

# Women and the economic prospects for sustainable development

---

By Dr. Larbi Jaidi - Hayet Zirari - Maroc

The Arab world is a vast region with enormous economic and human potential. Despite progress in economic and social development throughout the Arab countries, there is a latent but growing awareness, that the current development trends in this region are not sustainable. The Arab countries are, at the same time, the region in the world with the highest levels of inequality and the largest differences between men and women. It is also a region characterized by a persisting discrimination and the most flagrant violations of human rights of women.

Sustainable human development is being increasingly mainstreamed in the discourse of states and international organizations as a crucial social challenge. The Arab countries are parties to various international and regional conferences. These conferences are key reference and action frameworks for commitments regarding the promotion of women's rights and gender equality. Over the years, Arab countries face a major challenge: how to turn these commitments into tangible and successful actions?

The Arab Human Development and the major studies carried out in the region have highlighted the fact that the status and roles assigned to women are one of the main deficits and obstacles to development in Arab countries. Indeed, although the Arab countries have ratified several regional and international conventions on human rights, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) - with, however, reservations and interpretative declarations - the integration of international obligations relating to civil rights and economic, social and cultural rights in national legal systems and the enforcement of these standards is incomplete. Moreover, even where laws designed to promote equality are in place, it is common that they are not effectively implemented.

The analysis of the results for the Arab Region of the Beijing Action Plan (Beijing + 15, 2009) reflects the diversity of the region, as evidenced by the wide range of situations across countries and sub-regions in the field of gender equality and the various policies and measures that have been adopted to cope with them. However,



beyond this diversity most countries have decided to act primarily in three areas: violence against women, women's economic participation, including ways of reconciling work and family life and the fight against poverty among women, and finally the development of the existing mechanisms in place in each country to promote gender equality and empowerment of women. The progress on the status of women has been more unequal and slower in the field of participation in decision-making and in the social sectors (health and education). As for the activities and policies to take account of gender in the field of environment, they have hardly made any progress.

By adhering to the Millennium Development Goals, Arab countries agreed on a common platform of priorities to find solutions to the multiple aspects of extreme poverty, namely hunger, unemployment, disease and lack of housing, gender inequality and environmental degradation. Between 1990 and 2010, despite significant progress in some sub-regions and countries, the Arab region has achieved modest results. On the basis of the trends of the last fifteen years, the Arab region will not achieve the MDGs on time. Achieving the MDGs in the Arab region at regional, sub-regional and national level requires joint efforts and commitment of governments and civil society organizations. Efforts are needed to develop effective and transparent institutions and to establish youth- and gender equality-friendly policies so that young people are not only beneficiaries of development, but are also its actors. \_

Nowadays, Arab people are beginning to understand better and better that it is simply not possible to continue to exploit resources in the absence of a proper planning framework, of gender equity, of the required public policy reforms and of a reduction of disparities between North and South.

### **I. The critical aspects of access to economic and social rights in the Arab region**

**The feminization of poverty is a phenomenon in the Arab region.** The risk of being poor is greater for single women with children and older women, particularly among migrants and ethnic minorities. This women's poverty is exacerbated by a multifaceted, complex vulnerability largely related to sex discrimination and gender-based violence suffered by women. Some countries have made efforts to develop strategies to fight against poverty, strategies which take account of differences between the sexes.

**The objective of ensuring primary education for girls** is close to be achieved in many countries of the region and more and more girls are enrolled in secondary and tertiary education. However, despite progress accomplished, some obstacles still limit the access of girls to education: national education policies, a shortage of female teachers, lack of job opportunities for girls, domestic servitude and early marriage, as well as education of early childhood. Arab women remain poorly prepared for an active and constructive participation in public life.



The Arab countries have made considerable progress in preventing deaths and increasing life expectancy. However, **the limited access and use of health-care services** have serious implications for women's health in terms of under-identification of disease, delay in treatment and non-adherence. Limited access to potable water and to sanitation and drainage poses a risk to the health of men and women alike in relation to water-borne diseases such as schistosomiasis and diarrheal diseases. Unassisted childbirth without qualified personnel is a major problem in the region. The HIV / AIDS is gaining ground in the region.

**Climate change is a further challenge for gender equity.** The effect of this change on women's empowerment could be far-reaching and might reduce considerably progress achieved to date in several areas. The role of women in food security and in economic and social development of rural areas is strategic but largely ignored. This is due partly to the fact that rural women constitute a particularly vulnerable group.

**The proportion of women in the labour market in the region** is lower than for other regions of the world. Similarly, the patriarchal tutelage and dependence on men do not always stop when women work or when control of their finances is enhanced by a paid job. Throughout the region, women perform unpaid work at home or in subsistence agriculture or household enterprises without being recorded in official statistics on women employment. Similarly, they do not have health insurance or benefits. Women are most affected by unemployment, especially graduate unemployment. The vertical and horizontal segregation in the labour market remains a major problem and, despite some improvements, women still earn less than men and are heavily underrepresented among entrepreneurs.

**Women's entrepreneurship is developing in the Arab region,** like in other parts of the world. However, gender-related barriers and obstacles continue to exist, in particular in supporting the creation and development of businesses, including cultural norms, civil law, or barriers in the business environment. The barriers and costs for the creation and termination of companies, such as access to credit, create difficulties for all businesses. However, these difficulties are even more important for businesses owned by women.

**Arab women suffer direct and indirect forms of violence.** In terms of direct violence, they suffer various forms of physical aggression, ranging from beatings to rape or murder. In terms of indirect violence, they are victims of social and cultural practices harmful to their health, such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriage. Despite being banned by some States, FGM is still common in several Arab countries due to the weight of traditional beliefs.

The role of Arab women in national economies as actors and beneficiaries has not made significant progress. Progress of women's access to power has been slow and unequal, and in most countries women remain strongly underrepresented in all areas of political decision-making. When increased political responsibilities are assigned to women, it is generally in the socio-cultural sphere.



## **2. Policies for sustainable development : are they favourable to equality?**

The Arab region needs to redirect its development in order to meet the economic and social needs, which are considerable, without aggravating the on-going process of environmental degradation. Public policies should focus on mainstreaming social and environmental issues into the key areas of economic development.

The basic principle of public policies is that sustainability should be based on the interdependence of its three pillars: economic development, social equity and environmental protection, as well as on a better governance

Four challenges should be highlighted in order to promote progress in terms of sustainability in the economic, social and environmental areas as well as in governance.

- First challenge: to promote economic development by promoting the assets.
- Second challenge: to reduce social disparities in achieving the Millennium Development Goals.
- Third challenge: to change production and consumption patterns and ensure a sustainable management of natural resources.

- Fourth challenge: to improve governance at national, regional and local level.

Arab countries face these challenges to sustainable human development. Meeting these challenges requires a broader regional cooperation, political stability and effective social protection.

The Arab region still needs a collective vision of sustainable development, as well as appropriate resources and commitments. The problem is compounded by inadequate level of North-South and South-South and the persistence of conflicts, particularly in the Middle East. Given the slow progress of democratization, governance is weak and there is a strong need for political and social reforms, especially in the field of human rights and gender equality, which are slow to implement.

A policy of effective international cooperation should contribute to create the conditions required for a better integration of Arab women in sustainable economic and social development. This cooperation should be based on principles of solidarity and shared responsibility between developed and developing countries. Therefore current trends should be reversed through concerted effort to avoid an unfair, unbalanced, standardized and wasteful development model for the Arab region and avert discouraging risks and prospects which are to be observed.

In some countries of the region, women's civil society organizations play an important role in bringing about reforms to achieve equality and gender equity. However, the capacities of these structures should be strengthened. Access to data and information, expertise in certain specialized fields, capacity to argue and networking are still lacking.



In terms of capacity- building for economic analysis incorporating the gender dimension, Arab countries have taken in recent years innovative measures to better integrate it into economic analysis. Some countries do integrate gender into their national budgets. So they are endeavouring to introduce gender budgeting in development planning to ensure that public resources benefit men and women alike and promote gender equality. But this would require to enhance technical and analytical skills and to reinforce the political will to this effect

Many countries in the region state to have widened and strengthened their national policies for the advancement of women, particularly by developing strategies for gender equality. The existing national mechanisms vary considerably in their status and functions entrusted to them. In many countries, mechanisms implemented to promote gender equality lack of personnel, funds and influence in key policy areas. The evaluation of policies that affect them directly or indirectly is required in virtually all Arab countries.

The effective implementation of commitments made by the Arab States at international conferences depends on the political will of these states and their capacity to involve all stakeholders (public authorities, civil society and people in general...) in an agenda for public policy reform in order to achieve the goals throughout the prospect of gender equity mainstreaming.

To progress in this direction, it is important to create conditions for the free expression of women's organizations advocating for change with the support of all progressive forces. Ownership by the policy-makers of this issue and awareness-raising among the general public will be crucial to assess progress. The upcoming international conference will be a key moment to measure progress in achieving the objectives outlined above.

Commitment at the highest political level is essential for successful implementation of the Action Plan, but the governments should also takes specific measures in each critical area of concern if they want to achieve them in the coming five years.