

# Arab Women and Armed Conflicts : Which Sustainable Development ?

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Armed conflicts are a burden on societies and humanity at large. In addition to the heavy human and material losses, conflicts squander the opportunities of sustainable development and have adverse repercussions at the economic, social, cultural and psychological levels. Moreover, preparing for conflicts and engaging in arming and militarization waste essential resources required to achieve sustainable human development, raise education, health and economic development levels, combat poverty and create job opportunities. Although conflicts have negative impact on both women and men, this impact varies by gender. Conflicts make the entire society bargain the developmental priorities and spending on arming becomes a priority at the expense of social spending and sustainable development. Simultaneously, demands that call for the development of women status become marginal, which leads to postponing the solution of pending social issues for the benefit of conflict that will have its own life and dynamics.

This paper presents a description and an analysis of the relationship between militarization and conflict, on one hand, and opportunities of sustainable development based on gender analysis and their different impacts on women and men, on the other. As such, the paper focuses on relation between spending on arming and human development and gender related indicators in addition to the direct impacts of conflicts and arming on sustainable development, long-term developmental impacts and opportunities for the achievement of developmental practical sustainability in a society having an inclination to arming, militarization and conflict in comparison with other societies.

Moreover, numerous reports and studies further emphasize on the relation between liberation from occupation, fear and conflict and liberation from material and psychological needs. Development, at its core, is equivalent with freedom. Linking

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between these two concepts is necessary to understand the Arab women status under sustainable conflicts in the region within their relations with the national dimensions in each country and their regional and international dimensions, in addition to the temporary conflicts that require adjustments of relations within the society itself on bases of respect of ethnic, religious and political differences. The Arab Human Development Report of 2004 stressed on the importance of liberation from conflicts and occupations to achieve human development in the Arab world. Meanwhile, the 2009 Report stressed on the relation between sustainable development and human security in its comprehensive meanings.

In addition to the imbalance in the local and international priorities, problems of which Arab women suffer become more intense with the increase of pressures to which the Arab world is subjected. These pressures are the result of foreign regional and international parties' interference aiming to impose their military, economic and political hegemony on the area, so as to continue exploiting its natural wealth, controlling its markets and dominating the destiny of its people. Moreover, failing to reach a just and comprehensive settlement for the Palestinian cause by ending the Israeli occupation will lead to continuation of conflicts and bargaining on priorities. Due to the fact that the status of women in all the Arab countries is reliant on the prevailing economic, political and social circumstances, women suffer from the negative and severe implications of the general problems of which the Arab peoples suffer. They also suffer from special problems resulting from the flagrant discrimination they are subjected to, including poverty, wars, armed conflicts, military spending, unemployment, indebtedness, lack of democracy and political plurality and non-reaching of women to decision making positions, in addition to spread of illiteracy among women, women legal status and violence practices against women as well.

Arab countries are among the most regional groups spending on military arming. The Arab countries spent around \$40 billion in 1989 despite the need of most of them to spend on development. This is because the Arab leaders are aware of the importance of maintaining their military power and creating a state of balance in the region. According to the Sibri Institute based in Stockholm, Iraq was the biggest weapons' importer in the Middle East. In 1983, Iraq's military spending amounted to \$33.3 billions. This figure declined to \$15 billion in 1989. During the eighties, Iraq's spending on arming amounted to \$80 billions.

In view of the data and the international standards, there is considerable disparity between the Arab countries ranking in terms of spending on arming and their ranking in terms of their achievement of human development. Most of the Arab countries



occupy advanced ranks in terms of spending on arms and backward ranks in terms of spending on human development. This disparity includes lack of proportionality between military spending and spending on economic and social development, especially education and health.

The experience of Iraqi women is affected by a number of conflicts and wars, which adversely affected their actual role in the sustainable development of Iraq. The role of women declined and deteriorated after the Iranian-Iraqi war, which was consolidated by the subsequent foreign occupation and political and sectarian violence. Palestinian women also suffer from the long suppression of the Israeli occupation, which produced several problems including poverty, unemployment, deprivation of personal and collective freedom and security. Under the continued Judaization project of the West Bank and siege of Gaza Strip, the realities on the ground anticipate more violence and instability in Palestine and the region. This reality will enhance the postponement approach aiming to achieve any meaningful development for the society, in general, and women status, in particular. This paper also addresses situations in Lebanon, Sudan and Yemen.

Generally speaking, armed conflicts and intervention of occupation and foreign forces in other countries have extreme dangerous impacts on sustainable development. This is due to the fact that these armed conflicts and interventions create a state of disorder, and lack of peace and stability, which threatens economic stability and destroys the infrastructure, foundations and programs, which countries seek to develop before occupation. This situation spontaneously increases poverty and unemployment rates as a result of labor market and economic projects stagnancy and suspension of capitals flow to the local markets. Moreover, investments, local growth, imports and exports will deteriorate and investors and economists will be prompted to leave the occupied country suffering from conflicts.

It is evident that countries suffering from wars and internal conflicts or from foreign occupation result in the destruction of the living conditions of citizens, males and females, at all political, economic and social levels. This will contribute to increasing the rate of the killed among citizens, especially women, poverty and unemployment rates as well. On the other hand, this situation will also decrease human development and sustainable development indicators as a result of lack of stability, security, plans and programs supervised by the state. The Arab region is still confronting threats, conflicts and wars on more than one front, which is clearly reflected on the family structure, father, mother and children as a result of pressures they are subjected to. These pressures are rather intensified by fathers' or husbands' participation in military

operations, on one hand, and their subjection to direct violence, on the other. This means that involvement of males in military operations whether through involvement in the army, resistance movement or conflicting militias will drive them away from family affairs management and also their absence, death or disappearance, especially fathers and big children.

Arab women played honorable role in the national movements against colonialism, specifically in the beginnings of the twentieth century. In Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq, women are still playing the same role. Meanwhile, organizations and societies played charitable role in ensuring life basics for poor households and refugees. Women movements and pioneers in the various Arab countries played important roles in promoting the principles of Arab renaissance and modernizing the backwarded intellectual and cultural systems, which prevented the achievement of political and social liberation. During the recent decades, these organizations and societies, as a part of the civil society, played a significant role in promoting human rights and democracy principles and have been able, albeit at very different levels, to integrate the concept of gender in their countries policies and programs and their different organizations. Women had a role in attracting the attention of the society to social and legal issues, which were not possible to discuss before. Women also contributed to maintaining social peace and combating violence. In several countries, a number of organizations operating in the field of women's rights have been active in achieving reconciliation, disarming of militias, protection of child rights and development initiatives. Arab women organizations, including women organizations in Somalia, combated violence practiced against women such as distortion of women organs and raping especially among displaced women. Within the unofficial or semi-official contribution of women in promoting the reality and culture of justice and peace, women are active in resisting occupation and its policies, as a means to achieve peace and stability in the region. Women also contribute to family support, particularly in the absence of husbands or male breadwinners, whether due to participating in wars, detention, killing, disability or deportation. Moreover, women movements' pressures also contribute to including women issues, such as female prisoners, refugees and displaced, on the negotiations agendas and within the interests and concerns of international organizations.