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The Arab Human Development Report 2005

Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World



Regional Bureau for Arab States

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Foreword by the Administrator, UNDP

This year's Arab Human Development Report marks the fourth, in a four-part series that has made a significant contribution to the debate on the development challenges facing the Arab world.

The pioneering first report, issued in 2002, identified three critical development "deficits" – in the acquisition of knowledge, in political freedoms, and in women's rights – that have held back human development throughout the Arab region despite considerable natural wealth and great potential for economic and social progress. The second and third reports focused on the deficits in knowledge and freedom, respectively.

This year's report presents a compelling argument as to why realising the full potential of Arab women is an indispensable prerequisite for development in all Arab states. It argues persuasively that the long hoped-for Arab "renaissance" cannot and will not be accomplished unless the obstacles preventing women from enjoying their human rights and contributing more fully to development are eliminated and replaced with greater access to the "tools" of development, including education and healthcare. By placing Arab women firmly in the centre of social, cultural, economic and political development in the entire region, the Report goes beyond arguing that half the population deserves half the participation. In fact, it asserts that irrespective of the numbers, Arab women have already accomplished great strides that are transforming the region's political economy and social demography. While lauding these achievements and making a strong case for facilitating this strong current of positive social transformation, the Report also analyses the remaining impediments, and suggests concrete steps towards their elimination.

The Arab Human Development Reports have succeeded beyond all expectations in

triggering a lively debate about the challenges, opportunities, and exigencies that must be reckoned with if good governance, respect for human rights, and human development are to become defining characteristics of the modern Arab state. What started out as a daring experiment itself has served as a catalyst for other work and given rise to innovation and change throughout the region.

No reform – whether political or otherwise – can take place, let alone succeed, without an active exchange of ideas. Sometimes, this process takes place harmoniously, with a convergence of views that leads to consensus. Sometimes, the end result can be nothing more than an agreement to disagree. Given the contentious nature of the issues covered in the AHDRs, it should come as no surprise that their preparation has tended to fall into this latter category, with this year's report being no exception.

In this regard, it is necessary for me to reiterate the statement of my predecessor, Mark Malloch Brown, who wrote in last year's report, "the AHDRs are, deliberately, not formal UN or UNDP documents and do not reflect the official views of either organisation. Rather they have been intended to stimulate and inform a dynamic, new, public discourse across the Arab world and beyond... I feel it necessary to state that some of the views expressed by the authors are not shared by UNDP or the UN". All four AHDRs have been prepared by the authors with this shared understanding, reached with UNDP management when the series was launched in 2002.

The AHDRs – this year's included – articulate some views that UNDP does not share, and at times uses language that is unnecessarily divisive. Since 2002, UNDP has helped provide a platform for debate in the region and beyond. Unfortunately, the

language used in part of this debate has not always been compatible with the cause of reform and understanding based on reasoned arguments.

The Arab world and the Middle East region have for years suffered from deep divisions, violence and conflict, also involving external actors. UNDP management believes the building of freedom and good governance, which is the stated aim of the AHDRs, requires moderation and arguments based on reason and respect for the views of the “other”, all hallmarks of the golden age of Arab greatness, a time when the Arab and Muslim worlds were prosperous, strong and standard-setters for others. Progress in the Arab world in this age of global economic forces will also require much closer cooperation and economic integration, a process which can only take place if Arab countries, governments and civil societies can move closer together, despite their diversity. As cooperative processes in other parts of the world have shown, progress requires caution, a willingness to find compromises, as well as a firm long-term strategy for greater unity.

While we do not agree with all of the sentiments and judgements expressed in this

report, we can be motivated all the more to reflect on the factors behind them. The sense of anger palpable in certain sections of this report is widely shared in the region and has been deepened by recent events and the extensive loss of innocent life.

By any measure, the AHDRs have attracted enormous interest and made a unique contribution to stimulating debate on how the Arab region can move forward in advancing the goals of good governance, equitable growth, and greater respect for human rights.

Many individuals have made this possible, but I would like to take this opportunity to stress the leadership role of one in particular: Dr. Rima Khalaf Hunaidi. Rima has guided the AHDR “experiment” from the very outset – without her leadership the four reports could not have been produced. Earlier this year, Rima retired from UNDP after leading UNDP’s Regional Bureau for Arab States for almost six years. This fourth report was started while she was still directing the bureau. Rima continues to be a driving force in the debate on reform throughout the region and beyond. I wish her well in her new pursuits.



Kemal Derviş
Administrator, UNDP

Foreword by the Regional Director, UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States

This fourth report in the Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) series completes the frank examination of some of the obstacles to Arab human development initiated by its predecessors. With the same independence that distinguished the previous reports, AHDR 2005 analyses the dynamics of women's advancement in the Arab world. Its focus is on all women in the Arab countries, without discrimination. It situates the problematic nature of the equality of their rights, capabilities and opportunities in the context of history, culture, religion, society and the political economy. It outlines a vision for the achievement of gender equality built on the assurance of full citizenship rights for all through the reform of Arab governance.

Like the others in the series, this report is Arab in inspiration, authorship and ownership. It does not originate in abstract formulas for change removed from the play of forces in the region. Its authors and advisers are anchored in a broad diversity of intellectual, philosophical and cultural currents in the Arab world. Each has a firm stake in the issues at hand and accepts the risks entailed in tackling a subject loaded with cultural, religious and social sensitivities. Each understands that, optimally, the wider reforms they seek would grow from a multi-level consensus centred on mutual understanding among all actors, respect for differences and recognition of common ground. All however encounter today the degeneration of the reform debate into exclusivist rhetorical firestorms with the work of ascendant conservative forces seeking to reduce political choices to stark absolutes.

An Arab intellectual who today brings "Western" ideas of gender equality into such polarised arenas faces outright dismissal. In this environment, one who advocates for homegrown democratic change to speed women's empowerment while Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory, its aggression against neighbouring countries and the military interventions of foreign powers

continue, is seen as the pawn of a discredited model. With their arguments derailed by intervention from abroad, and stifled by reactionary forces at home, Arab moderates are increasingly embattled, frustrated and angry. And while anger, by its nature, is an invitation to dialogue, in a world of divides it is easily misunderstood as yet another form of intransigence. The accents of that anger reverberate through parts of this report, at times conveying a combative tone. To some, this may be dismaying; to others, it may simply be a genuine reflection of the authors' political, intellectual and moral ordeal. We continue to believe that providing the authors with a platform not available to them anywhere in the region makes accessible a body of salutary and instructive messages that the world needs to hear.

The situation of women in the Arab countries has been changing over time, often for the better. Arab women have made outstanding national and international contributions to the arts, sciences, politics and other fields of human endeavour, achieving results that equal, and often surpass, those of men. Yet many continue to struggle for fair treatment. Compared to their sisters elsewhere in the world, they enjoy the least political participation. Conservative authorities, discriminatory laws, chauvinist male peers and tradition-minded kinsfolk watchfully regulate their aspirations, activities and conduct. Employers limit their access to income and independence. In the majority of cases, poverty shackles the development and use of women's potential. High rates of illiteracy and the world's lowest rates of female labour participation are compounded to "create serious challenges". Though a growing number of individual women, supported by men, have succeeded in achieving greater equality in society and more reciprocity in their family and personal relationships, many remain victims of legalised discrimination, social subordination and enshrined male

dominance. Unacceptably, physical and mental violence against women often destroys their personal health and security and even their right to life. Such abuse is by no means uniquely found in the Arab world but is part of a global problem.

The Report lays out a comprehensive set of priorities for accelerating the rise of women. In its human development perspective, women not only require access to the tools of development in order to help society to progress; as human beings, they are in themselves the agents of that development.

In that light, the Report stresses the need to eliminate the seeds of discrimination against women in Arab tradition and to promote *ijtihad* (interpretative scholarship) in religious matters to overcome cultural obstacles. It outlines changes in patterns of upbringing, education and media presentation that could revise social norms, erase harmful stereotypes and vitally transform relations between the sexes in a culture of equal treatment. It proposes a battery of legal reforms to guarantee women's political, civil and economic rights. They range from the full alignment of national legislation with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and with international labour treaties through time-bound quotas for women in political assemblies to the adoption of updated personal status codes. The Report also advocates measures to protect the civil and personal rights of all women in Arab countries including expatriate women. More broadly, it calls for the opening of the economic sphere to women to address income poverty and for investments in women's education, health and social safety nets to reverse the spread of human poverty. Taken together, its findings constitute an important framework for the development efforts of governments, civil society and regional and international organisations, including UNDP.

Not all will agree with everything the authors have to say, which encourages us to anticipate a lively debate around their analysis. Few however will deny that, ultimately, women's advancement in the Arab

world is inseparable from society's progress towards democratic and empowering forms of governance that uphold the citizenship rights of all. If that conclusion in turn prompts vigorous discussion and thought on how these two interrelated goals might be achieved together, the authors will be more than amply rewarded for their efforts.

Our readers will find that we have, once again, been caught short in our coverage of world events in Part I which stops at the end of January 2006. Various delays in publishing this Report have, unfortunately prevented us from reviewing many seminal developments in the course of the year but I am confident we will be able to do them justice with the continuation of these Reports.

AHDR 2005 represents the work of many hands. I congratulate all who took part in its preparation, review and editing. Like others, I wish to single out my distinguished predecessor, Dr. Rima Khalaf Hunaidi, the inspired innovator behind the entire series, whose guidance is felt everywhere in this Report. I am very grateful to the core team, especially the lead authors, the veteran Dr. Nader Fergany and Dr. Islah Jad, for their tireless commitment and invaluable work. I also thank the distinguished Advisory Board for its vigilance and advice, which have kept the report anchored in its regional moorings. I am indebted to Kemal Dervis, Administrator of UNDP, for bravely supporting the publication of the concluding part of this unusual series, notwithstanding some differences of views and risks associated with the effort. I owe a particular note of appreciation to my colleagues in the Bureau's Regional Programme Division under the leadership of Nada Al-Nashif for their dedicated and unflagging support to this demanding endeavour. Finally, I salute our regional co-sponsors the Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development for their prized partnership and collaboration. While the original concept of the series in four installments is now complete, I am pleased to confirm that more reports will follow.



Amat Al Alim Alsoswa

Assistant Secretary General and Assistant Administrator, Regional Director,
Regional Bureau for Arab States, United Nations Development Programme

Foreword by the Director General and Chairman, The Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development

Economic and social development cannot occur in isolation from human development, which is the lynchpin and goal of comprehensive development. The first three issues of the Arab Human Development Reports series espoused, affirmed and explored this concept in relation to different topics. It is only natural, therefore, that the fourth and final report in the series, dealing with the topic of Arab women, should analyse women's situation and role in development in the same comprehensive perspective.

In examining Arab women's issues and the obstacles to the improvement of their social and economic condition and rights, and in calling for a perfect social partnership, this report remains in a tradition of development literature which historically has stressed the importance of collective collaboration for development without discrimination on the basis of race or sex. The report thus takes its place among the intellectual and practical efforts exerted since the beginning of the Arab Renaissance early in the last century in the area of Arab women's issues and rights, efforts that continued through the work of noteworthy thinkers, scholars and reformers. From the third decade of the same century, these efforts were supplemented by those of women's movements which, by the end of the century, had been transformed into communal and political movements within Arab civil society that aimed at fashioning inclusive developmental visions and implementing their goals in the real world. Among these goals has been the realisation of the perfect partnership of Arab women in state and society.

This report illuminates the many different political, economic, social and legal dimensions relevant to Arab women, the developments, negative and positive, that have affected them and the difficulties that they have faced in playing their full role in economic development and in political and social modernisation. It also illustrates what the report's authors consider to be the

political and intellectual trends and demands in the areas of rights and society at the various levels necessary to assure the rise of Arab women, their ability to perform their role and undertake their responsibilities as required, and their perfect partnership in Arab society. All this is of interest to development agencies in general and, in particular, to the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, which has been concerned to activate women's participation in development through both its orientations and policies and its programmes and projects. The Fund has also been anxious, via its support for the report, to ensure that the latter be honest and bold, both stylistically and substantively, in its illumination of Arab women's reality.

With a subject of such importance, complexity and sensitivity, certain gaps and minor shortcomings in the report's data are perhaps inevitable. Some contributions and analyses may be more detailed and extensive than strictly warranted, but this is only to be expected when the perspective is a broad based vision of human development with a varied scope, multiple points of intersection and widely branching issues. Points of consensus within the report's generalisations and conclusions may be numerous, and those on which there will be no consensus may be yet more so, but this, of course, naturally follows from presenting a multiplicity of outlooks. In any case, this report is the work of independent thinkers, researchers and specialists and bears no official stamp; the authors have been encouraged to participate in order to express, as far as possible, both the cultural and intellectual diversity of Arab society and its geographical distribution. Their participation also accords with the conviction of the sponsoring institutions that a project for Arab women reflecting the spirit of the Arab Renaissance must be inclusive, representative and open.

This report, its content, its methodology, its conclusions and its speculations, does not

constitute the final word, just as it does not form the only project to take on the complex issues of the rise of Arab women. It is rather a supplementary attempt, characterised by a degree of boldness, to initiate an Arab dialogue around the issues and theses. It seeks to start a broad debate on how best to confront these complex issues and arrive at economic, communal and political solutions that will gain the widest possible support and contribute to the rise of Arab women.

We feel that a number of facts should be brought to the reader's attention. The most important of these are:

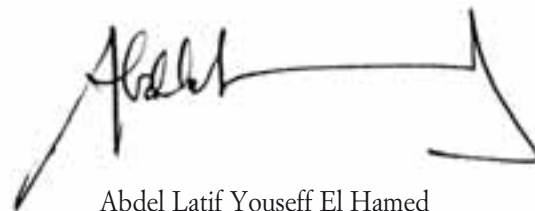
1. Arab women have in no way fallen short in performing their role over the various phases of the development of Arab society throughout history, despite certain limited attempts to marginalise that role. The great contributions of Arab women in the traditional economy and in family and social structures are those of fundamental and indispensable partners. No less important are their struggles to assert that partnership via political and emancipatory movements and civil society institutions, which have increased and grown in recent decades, realising important achievements which are today admired and respected all across Arab society.
2. Arab women have achieved much by way of enlarging their capabilities through their own efforts. They have registered outstanding progress in education, made their mark through their merits and skills in work and business, asserted their capacity to assume leadership positions, increased their participation in economic activity and pushed forward their role in national public affairs in all Arab countries. This must be the starting point for Arab development efforts and the basis for pursuing improved development indicators and progress in the deployment of women's capabilities. On this foundation, women will increase their participation in the job market and raise their contribution to economic activity on a basis of justice and equality between the sexes.

From another perspective, efforts towards political reform must work to ingrain the principles of good governance nationally and locally and to develop systems and legislation that accord with the principles of freedom, equality, and social justice. That is how social reform and economic reform can complement one another and thus form the two wings on which Arab development will fly towards the goals of the Arab renaissance project.

3. The rights of Arab women and the improvement of their condition are not a luxury or a subject for mere theorising, neither are they simply a call for reform. On the contrary, they have become today a fundamental component of the rights of humankind as confirmed by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, while calls for the rights of women and demands for their economic and social betterment have become a global movement supported by international law. By the same token, work on behalf of these goals has become a communal movement supported by the forces of Arab civil society, in whose institutions Arab women have come to assume important positions and to the realisation of whose goals they contribute effectively.

This report, with all that may be said for it and against it, is now set before all Arab citizens, and it is to the Arab citizen, first and last, that it is addressed. I expect its publication to be a beginning and not an end. It provides an opportunity for a constructive civilisational dialogue that will do more to bring people together than to force them apart and more to gather them than to divide them, in the service of the rise of Arab women and of our nation. I would like to express my sincere thanks and appreciation to all who contributed to its preparation and publication and to the United Nations Development Programme for their good offices in providing for its follow-up and supervision. I offer my thanks as well to all participating institutions and parties.

“God is the guardian of success.”



Abdel Latif Youseff El Hamed
Director General / Chairman of the Board of Directors
Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development

Foreword by HRH the President of the Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND)

Arab Women and the Mechanisms for the Desired Change

An observer of social developments in the Arab world will be aware of a number of positive changes caused by the publication of the Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) since its initial appearance in 2002 under the title *Creating Opportunities for Coming Generations*, as it has prompted both controversy over, and engagement with its authors' themes, findings and recommendations.

The AHDR series was prepared by leading specialists preoccupied with issues of concern to the Arab human being, and it raises and explores in depth issues of direct and profound import for development in its three dimensions: social, economic and political. For this reason, these reports are, in our estimation, among the most outstanding products of Arab development thought to emerge so far in the third millennium, with all that the opening years of this century have witnessed in the way of changes and transformations benefiting humanity.

The fourth edition of the AHDR takes on additional importance because it raises the issue of women's development as the critical issue in all Arab societies. Its objective presentation of the obstacles to Arab women's development is part of a sequence. Thus, in its third edition the Report investigated the dialectics of freedom in the Arab world, in the second it dealt with the topic of knowledge, and in the first it treated the creation of opportunities for coming generations.

Anticipating the debate that will surround this edition, we would like to state that we believe that the experts and the authors behind this effort have applied their knowledge to illuminate crucial aspects of the situation of Arab women, and especially the continuance of outmoded attitudes towards women, their status and role.

Such attitudes are, regrettably, linked to certain interpretations of religion, even though a careful study based on the facts will reveal that they have their origins in custom and tradition. Religion has no connection with any of the mistaken practices that are carried out against women. Our societies, however, give precedence to custom over true worship and provide foundations for assumptions that have no grounding either in the Holy Qur'an or in the authenticated practices and sayings of the Prophet (the Hadith).

Most of the sufferings of Arab women is attributable to the accumulation of such customs and traditions. It follows that the correction of outmoded assumptions and attitudes is a leading priority, one that demands, in the first place, cultural and societal measures to instil in coming generations a balanced vision of women and their role. This report, with its probing analyses, statistics and data, is a part of these required measures. For this reason, we shall continue to support its publication, in co-ordination with our partners in development.

We believe that Arab societies must shoulder their comprehensive and necessary responsibility to re-evaluate women's role and to protect their rights. In that respect, it should be noted that all Arab countries have signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Yet we also consider that women themselves are those most capable of defending their rights and of bringing their issues to public attention. Indeed, were this not so, Arab women's problems might continue to be sidelined and buried for ages to come. Actual indicators, however, and the examples we see of Arab women's activism, incline us to optimism.

We have always believed that Arab women (as mothers, sisters, wives, daughters) are not less, in any way, than women in societies that have preceded us on the ladder of development. Arab women are creative innovators who display initiative when provided with the means. This is what has encouraged us to sponsor a developmental organisation specialised in women's issues, the Centre for Arab Women's Training and Research (CAWTAR), and to entrust its leadership, administration and planning to a group of outstanding women. The latter have shown what they can accomplish in realising the Centre's most important strategic goal of becoming a point of reference in the Arab world for women's issues. CAWTAR continues to train women cadres, to help overcome deficient images of women in society and to ensure that the voice and demands of women reach decision-making circles. There can be no future for a society that impedes half its population in the exercise of their potential, ignores their demands and marginalises their entitlements.

This same orientation is adopted at the Arab Open University and at the "Bank for the Poor", which target the poorest of the poor. Women have shown themselves to be

extremely able in managing small and micro-loans to good effect and to be more reliable than men in honouring their commitments to lending institutions.

Without prejudice to the importance of new legislation, revised codes and statutes and evolving constitutions in guaranteeing women's rights, the laying of a foundation for enlightened thought must come first. After all, legislation, no matter how contemporary, developed and favourable to women's aspirations, cannot function in an intellectual and moral vacuum.

Rather, positive values in harmony with religion and authentic Arab tradition must first inform our view of women. These values must be nurtured, in the first place, through teaching and their integration into curricula from kindergarten to higher education. They must be popularised by a media committed to the issues and concerns of society. These mechanisms are important levers for desired changes in the cultural structure. Indeed, no change can be expected if we do not begin by developing the inner workings of our culture, which determines our rules and how we see ourselves.

May God grant success to all who work for the good of the Arab World.



Talal Bin Abdul Aziz
President, The Arab Gulf Programme for
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