

# **CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

**John Hopkins University**

**Istanbul - June 19-20, 2013**

## **The role of NGOs in advancing CSR in the Middle East**

Sa'eda Kilani

MENA Representative & Researcher  
Business and Human Rights Resource Center

For the past two months, orange employees in Jordan have been protesting the low wages and lack of benefits. The company has been ignoring their demands successfully. When I talked to one of the protesting leaders, he told me it was very difficult for them to get the news published in any private or public media means, even in the independent blogs.

A major part of our work is input and seeking company responses from articles and news that appear in the media or released by NGOs. This is not easy in our region. There are many hurdles that make our job difficult and therefore exposing businesses violations of human rights remain largely buried.

Most media shy away from reporting on business and human rights issues largely because of the obvious reasons:

- media is owned by these businesses in our region and others have reservations reporting on violations made by the private sector
- government owned media means have a close relationship with the private sector – a large number of entrepreneurs and leading business people are either ex-officials or hired in honorary posts by the governments
- Journalists have also close relationship with the business sector because of the advertisement.
- If there were reporting on violations, then in most cases the name of the factory or company does not appear in the article which makes it hard for us to seek company responses.

Therefore, most stories are general, either about migrant workers that had become trendy lately, or child labour. We rarely find good stories about oil companies, discrimination against women in the workplace, or responsible investment.

Most NGOs in the MENA countries focus their work on violations committed by the government. It's very rare to see NGOs specialize on the private sector's responsibility towards respecting human rights. This is mostly because the idea of business and human rights is still a new subject to the region. I met several successful NGOs representatives since I started work with the center in more than ten conferences last year, explained to them in details the mission of the center and proposed we cooperate. They are active and try to contribute, but until now, their contributions have nothing to do with business and human rights.

Criticism of the private sector comes in the form of personal attacks especially in relation to the way wealthy entrepreneurs spend their money instead of donating them to charity and to general causes.

There are around 200,000 rich persons in our region with 2 trillion dollars, but they have no bearing on development and their contributions are unheard of in the fields of development, democracy, freedoms, or charity in general. At present, there is over \$1 trillion in Arab money outside the region as investors went abroad for investment opportunities.

When the oil prices scored a record high in 2007 and until mid 2008, local and international news of Arab spending extravaganzas made headlines around the world. Half a billion English pounds (around a billion dollars) of Arab money has been spent on athletes in England. More than 200 million British pounds were invested in a British soccer team by one of the wealthy Arabs - while Arab soccer teams have no resources whatsoever, some of them hold other jobs to make ends meet. Others are registered as garbage collectors to enable them to receive a monthly salary to live from.

Arab women's wealth had reached 350 billion dollars, most of whom are Saudis. Women's rising wealth did not contribute

either to enhancing human rights. By sheer coincidence, I found a dedicated wealthy Arab genuinely calling on the rich and wealthy to donate. In August 2010, Saudi businessman, Abdullah bin Marei bin Mahfouz, called upon his fellow well-to-do to give one third of their wealth for charity and follow the example of several American businessmen who donate hefty amounts to a variety of causes. Bin Mahfouz was the first to take the initiative and he already donated one third of his fortune to *Kinda Charity Organization* in order to be spent on health and education projects, but it doesn't seem that others followed suit..