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**THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS:  
GENDER-RELATED INDICATORS IN  
THE ARAB STATES**

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**The Millennium Development Goals: Gender related indicators in the  
Arab States**

**= *Notepaper* =**

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***Note:***

***Opinions, statements, and recommendations included in this paper do not necessarily represent opinions, statements and recommendation of UNDP. They are strictly of the author who welcomes any comments.***

## **1. Introduction: The Millennium Development Goals**

Achievement of sustainable human development has been a declared goal in all Arab States. Towards that, the most recent, important, and internationally abiding commitments were made in September 2000 in the Millennium Declaration at which foundations of the global political partnership for development were internationally set and approved. Along with most countries of the world, Arab States have reaffirmed their commitment to achieve the globally declared Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) towards 2015. Interpreted by a limited set of numerical and time-bound targets, MDGs include halving income poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality; reducing under-5 mortality by two-thirds and maternal mortality by three-quarters; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and developing a global partnership for development. Set goals and targets are to be achieved over a 25-year period extending from 1990 up till 2015.

In addition to designating one of the eight goals to gender equality, a closer look reveals that women rights and equality with males exists in several of the millennium goals, targets and indicators ..... This notepaper attempts to detect the status of goals, targets and indicators that are relevant to gender equality and women status in Arab states.

## 2. Goal number 3.... The Millennium Gender Equality Goal:

One of the eight MDGs has been singled out to gender issues. Goal 3 clearly calls for “*promoting Gender Equality and empowerment of women*”. Under this goal the relevant set target calls for “*eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and to all levels of education no later than 2015*”. To measure the current status and track improvements in relation to the stated goal and target, a number of indicators were set to include;

- Ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education
- Ratio of literate females to males of 15-24 years old
- Share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector
- Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament

### • The status of Arab States in relation to Gender indicators....

Taking into account the above listed Millennium indicators reveals some of the major aspects of gender status in the Arab States. Looking into the first relevant indicator to equality in education reveals – and in accordance with the latest available data- that Arab States have been advancing steadily towards eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education. The ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary education increased from 78.7% in 1990 (the Millennium baseline) up to 83.7% in 1999.<sup>1</sup> Such a trend demonstrates that Arab States are most probably on the right track and it should not be difficult to reach the goal of gender equality in primary and secondary levels of education by 2015. Impacts of that were manifested in other related indicators. The ratio of literate females to males in the age group 15-24 increased from 77 % in 1990 to 87% in the year 2000<sup>2</sup>. Several Arab States made remarkable advancements such as Djibouti (from 78.1 %

in 1990 to 89.5 %<sup>3</sup> in the year 2000), Sudan (from 71.4 % in 1990 to 86.3 %<sup>4</sup> in 2000), Oman (from 79 % in 1990 to 96.7 %<sup>5</sup> in 2000), Morocco (from 61.8% in 1990 to 79.6% in 2000), Syria (from 72.5% to 82.6% in 2000) , Algeria (from 79.2% in 1990 to 90% in 2000), Libya (from 83.7% in 1990 to 93.3% in 2000), Saudi Arabia (from 86.2% in 1990 to 95% in 2000), Kuwait (from 89.2% in 1990 to 101.7% in 2000), Qatar (from 105.4% in 1990 to 104.8% in 2000), UAE (from 106.5% in 1990 to 106% in 2000), and Egypt (from 64.46% in 1990 to 77.79% in 2000). But, progress has not been sufficient in some other countries. Yemen enjoyed a 20 % increase in literacy ratio over the decade but stayed at a low 55.3%<sup>6</sup> level in 2000. Lebanon on the other hand managed to maintain a high level of female to male literacy almost equivalent to the richer oil producing countries (from 92.8% in 1990 to 95.7% in 2000)<sup>7</sup>.

Despite the above-mentioned, it is noted that illiteracy as a percentage of the population over 15 years of age is concentrated among women, particularly the rural. A vivid example of this compound gender/rural-urban gap is found in Morocco. In 1994, 92.3%<sup>8</sup> of the rural women in Morocco were illiterate compared to 53.8%<sup>9</sup> in the urban areas. Similar status is also observed in other Arab States such as Egypt. In 2000, and according to the latest statistics, the ratio of literate females to males in rural areas in Lower Egypt was 75.9% compared to 94.7% in urban areas. In the year 2000, the situation was even worse in Upper Egypt with the ratio of literate females to males being 50.85% compared to 86.18% in urban areas.

The status of gender equality dramatically worsens in the more advanced stages of education. In 1995 the enrolment ratio of girls in tertiary education

in the Arab States was 10.5 to 14.5 of males indicating the widening of the gender gap in the higher levels of education<sup>10</sup>. It is to be noted that higher education is one of the main determinant of an individual's ability to be active in the socioeconomic and political life of his/her society.

Accordingly, this very fact of gender inequality in the higher levels of education can, and most probably is, affecting the ability of women not only to pursue higher levels of education, but also to be effectively productive members in the social, economic, and legislative life of their societies. The lack of education brings about women's lack of access to resources, control over decision-making, and participation in public life, and labor force.

- **Empowerment of women..**

Low empowerment of women is clearly manifested in their low representation in the political, legislative, and business arenas. In 1990, the overall share of women employed in the non-agricultural sector in the Arab states was as low as 18.1%<sup>11</sup>. Examples of that are multiple. In Djibouti, women earned 32.7 %<sup>12</sup> of the share in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector, and in Yemen women increased this earning by less than 1% throughout the period 1994-2000<sup>13</sup> (6.2 % in 1994 to 7% in 2000). On the other hand, the status in Morocco has been fluctuating; it witnessed an increase in the share from 25% in 1990 to 27.2 % in 1995, to decline to 22.6%<sup>14</sup> in 1999. These shares are low and are a clear indicator of deficit in women's empowerment.

The status is not better in the legislative area with women occupying only 3.5%<sup>15</sup> of all seats in Arab parliaments. Except for Syria (8.5% in 1990 and 10.4% in 2000)<sup>16</sup> and Algeria (13 % in 1995)<sup>17</sup> the proportion of seats held

by women in national parliaments is very low and several Arab States have no women representation at all.

### **3. Gender equality in other Millennium Goals**

Calling for gender equality, and other women empowering and protecting policies and activities, has not been restricted to Goal number 3 only. Other goals, targets and indicators also included gender sensitive issues such as the case in Goal 5 that sets the targets of reducing maternal mortality and Goal number 2 that targets achieving universal primary education.

- **Reducing maternal mortality**

An obvious example of the women protecting goals is goal number 5 that calls for improving maternal health, setting the target of reducing the maternal mortality ratio by three quarters between 1990 and 2015. A look at the status of maternal mortality in the Arab state demonstrates that it is lower than the world average of 400 per 100 000<sup>18</sup> live births, yet it is still high at a rate of 360 per 100 000<sup>19</sup> live births. What makes the situation more alarming is the fact that this ratio has not changed for the last decade. In fact, nowadays about 1 in every 55<sup>20</sup> Arab women is on her lifetime risk of dying in pregnancy or childbirth. Maternal mortality in the Arab States is a major issue.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that despite stagnation on the aggregate level, improvements are detected on the country levels yet with vast discrepancies among Arab states. Few countries have managed to decrease their ratios considerably to developed countries standards, (Kuwait from 25 in 1995<sup>21</sup> to 5 in 2000<sup>22</sup>, the United Arab Emirates from 30 in 1995<sup>23</sup> to 3 in 2000<sup>24</sup>, Oman from 120 in 1995<sup>25</sup> to 14 in 2002<sup>26</sup>, and Qatar from 41 in



1995<sup>27</sup> to 10 in 2002<sup>28</sup>) thus succeeding in being ahead of track by reducing the maternal mortality by more than the required three-quarters throughout the period 1990-2015. Despite noticeable improvements in the last few years, most other countries are still lagging behind. Countries that had the highest rates demonstrated tangible improvements. These countries include Sudan (maternal mortality rate improved from form 1500 in 1995<sup>29</sup> to 550 in 2002<sup>30</sup>), Yemen (maternal mortality rate improved from form 850 in 1995<sup>31</sup> to 350 in 2002<sup>32</sup>), and Mauritania (maternal mortality rate improved from form 870 in 1995<sup>33</sup> to 550 in 2002<sup>34</sup>). Most other Arab states demonstrated little or no advancement towards the declared millennium goal of reducing maternal mortality by three quarters between 1990 and 2015. Improvements were recorded in Lebanon from 130 in 1995<sup>35</sup> to 100 in 2002<sup>36</sup>, Libya 120 in 1995<sup>37</sup> to 75 in 2002<sup>38</sup>, Morocco from 390 in 1995<sup>39</sup> to 230 in 2002<sup>40</sup>, Syria form 200 in 1995<sup>41</sup> to 110 in 2002<sup>42</sup>. The status was stagnant in other Arab counties such as Tunisia (70 throughout the last decade)<sup>43</sup> and Egypt (170 throughout the last decade)<sup>44</sup>, while Bahrain declined from 38 in 1995<sup>45</sup> to 46 in 2002<sup>46</sup>.

- **Achieving Primary Universal Education**

This goal has been gender sensitive stating clearly that countries should “ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, **boys and girls alike**, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling”. Latest statistics demonstrate that in the Arab States, enrolment rates in primary education are around 80% <sup>47</sup>. Yet, data on enrolment in primary education varied from one country to another. Throughout the last decade, some of these countries encountered high increases in their net enrolment ratios such as Kuwait and

Morocco<sup>i48</sup>, while others retreated such as Qatar<sup>49</sup> and UAE<sup>50ii</sup>. Some middle-income Arab States had a high enrolment ratio to start with, making it hard for any increase to be noticeable such as in Lebanon (98%<sup>51</sup>), and in Jordan (95%<sup>52</sup>). On the other hand, most Least Developed Arab States are still suffering from low enrolment ratios in primary education. The percentage of children enrolled in primary education in Mauritania, for example, was only 53% for females and 55% for males<sup>53</sup> throughout the period 1995-2001.

In this regard, it is to be noted, that the literacy rates among males is higher than that among females, with two thirds of illiterate adults in the Arab world being women<sup>iii</sup>. In some Arab States, such as Egypt and Iraq, the percentages of literate females do not exceeding 44%<sup>54</sup> and 45%<sup>55</sup> of the total female population. Bahrain on the other hand is one country that is noticed to have a high 83%<sup>56</sup> of female literacy opposed to 91%<sup>57</sup> among males. The same phenomenon is recorded in the United Arab Emirates where the percentage of literate women stood at a high of 93%<sup>58</sup> compared to 85%<sup>59</sup> for males

#### **4. Conclusion:**

Gender equality has been stressed and clearly called for in the Millennium development indicators. As demonstrated above, the Arab world has been advancing in relation to some gender indicators as the case in eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education. Nevertheless, this

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<sup>i</sup> In both countries, net enrolment ratios in primary education increased by around 16 % from 1990 to 1995

<sup>ii</sup> Between 1990 and 1995 the net enrolment ratio in primary education decreased from 86.6 % to 80.2 % in Qatar, and from 94.3% to 79.6% in UAE.

<sup>iii</sup> Illiteracy rates in the Arab States amount to 40%- Arab Human Development Report -2002

advancement in relation to other indicators and factors of gender equality -as the case in the share in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector and number of seats held by women in parliaments- has not been enough to allow announcing that gender equality, measured by the MDG indicators, has been achieved, or is most probably going to be achieved, by 2015.

Achieving gender equality in the Arab states is an urgent issue. This can be achieved through adopting and enacting gender sensitive policies, programs, and indeed legislations. These policies and acts should aim at the factual empowerment of women in all terms including economic, educational, and indeed in enhancing their political/legislative representation. In fact gender should become a cross cutting element in all policies; on the macro and sectoral levels.

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