

# Women and sustainable development : A methodological introduction

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The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is routinely used, by all experts and communities, to describe economic activity. Indeed, the GDP is the best standard for measuring the performance of market economy, notwithstanding the reservations and perceived limitations of this indicator, especially as it was not designed, from the beginning, as an instrument to measure human well-being and social development, let alone the possibility of facing up to other problems such as the environmental changes and the efficient use of scarce resources.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the economic approach, which is based on such indicators as the gross domestic product, has laid itself open to criticism in recent years, as it has been observed that economic development does not necessarily mean social progress. On the environmental plane, it has become clear that development may destroy natural resources and expose future generations to incalculable dangers.

For this reason, it has become imperative to look for other approaches that would apply to most societies. The growing awareness of the dangers facing the environment, and of the continuing shocks that the recent economic crisis has provoked, has made the experts and civil society, then the leaders of nations throughout the world, realize the need for a radical re-examination of the concept of development. As a result, the developmental concerns, with their different dimensions and consequences, are no longer confined to the activities of scientific and communal circles, but have attracted the attention of political leaders everywhere in Europe, America and Asia.

The report of the commission chaired by Joseph Stiglitz comes within this framework.

The purpose of the commission was "to identify the limitations of the gross domestic product as an indicator of economic performance and social progress" and to consider the necessary elements and statistics covering the other dimensions in order to obtain a lifelike picture. The report aims, first, to reconcile people with quantitative measurements and statistical figures that meet the reality of their daily life. Second, it aims to deal with climate dangers in order to provide decision-makers with appropriate means to measure the necessary action and its impact.



The report states that when we adopt unclear methods of measurement, we act as though we lack clear-sightedness.

The report experts emphasize the need to go beyond concern for the immediate future by focusing on the concept of sustainability, which means the economy's ability to guarantee the well-being of people over the long run.

Hence the fundamental concept of sustainable development whose new objective is to ensure the continuity of development and to know the extent to which growth can endure so that we may come to know, for instance, whether our grandchildren will lead a better or a worse life than ours. In this regard, Jean Paul Fitoussi believes that the current situation cannot give us satisfaction unless it enables us to pass on, to future generations, the same amenities as those we are enjoying today in terms of education, environment and raw materials. That concern justifies, more than ever before, the need to clarify a new approach to sustainable development.

Given the fact that Arab women account for half the Arab society, it is impossible to achieve sustainable development without their active participation and contribution, as an essential party, to the process of building a better future. Accordingly, it is imperative to examine the status of Arab women in terms of the four basic elements of sustainable development: i.e. their economic status, their social status, their role in preserving the environment, and their institutional status.

We have used, as a basis for this paper, the Arab Human Development Report 2009, published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

It is evident that women play a fundamental role in the fields of agriculture, farming and water resources. But given the fact that the ownership of the land often goes to men in the family, the decision is also theirs. Similarly, women's reluctance to participate in institutional life, contrary to affluent categories, is likely to confirm women's comparative backwardness within societies; and as local culture does not encourage women's involvement in public life, how could the relatively disadvantaged categories impose their role as fully-fledged partners?

The question may be asked in light of the difficulties facing the achievement of sustainable development itself. Sustainable development is an idea more than it is a procedural concept; it may well be an ideal to aspire to more than it is a clear-cut solution. Some of the significant lessons to be drawn from the problems facing sustainable development are the facts that a solution at a given time may become a problem at another time. More explicitly, sustainable development is not a consistent phenomenon; it is subject to the logic of things more than to the things of logic, as the philosophers would say. The study of Arab women's status in the educational field and the employment market may be the best example of this paradox. Women have made prodigious progress in the field of education and training. Statistics show that girls' results are much better than boys' results even in higher education, particularly in scientific subjects including mathematics and engineering.



Yet the advancement in education has not been accompanied by similar advancement at the level of participation in the employment market. This phenomenon deserves to be studied in depth, and we propose the examination of the following factors:

The imbalance between the development of women's participation in education, and particularly higher education, and the development of their economic participation.

Women's unbalanced participation in the various educational specializations and its impact on the employment market.

The repercussions of economic reforms and free trade on women's economic participation.

The strategic policy guidelines to strengthen Arab women's economic participation.

The question put forward today to Arab intellectuals and decision-makers is how to promote the empowerment of Arab women in the educational, economic, cultural, social and political fields so that they may become an effective partner in sustainable development?

The question may be divided into four parts to be addressed during this conference:

**Part 1 :**

On the economic level, how do we increase Arab women's rates of participation in modern establishments of production? And what are the legislations and policies required for achieving this objective?

**Part 2 :**

On the social level, how do we speed up the process of enabling girls and women to pursue the different levels of education? And what is the role of governments in this process? What role does civil society play in raising the educational level of Arab women? What are the cultural legislations and policies required in order to eliminate all manifestations of gender discrimination and physical violence against women?

**Part 3 :**

On the environmental level, how can rural women in the Arab world contribute to preserving natural resources? What role should Arab women play, as housewives, to rationalize consumption and reduce domestic waste? And would this role increase their burdens within the family? What role should Arab women play in the field of environmentally educating the young generation?

**Part 4 :**

On the level of institutional participation of Arab women, is it feasible to increase women's representation within parliamentary councils, political bodies and civil associations without waiting for the expected improvement in the level of girls' and women's education? What means may be mustered for that purpose?