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WOMEN, EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST



Keynote Presented by

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Education is a basic human right and an essential factor for economic and social development. In many parts of the world, illiteracy rates among women in adulthood are still high due to limited access to education during childhood. Despite the progress reported, a gap persists between men and women in terms of access to education, especially in patriarchal societies such as those that characterize the

Middle East. In Southeast Asia, 3 out of 5 women are illiterate; in the Arab world and Africa, this figure is closer to 50%. The fight against illiteracy and advocacy for access to basic education amongst women and girls remains a global priority. The United Nations Development Fund, in its fourth installment of the Arab Human Development Report¹ titled "*Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World*", stated that inequality of educational opportunities poses a serious obstacle to the advancement of women, even though females are higher academic achievers than their male counterparts in the region. Illiteracy in Arab countries, therefore, remains more widespread among women than men.

The impact of the Arab spring on women remains difficult to discern. Violence against women seems to have increased in the last two years. Mohamed Diab's portrayal of sexual harassment in the streets of Egypt in "Cairo 678", which tells the story of three young Egyptian victims of sexual harassment from different social classes struggling to raise awareness of this issue in the face of a society more prone

to ignoring it, speaks to the widespread and pervasive difficulties faced by women's rights advocates in the region. Egyptian judges who opposed the appointment of female magistrates, pushes for the reversal of legislation outlawing polygamy in Libya, and the proposed replacement by Islamists in Tunisia of the term "equality" with "complementarity" in the constitution are all very real dangers threatening to reverse decades of work by Arab feminists to reform inherently discriminatory legislation and social practices. Despite Western media initially heralding the arrival of a new Middle East with praise, the rise of Islamism following the 1979 Iranian Revolution remains very much a part of political and social ideology the has manifested itself in the form of retrogressive, and oftentimes, blatantly discriminatory political agendas of new authoritarian orders.

Having said this, from my own personal experience as president of the USFMEP, I have luckily had the opportunity to meet with many women's rights advocates from around the Arab world who, whilst acknowledging and understanding the pervasiveness and the threats represented by the obstacles they face, provide a

¹ Arab Human Development Report "Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World"

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characterization of the situation that is not as dire as we may be prone to believe. Through the different events we organize at the United Nations and in the Middle East, and those in which we participate, we have been able to gauge moderate, yet noteworthy, progress. As such, the Arab revolts can be used to highlight and emphasize the leading role women have assumed in demanding and advocating for change, an unprecedented degree of participation and involvement in the region and the focus of much Western scholarship on the matter.

I strongly believe that the instability currently prevailing in the Middle East is not the result of an inherent conflict between traditionalism and modernism, or Islam and the West. This temporary instability is rooted in a variety of social, economic, political and psychological factors that remain predominantly domestic in character. In the coming years, young generations in the Arab world will achieve a level of education that will allow for democracy to emerge. Achieving a relatively adequate level of education coupled with the reduction of fertility rates are indicators that the region is on the cusp of entering into a new demographic phase indispensable for economic and social development and for the flourishing of democratic systems. These have

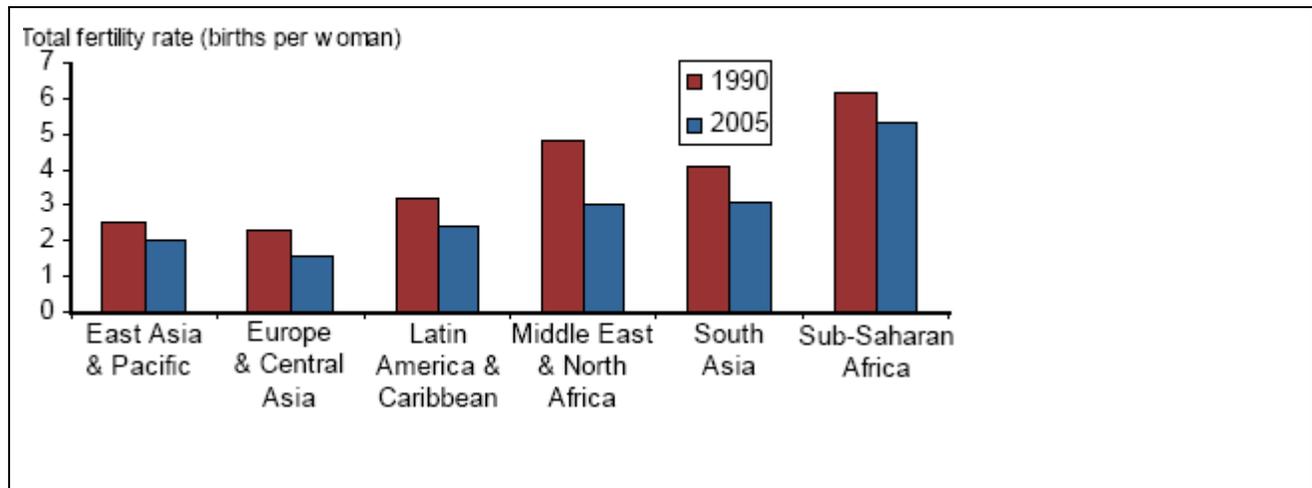
been accepted prerequisites for the establishment of nearly all democratic systems existing today. If the Arab world is able to achieve this transition, there is no reason to believe that the outcome will be different.

*"The Arab region has been going through a rapid demographic transition from sustained high fertility rates to much lower levels since the beginning of the 1990s. This phenomenon is accompanied by many changes locally, among which is an increase in the levels of school enrollment, especially of female children who used to lag behind males in this regard. These changes will lead to further decrease of the rates of population growth in the Arab world...This is especially true in the Middle East and North Africa region where the educational fertility differentials are very strong and substantial changes are presently occurring or can be expected to occur in the educational composition"*²

² "Population and Education Prospects in the Arab World: The Need for Multi-Educational State Population Projections". Anne GOUJON, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), Laxenburg, Austria.

www.cicred.org/Eng/Seminars/Details/Seminars/education/ACTES/Res_Goujon.PDF

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“Between 1990 and 2005, the total fertility rate [in the Middle East] dropped by 1.8 births per woman, the largest decline amongst all regions. The biggest changes were in Oman and Iran, which recorded nearly three fewer births per woman. The region has made impressive improvements in education: nearly 90 percent of its children complete primary education.”³

Over the past 20 years, significant progress has been made in higher education. For example, Libya indicates that women are more likely than men to pursue studies abroad, while in Algeria 86.6% of female students choose to pursue higher education. According to United Nations’ statistics, in nearly two thirds of Middle Eastern countries, there are more women than men enrolled in universities. This exceeds the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals target - to eliminate gender disparity at all levels of education by 2015.⁴ The education of the masses and demographic transitions are universal phenomena; the fact that they are taking place in the Middle East grants me the confidence to predict that the region will traverse its phase of instability to reach the “universal” standard of democracy as well as economic and social development.

What Needs to be Done?

³ Regional Fact Sheet From The World Development Indicators 2007: Middle East and North Africa. [Siteresources .worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/mna_wdi.pdf](http://www.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/mna_wdi.pdf)

⁴ “Mideast women beat men in education, lose out at work” <http://www.cnn.com/2012/06/01/world/meast/middle-east-women-education>

At the USFMEP, we have dedicated our efforts towards educating and empowering youth worldwide. This is due to a firm belief and assertion that they will play a crucial role in shaping the future. We also believe that in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, special attention must be paid to educating and empowering women with a particular focus on those in rural areas. In February 2012, the USFMEP organized a seminar titled "Reconciliation Through the Empowerment of Rural Women" during which experts from around the world shared their views on how education can incorporate poverty-stricken communities into existing social and political structures and encourage the empowerment of rural women, helping to fulfill their untapped potential. The education of women and girls as well as the elimination of gender disparity are key elements to advancing the status of women and achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The role education plays in the eradication of poverty, the reduction of child mortality, and improvement of maternal health cannot be overstated. This, in turn, contributes towards global development and, as a result, provides a sound strategy for the advancement of rural as well as underdeveloped urban communities. Any strategy aimed at reducing female illiteracy should focus on providing equal access to basic education and ensure that girls complete, at the very least, basic primary education.

Our efforts should be mobilized toward the promotion of free and compulsory basic education; more often than not, the governments of developing nations tend to consider education a privilege rather than a right. For this reason, a rights-based approach has been relegated to a secondary position with the benefits derived from the provision of basic education cast in economic terms as a means of persuading governments more prone to hostility when faced with rights-based language that give priority and primacy to development as a prerequisite to the safeguarding of basic rights. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk was amongst the first leaders to understand that education is not only a right but also a passport to human development. In the words of Ataturk, "Government's most creative and significant duty is education." True to his word, Turkey now serves as an exemplar of the power educating and empowering the population has in transforming and modernizing society. The fact that Turkey today has one of the world's highest ratios of university graduates relative to population can undeniably be attributed to this ethos. Under Ataturk's

leadership, thousands of new schools were constructed and primary education was made free and compulsory; even the armed forces were mobilized toward the accomplishment of this goal in the implementation of an extensive program for the promotion of literacy, "*The Army of Enlightenment*".

The eradication of adult illiteracy is also a target of the Millennium Development Goals; within the accomplishment of this aim, we must not forget addressing the needs of adult women who are too often the secondary or tertiary beneficiaries of education, economic and political advancement. All modern means available must be geared towards the creation of widespread literacy programs and campaigns in an attempt to achieve this end. Here too, Atatürk's achievements present examples of astounding success. His decision to *emphasize placing women's secondary and higher education on an equal footing with men* as well as equality in terms of syllabi empowered both the male and female segments of the population to enter into the profit-generating sector of Turkey's economy. The relegation of women to the domestic sphere and, as such, the informal sphere of the economy, where their education would focus on household management and childcare became hallmarks of the past. A new emphasis on the provision of skills needed to contribute to meaningful change through active participation in the economic and social

development of a society became a norm that remains difficult to emulate and a goal to which the region must aspire.

In closing, I would also like to highlight one obstacle to the advancement of women in the Middle East that is often overlooked. The role patriarchy and the resulting culture and traditions have played in ingraining the acceptability of discriminatory practices in the psyche of men as well as women in the Middle East cannot be ignored. Governments must assume responsibility for the persistence of gender bias within their educational systems and curricula, as well as the behavior of teachers and educators. Reform would be meaningless if the benefits derived are inaccessible or not understood by the majority of a nation's female population. For this reason, awareness-raising campaigns, crisis centers and humanitarian workers must possess the cultural sensitivity to understand the self-perpetuation of the

abovementioned social mores and work toward their elimination within a culturally and religiously sensitive framework. Workshops as well as campaigns focused on the elimination of discrimination against women as well and empowerment initiative that surpass general PR obligations to effect meaningful change are necessary now more than ever. If legal systems continue to reinforce discriminatory practices and society remain complacent, little can be done to guarantee the longevity of safeguard instituted for the protection of the regions women. Although a holistic approach to reform may appear most effective, taking into consideration religious, political and cultural sensitivities, a continuation of piecemeal reform programs towards an aspirational goal may give rise to more meaningful change.

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