. Not only is women's development an essential part of this process, but women in the Muslim world must take on their share of questions, and find their share of the answers."

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"We can learn a lot from the case studies presented in *Speaking Out* — from the challenges faced and the achievements made by the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, by the Self

Employed Women's Association in India, and by other notable South Asian NGOs," she added. "The most striking lessons that I have learnt about these organizations is how they recognize that women at the grassroots — not outsiders, however good their intentions — must lead the empowerment process. Why? Because they know their problems, their needs, and their daily, local realities better than anyone else ever could . . . and because they will lead this process at a pace and in a style that is appropriate for their own social and cultural environment. And while doing this, they will define what empowerment means — in their own terms, not terms borrowed from the West."

After the launch, Princess Zahra participated in the first of a series of workshops held across the country to share the results of the book with social development experts in Canada. Over 200 people attended the workshops in Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver.

Princess Zahra in Bangladesh and Singapore



Visiting an AKF-funded rural development project in Bangladesh



At the Aga Khan School, Dhaka



With members of Jamati institutions in Singapore