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The Millennium Development Goals: Prospects for Gender Equality in the Arab World

By Nadine Sika¹

Abstract

This study is an assessment of the Millennium Development Goals in the Arab world with Egypt as a case study. The analysis focuses on access to primary education, gender equality, and women empowerment in the Arab world with special emphasis on Egypt. The study found that most Arab countries are on the right track toward achieving most of the MDGs by 2015. However, discriminatory social norms, laws, and practices are still at the heart of gender inequality in the Arab world, and therefore need to be further incorporated in the MDGs to advance a more egalitarian developmental approach.

Keywords: Arab World, Egypt, Gender Equality, Women Empowerment, Education, Equality, MDGs.

Introduction

The Declaration of the Right to Development in 1986 formally defined this fundamental human right. States have both the right and the duty to develop public policies to enhance the well being of their citizens. Nevertheless, by the beginning of the new millennium developing nations still faced serious impediments to development, and poverty was widespread. As a result, the United Nations enacted new measures to help alleviate world poverty and to ensure equality of opportunity to development of all individuals. The Millennium Declaration in the year 2000 was an evolutionary extension of the Right to Development, which was endorsed by the UN member states as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved by the year 2015. To ensure sustainable development the MDGs set out eight measurable developmental goals, each with different targets. Goal 1: to eradicate extreme hunger and poverty; Goal 2: to achieve universal primary education; Goal 3: to promote gender equality and women's empowerment; Goal 4: to reduce child mortality rates; Goal 5: to improve maternal health; Goal 6: to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; Goal 7: to ensure environmental sustainability; and Goal 8: to implement a global partnership for development (Alston, 2005).

In spite of these precise targets, so far the MDGs have concentrated on certain measurable aspects of development but overlooked the elimination of discriminatory laws and practices against women. Gender equality is central to the MDGs; yet, neither the goals nor the targets hold any direct references to the elimination of discriminatory laws and practices against women (Alston, 2005: 766). One might ask why discrimination in general and discrimination against women in particular limit development? What is the extent to which discrimination against women affects development? Does discrimination impede women's right to development and hinder the achievement of the MDGs? Does discrimination against women in the Arab world affect their development and empowerment potential? According to the World Bank (2004), discrimination directly

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obstructs good governance and works against the efficiency of social and legal institutions. It limits both the effectiveness of government and state by limiting competition, economic performance, and welfare (World Bank, 2004). Thus, this study will shed light on Arab countries' amendments to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women; will analyze the personal status laws and the right to a nationality as precipitated in different Arab countries. This research argues that the MDGs cannot be fully achieved in the developing world, especially in the Arab world, without addressing and eliminating all types of discriminatory laws and practices against women. By concentrating on these two goals, this study argues that the failure to address discriminatory laws and practices against women in the Arab world limits and undermines the ultimate effectiveness of the MDGs.

Arab governments have been developing MDG monitoring reports for the past decade. Most reports have concentrated on the goals attained thus far and the challenges posed to achieve the MDGs. However, they largely ignore the extent to which the MDGs have helped Arab citizens, mainly women, to attain their full development potential in light of discriminatory policies and practices. In an attempt to shed light on the importance of addressing discrimination issues for the fulfillment of the MDGs, this study will analyze two MDG goals. Goal 2, regarding the achievement of universal primary education, is to "ensure that, by 2010, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling." The measurement of this goal and target is through indicators measuring "net enrollment ration in primary education; proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach last grade of primary; literacy rate of 15-24 year-olds, women and men" (UNDP, 2010). This goal is important in portraying the importance of quantity, rather than quality in the case of the Arab world. The enrollment of girls is important in eliminating discrimination against women, nevertheless the content of the curricula itself is important for analyzing the extent to which the "quality" of education enhances gender equality. Goal 3, concerning gender equality and women empowerment, is to "eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2015, and in all levels of education no later than 2015." Its measurement is based on identifying "ratios of girls to boys in primary, secondary, and tertiary education; share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector; [and] proportion of seats held by women in national parliament" (UNDP, 2010). Gender empowerment within the MDG framework, is important for developing quantitative advancement for women's participation in society. However, it disregards the importance of empowerment of women from different angles, like for instance, the feminist perspective, which identifies it as a woman's power in her own setting, control over her family and society, her self-realization, and her potential to change both herself and society around her (Joensseon, 2010: 396).

These two goals represent important milestones in the MDGs, since there is an inverse relation between education enrollment, alleviation of poverty, and increased access to maternal and child health care (UNDP, 2010). Women's equality and empowerment is "one of the most important linkages across the MDGs" (UNDP, 2010: 1). Nevertheless, women's empowerment from an MDG perspective, is rather limited in its perspective, and should be developed from a broader perspective, like the feminist interpretation of empowerment for instance. This feminist approach to women empowerment is important for the realization of a more pronounced role of women from

below, which helps in changing social norms of discrimination against women. For instance, concentrating on the MDGs with regards to the proportion of women in parliament, may not effectively develop the role of women in society, rather may institutionalize authoritarianism. For instance 62 seats were reserved for women in the 2010 Egyptian parliamentary elections in accordance with the newly applied quota system. However, candidates who won the elections are all members of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), which helps in gaining more power to the NDP, rather than in initiating new laws for developing the role of women in society.

The Status of Women in the Arab World

When the MDGs began to be implemented in 2000, Arab countries advanced development initiatives within the MDG framework. A special emphasis throughout these initiatives was the enhancement of the status of women. Nevertheless, according to the 2005 Arab Human Development Report:

Many (Arab women) 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 labor participation are compounded to "create serious challenges" (UNDP, 2006: III).

A number of discriminatory laws undermines the status of women and impedes women's rights in the Arab world. For instance, many Arab countries signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). However, eight countries (Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Syria and the UAE) enacted amendments to Article 2, which ensures that "States Parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women..."

Nevertheless policy makers contend that amendments to this Article are necessary for the preservation of religious traditions. However, these laws worked as a green light for both the enactment and the preservation of discriminatory laws and practices against women throughout the region. For instance, countries like Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon do not have a unified personal status law, which restricts inter-faith marriages, and are generally discriminative against women, and are left for religious interpretations, rather than civil codes (UNDP, 2006: 180). According to Shari'a law, men are allowed to only marry non-Muslim women who belong to either the Jewish or the Christian faith. "... (Lawful unto you in marriage) are (not only) chaste women who are believers, but chaste women among the People of the Book, revealed before your time, - when ye give them their due dowries, and desire chastity, not lewdness, nor secret intrigues if any one rejects faith, fruitless is his work, and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of those

who have lost (all spiritual good)” (Surah 5, Al Ma’ida)². In this case, children must be raised as Muslims (Leeman, 2009: 756); directly infringing on a woman’s right to “ensure the religious and moral education of [her] children in conformity with [her] own convictions” (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 18 (4)). On the other hand, a Muslim woman is prohibited from marrying any person who does not belong to the Islamic faith (Leeman, 2009: 757), directly contradicting human rights standards perpetuating the right to freely choose a person’s spouse. Moreover, if the marriage is to be ended, a non-Muslim woman has the legal problem of being driven to accept Islamic, rather than secular jurisprudence. This explains the rarity of interfaith marriages in the Arab world, with such marriages leading to more problems and discriminations against women than the same faith marriages. The penal codes in many Arab countries, like Jordan for instance, discriminate against women especially in “honor crimes,” the system of punishing women for “sexual crimes” such as adultery. Only accusations of such crimes may be sufficient to jeopardize women’s lives as well. In Kuwait for instance, the law reduces the imprisonment of men in honor crimes against their women relatives to a maximum of three years (Afary, 2004). In Jordan, it is estimated that one third of the country’s killings are related to honor crimes. However, the average sentences for such killings are for only seven and a half months imprisonment (AWID, 2005). The complexity of Jordan’s tribal system is an important impediment for reforming this law, since the Jordanian government depends on its legitimacy on much of these tribes whose customs infringes on women’s rights. These measures directly threaten a woman’s right to empowerment, from a “feminist” perspective, which is instrumental for the fulfillment of development on a larger scale in society, rather than the limited perspective of quantitative women empowerment in education, employment and politics.

Concerning the right to nationality as prescribed in Article 9 of the CEDAW, thirteen Arab countries have enacted amendments that clearly discriminate against a woman’s equal right to nationality (UNDP, 2006: 179). In Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon a man has the right to give his nationality to his children born from a foreign national, while a woman does not (El Solh &Hijab, 2008: 43). In Kuwait, a woman is denied the right to give her nationality to her children born to a non-Kuwaiti national. Until July 2010, a foreign husband of a Kuwaiti woman was denied residency permits if he was unemployed. Thus if a non-national married to a Kuwaiti woman could not renew his work permit he faced the threat of expulsion, putting the whole family at risk (HRW 2010; UPR Submission Kuwait 2009). Today women can “sponsor” their non-national husbands, making it harder for men to be expelled; nevertheless the children born within such a marriage are still denied the Kuwaiti residency. These laws are problematic, especially for poor women who are married to non-nationals: their children do not attain the same benefits of free education and access to public health care facilities as their counterparts whose fathers are Arab nationals and their mothers are not. Thus discriminatory laws directly extend to a women’s family’s rights to development, especially to poor households, where basic free education and healthcare are essential for the family’s survival.

² The Holy Quran, Yusuf Ali Translation,
http://www.harunyahya.com/Quran_translation/Quran_translation5.php

Some reforms have been adopted by a few Arab countries, like Egypt and Morocco, where women are now able to pass their nationality to their children born of non-nationals. However, these laws pose different limitations and are not implemented efficiently.³ The least discriminatory laws against women are in the Maghreb states (North Africa), especially Tunisia, which began to expand women's freedoms and rights in the 1950s, shortly after independence, while other countries lagged far behind. Accordingly, it has the most progressive laws concerning equality in family relationships (UNDP, 2006: 180).

Discrimination against women is not only prevalent in discriminatory laws, but also in "absent or limited implementations mechanisms; insufficient dissemination of correct information on reformed legislation; resistance to giving women more rights; a judicial system subject to corruption; and arbitrary ruling by judges" (El Solh & Hijab, 2008: 27). Thus, even in cases where discriminatory laws have been reduced, limited implantation mechanisms and discriminatory social norms and practices are extended to policy makers, which in many instances effectively impede reform from taking place. Therefore, public awareness campaigns, education reform and women empowerment projects need to take the problem of discrimination against women into consideration, for a broader implementation of development for all individuals within society. Basic primary education for all and women's equality and empowerment will be jeopardized if discrimination against women is not eradicated.

Achieving Universal Primary Education

Women's access to primary education in the Arab World has increased dramatically in the past decades, especially at the primary level, but significantly dropped at the secondary level (UNDP, 2006: 77). Nevertheless, according to the UNESCO Global Monitoring Report (2010), the majority of pupils who are not enrolled in schools, and the majority of dropouts before the completion of primary education are females (UNDP & LAS, 2010). Female illiteracy rates are much higher than male in all Arab countries, except in Qatar and UAE, where illiteracy rates are of 16.8 percent for men compared to 19.5 percent for women in Qatar and 20.5 percent for women compared to 24.8 percent for men in the UAE. As for the rest of the Arab world, female illiteracy rates are almost double those of men, with the highest rates in Yemen: 75 percent compared to 32.6 percent male illiteracy rates. Morocco has 63.9 percent female illiteracy compared to 38.2 percent of male illiteracy rates (UNDP & LAS, 2010). Cultural and social norms are important, with families preferring to send boys to schools and keeping girls at home to help with household activities. Early dropout rates from education are the direct result of fewer resources for poor households who have fewer funds to invest in their children, and are less resilient to external economic shocks. Middle to lower income countries⁴ like Morocco, Egypt, Sudan, and Yemen in the Arab world have high poverty levels and the likelihood for children, and most importantly

³ The Egyptian Nationality law for instance, does not include children who were born before the 2004 amended date of the law. If a family is to acquire this right, they must go through complicated procedures and obtain a permit from the Minister of Interior. For more information regarding this law, see the Campaign for Arab Women's Right to A Nationality <http://www.learningpartnership.org/citizenship/2009/09/egypt-discrimination-nationality/>

⁴ The classification of these countries is in accordance with the Human Development Index as developed by the UNDP, especially in the Arab Human Development Reports

girls, leaving school early increases with the increase in poverty levels. For instance in Yemen, the rate of children deprived of primary education, especially of the first four years, is twice as high as the national average of the poorest population therein (UNDP & LAS, 2010). Moreover, the shortage of school buildings and the high repetition of classes, especially of the fourth grade, are important factors in early dropouts as well. These last two challenges are attributable to the low quality of education to which poor children, especially in rural areas, are exposed to as opposed to richer children in urban areas.

Table (1) Illiteracy Rates and Youth Literacy Rates in the Arab World

	Adult Literacy Rates 15+ 1995-2005		Youth Literacy Rates 2007	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Jordan	95.2	87	99	99
Egypt	83	59.4	88	82
Syria	87.8	73.6	95	92
UAE	89	87.8	94	97
Bahrain	88.6	83.6	100	100
Saudi Arabia	87.5	76.4	98	96
Oman	86.9	73.9	99	98
Qatar	89.1	88.6	99	99
Kuwait	94.4	91	98	99
Tunisia	83.4	65.3	97	94
Algeria	79.6	60.1	94	91
Libya	92.8	74.8	100	98
Morocco	65.7	39.6	84	67

Sources: Adult Literacy Rates, Arab Human Development Report, 2009; Youth Literacy Rates UNESCO 2010 Global Monitoring Report, p. 309.

Quantity vs. Quality of Education

The MDG reports are mostly concerned with the number of students who are able to access primary education (AHDR, 2009; AHDR, 2005; AMDG, 2010). However, few studies in the Arab world focus on the quality of education students attain during their school years, which is crucial in the socialization process of students (Almond & Verba, 1989; Inkeles 1976). Most mass education reform processes that have taken place in the Arab world focus on promoting national identity. During their education reform processes these countries were eager to establish a common heritage through education, to ease the process of nation building (World Bank, 2008: 138). However, the extent to which Arab curricula promote gender empowerment and equality is not clear and needs further investigation.

Quantitative measures have taken place in different countries, like the “Girl friendly” schools, in Egypt for instance, which represent an innovation that ensures the separation of the sexes on the school premises, to encourage parents to send their daughters to schools without cultural infringement on parents’ wishes not to make their

daughters in mixed schools. They also ensure that girls living in impoverished areas have the right to access education (World Bank, 2008: 139). To this end, women teachers were widely recruited in Arab countries to encourage access to education for women. For instance, in Yemen, the government in cooperation with UNESCO recruited 70 women teachers in 2006 in the Hodeidah governorate. Three years later, the number of girls' enrolment doubled from 24 percent to 48 percent (UNGEI, 2011). The private sector and civil society organizations were encouraged to participate in educational reform as well. For instance, in Jordan the private sector has been involved in curricular development and teacher training skills programs (World Bank, 2008: 140).

However, the extent to which gender equality issues were addressed throughout these curricula is understudied in the Arab world. There is an imminent need for a comprehensive examination of Arab curricula, to ensure that social stigmas against women are eliminated from the curricula. A significant impediment to the realization of universal primary education in the Arab world lies in the subtle discriminatory practices against women and girls, which directly infringe on the attainment of their right to basic education. For instance, children whose mothers are Arabs but fathers are not, are more likely to be denied access to free public education, due to problems of nationality rights in most of the Arab world. Divorced Arab women heads of household are at highest risk of poverty in the Arab world⁵ as a result of both discriminatory laws and social norms. For instance, in Yemen poverty measures for female-head of household are 4 percent higher than their male counterparts, where poverty is highest, deepest and most severe amongst illiterate house of households (Yemen Poverty Report, 2009: 65). The trap of poverty becomes intensified in this case, since illiterate and poor heads of household do not have the capability to invest in their children's education.

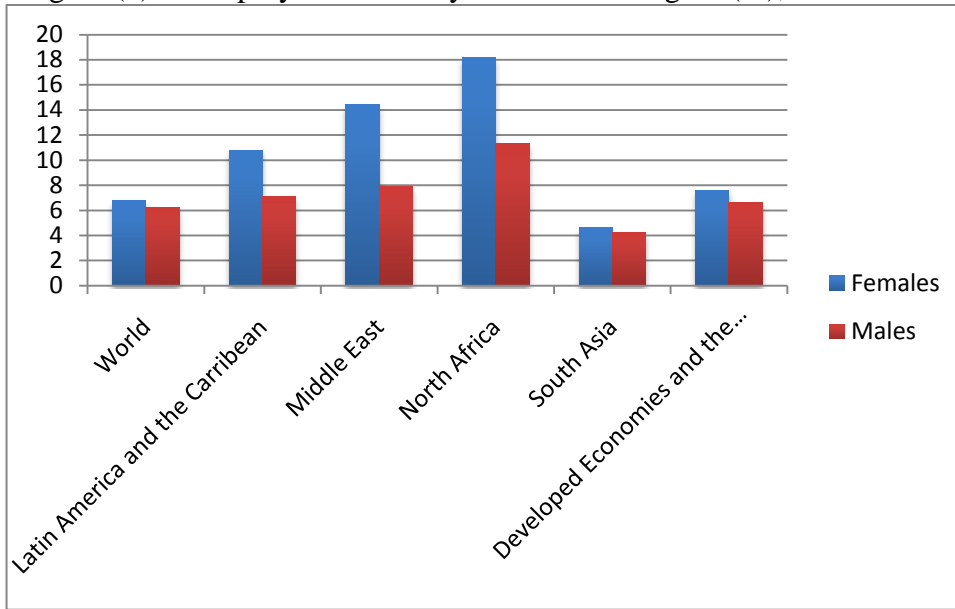
Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

Equal access to higher education was achieved in several Arab countries like the UAE and Libya, but in Sudan, Yemen, and Morocco, women represent only 10 percent of enrollment levels (Bernard, 2006). Women in higher education are primarily enrolled in the social sciences and humanities rather than in scientific fields (UNDP, 2006: 78). Some practices by Arab universities have outright discrimination measures. In Kuwait, men are accepted to study engineering and petroleum studies with 67.9 grade point average, while women are only accepted for the same studies with 83.5 grade point average (UNDP, 2006: 79). These measures, impede women from accessing certain jobs, and keep them within the realm of typical female jobs, like teachers or housewives for instance.

Despite women's increased performance in education, positions in the job market remain dim. Female unemployment levels far exceed the levels of any other region in the world (Figures 1 and 2). Female unemployment rates have only dropped slightly from 1991 to 2008.

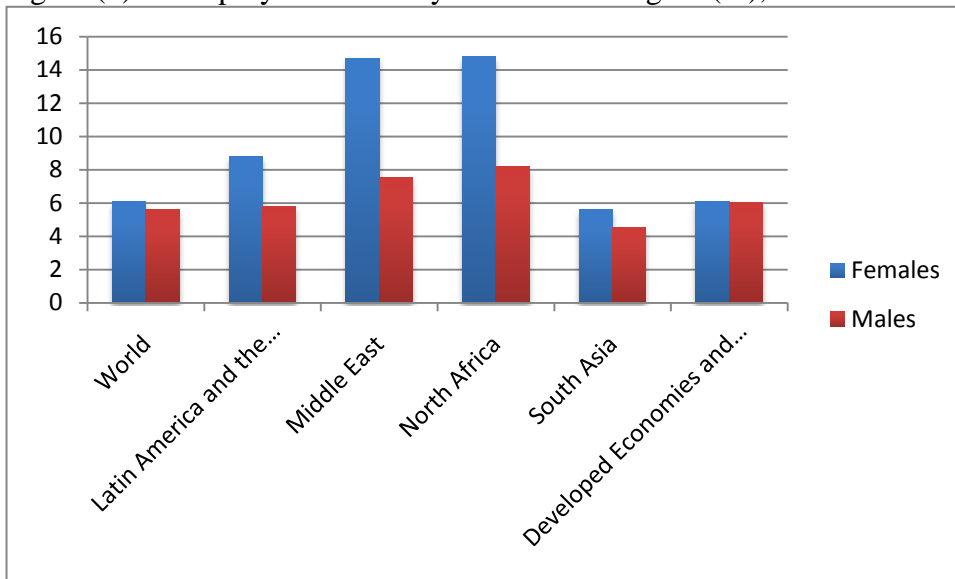
⁵ See for example the Jordan Poverty Assessment Report 2009; Syria Poverty Assessment Report 2005; Egypt Poverty Assessment Report 2007.

Figure (1) Unemployment Rate by Gender and Region (%), 1991



Source: ILO, *Global Employment Trends for Women*, March 2009

Figure (2) Unemployment Rate by Gender and Region (%), 2008



Source: ILO, *Global Employment Trends for Women*, March 2009

The Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Oman, illustrate a curious phenomenon: with the highest levels of female education and female access to higher education there are also the highest levels of female unemployment in the Arab region (UNDP, 2006: 91). These high unemployment rates are mostly the result of social norms and practices, which prefer women to stay at home.

Wage discrimination against women in the Arab world is also widespread, especially in the private sector, which increased tremendously with the advancement of the structural re-adjustment programs. In Jordan, female university graduates earn only 71 percent of the amount earned by their male counterparts in the same job (UNDP, 2006: 91). There are other instances of discrimination in employment practices that are not protected by law in the Arab world. In Syria, employment offices do not offer employment opportunities to women on as regular a basis as they do for men. In Morocco, women receive half the minimum wage required by law through weak enforcement measures of the reformed laws (El Solh & Hijab, 2008). These practices are representations of cultural norms and stigmas against women rather than representations of discriminatory laws.

Some progress has been made toward women's empowerment in the political space and their access to public offices, but to date women still occupy only 10 percent of all parliamentary seats in the whole Arab region, amounting to the lowest rates in the world (UNDP & LAS, 2010). In some countries like Morocco and Jordan, and most recently Egypt, quotas for women's participation in parliaments have been enacted. In 2007, Moroccan women were capable of attaining 10.8 percent of the parliamentary seats, as opposed to 0.6 percent in 1997 (UNDP & LAS, 2007: 18). Tunisia, after Iraq, has the highest level of female representation in Parliament, where they occupy 22.8 percent of seats. Moreover, women have fewer seats in the executive branches where there are no quotas (UNDP, 2006: 96). In Tunisia for instance, women constitute only 7 percent of the total ministerial positions (UNHDR, 2009). Arab republics are mainly presidential systems, with far more power in the executive than the legislative branch of government. Thus, women in higher numbers in parliament rather than in the executive branch show their marginalization in the decision-making processes of these countries, with Tunisia a particularly stark example. There is no Arab woman serving as minister in sensitive ministerial positions, such as in the Ministry of Interior or Defense. These government trends intensify cultural traditions of alienating women, and of giving priority to highly sensitive government positions to males.

In the field of gender empowerment and access to education, most Arab countries have been able to generate gender-aggregated data for women's access to education, enrollment in primary education, and youth literacy rates. They are, therefore, more able to target gender problems. However, these reports do not address the issues of discriminatory laws, which impede women's empowerment. For instance, there are no statistical Arab data that address the prevailing obstacles to women's education or the reasons behind the high dropout rates of girls from schools. In many Arab countries the gender gap in access to education has been addressed, however, national reports have been unable to analyze why, even though the gap has decreased, the gender gap is still high in the workforce (UN-ESCWA, 2008: 25). Therefore it is of grave importance to enact more social and anthropological research for the development of gender aggregated data to help decrease gender bias and discrimination, which in turn could better serve the effectiveness of gender equality and empowerment of the MDGs.

MDGs in Egypt

This investigation will now analyze the link between MDGs and discrimination against women in the case of Egypt, an important regional power and the most populous Arab country. During the past few years, Egypt was able to attain a high percentage of economic development and growth. Its GDP grew from 4.5 percent in 2005 to 7.2 percent in 2008 (World Bank, 2010), which ensured its departure from the “low development category” in the 1990s to the “medium development category” of nations by the mid 2000s, as specified by the United Nations Human Development Index. According to the 2008 Egypt Human Development Report, the Egyptian Human Development Index has improved continuously since 1996. Egypt adopted the MDGs for a five-year span between 2002 and 2007, and its strategies were mostly compatible with the eight MD goals. Various studies found that it is “on the right track to realizing most of the Millennium Development Goals by the set date of 2015” (MED, 2008: iii). In this sense, it is important to understand the road on which Egypt embarked to advance the MDGs in general and how women are incorporated in the MDG strategy.

The 2002-2007-development plan allocated most of the resources to Upper Egyptian governorates, Assiut, Suhag, Beni Suif, Aswan, Qena, Minya and Fayoum because they rank lowest on Egypt’s development index. The Egyptian government initiated short-term programs that targeted poverty and hunger reduction, and that support and directly target the “Most Vulnerable Families” (UNDP, 2008: 2). Nevertheless, the percentage of the poor increased during the years 2000-2005, with main clusters in Upper Egypt’s geographic areas (UNDP, 2008: 2). Poverty levels in this region, decreased only from 39.8 percent in 2005 to 39.4 percent in 2008 (MED, 2008: 8). In spite of the overall level of economic development, these figures point out that development has not been achieved in the case of impoverished rural villages, with a marked reduction in per capita expenditure for the poor (Khair El Din & El-Laithy, 2008: 44). For instance the government of Egypt introduced major tax improvements, eliminated restrictions on access to foreign currency and savings; eliminated customs barriers for the development of international trade; liberalized the financial sector, through increasing private ownerships of banks and financial institutions (World Bank, 2007). Nevertheless, these policies did not address social reform policies, especially to the most vulnerable that would be harshly affected by these neo liberal measures. Policies did not ensure an equal distribution of income amongst different segments of society. Thus even though Egypt is on the right track in the MDG progress and its government is trying to allocate money and resources to Upper Egypt, these policies have not targeted the poorest sections of society.

Universal Access to Primary Education: Quantity over Quality

Where access to universal primary education is concerned, government policies have mainly focused on increasing education enrollment in primary level education, and the eradication of illiteracy among 15-24 year olds of both sexes. Education policies have been enacted to increase the number of schools and to reduce class density (MED, 2008: 3). There has been a 7 percent increase in the number of primary level schools in Egypt from 2001 to 2006, and the rate of student enrollment increased by 25 percent during the same period. Education expenditure and investment also increased during the same period, from almost L.E. 3.7 billion in 2005 to L.E. 4.6 billion in 2006 (MED,

2008: 3). An important step for increasing female enrollment levels was undertaken through the one classroom schools for girls, which increased from 213 classes in 1994 to 2717 in 2003. Moreover, the girl-friendly school program was introduced and the Girls Education Initiative was launched in 2001 to promote female education in Egypt (Zaalouk, 2004). The main drawback concerns the elimination of the ratio of literate women to men by 2015, which would only reach 92.7 (NCW, 2005: 3).

These numbers show the overall improvement in the quantity of education, and the overall women's access to education. Hence, according to the MDG framework, Egypt attained major improvements in universal access to primary education. However, to what extent did these measures increase women's enrollment levels? A closer look at the population census shows a high number of drop-outs and low enrollment ratios for girls. For instance, 14 percent of 6 to 18 year olds have never enrolled in primary education or have dropped out in the basic education system. These figures translate to three million youths, who are mostly girls (UNDP, 2008: 34). Thus high dropout rates of girls are based on social norms of discrimination that favor boys' education over girls'. According to the Egypt Human Development Report (2008), three Egyptian governorates (al-Wadi al-Jadid, North Sinai, and Marsa Matruh) would not be able to reduce gender inequality at the secondary level of education. It is believed that educational institutions in these governorates are both not sufficient and inefficient for the attainment of the MDGs (UNDP, 2008: 43). A significant obstacle is "the prevailing culture among Bedouins⁶ in these governorates [which] prevents women from attaining their educational and property rights, leading to high illiteracy rates and lack of awareness regarding the importance of education" (UNDP, 2008: 43). There is no clear government policy to reduce cultural discriminatory practices against women in these areas when the government should conduct awareness campaigns amongst these populations to promote the importance of education for women. The MDG reports concerned more with statistics and number figures do not tackle the important question of *how* to eliminate discrimination against women, even though it is clear that the realization of the MDGs is directly dependent on eliminating cultural and social norms that discriminate against women.

Do Poor Women have Equal chance to Access Education?

Another substantial problem that concerns the right to equality of opportunity is not only access to education, but also access to a proper educational system, which is mostly neglected in the MDG reports. In the case of Egypt, the type of education students encounter in rural areas vis-à-vis urban areas varies widely. For instance, it is believed that public schools in urban areas have more capable teachers than in rural areas, while teachers in rural areas believe they are assigned to these locations as a punishment by the educational administration. Thus, according to a student in an Egyptian village, "if I am a student in a rural school, how can I achieve good educational standards if my teacher is being punished by teaching me?" (Megahed & Mark, 2008: 381). Teachers in public schools have very low salaries, and in turn very low motivation to teach students properly in the classroom. They prefer to resort to private tutoring as a means to acquire more money (Galal, 2002: 7). As a result, only students who can afford private tutoring are able to attain better educational standards. This factor further enhances inequality toward

⁶ The Bedouin population is believed to be 500,000 residents (WFP, 2007).

accessing proper education. Moreover, since social and cultural norms prefer boys' over girls' education, the chances are much higher that families will be willing to pay for private tutoring for boys rather than for girls. Thus the importance of "teachers, teacher training and teaching-learning practices" (UNESCO 2010) in addition to "highly motivated, justly remunerated and well-trained teachers" (AMDG 2010; UNESCO 2010) is essential for developing quality education, however, in Arab rural areas, these criteria are minimally met. A policy of encouraging the recruitment of teachers from the rural areas is essential, to keep these teachers in the country side, instead of recruiting teachers from urban areas who would not want to migrate to the country side is also important for the development of education in rural areas. Encouraging women teachers in the countryside is also important for the generation of employment and for encouraging more girls to enroll to school.

Discrimination against Women in the Egyptian Curriculum

The Egyptian curriculum is filled with signs of inequality and discrimination against women. For example, references to women's rights are presented in the lesson manuals for teachers, but the number of illustrations that present men tremendously outnumbers women, out of 449 illustrations in the primary level curriculum only 119 pictures present women (Sika, 2010: 119). The illustrations depict women in their traditional roles as either housewives or teachers, which stigmatizes the role of woman in the workforce in general. Some classroom lessons that address working women implicitly teach that women should only work temporarily, and only as replacement for men. This theme is also presented in other textbooks that point to the "ideal" mothers as those wage-earning women who produce goods in their households and do not invade the public space (Sika, 2010: 119).

Hence, the illustrations and examples of women in the curriculum reinforce the traditional roles of women in society rather than introduce new concepts of women's empowerment. These traditional ideas are also reflected in the students' perception of women's rights and of girls' self-perception. In a survey study conducted in several Egyptian governorates, it was found that most students believed that their mothers should not work outside their household, and that women do not have the right to equal pay for an equal job as their gender counterparts (Sika, 2010: 328). These articulations reflect a shallow understanding of the governments' policies regarding women's empowerment. The quality of education institutionalizes already existing discriminatory behaviors against women through latent manifestations of discrimination against them. Thus, students not only encounter discriminatory behavior in their social and cultural environment, but they are also exposed to these same ideas within their educational system.

The Egyptian government's objectives under the MDGs are to advance both universal primary education and women's empowerment. However, it was demonstrated that it is more concerned with quantity rather than quality, and while reference in its curriculum to women's rights is fundamental the way in which women's empowerment and rights are articulated throughout the educational system negate progress toward emancipation.

Women's Economic and Political Empowerment in Egypt

Despite the increasing number of women who have access to education and have qualifications and degrees, the employment rate of women in non-agricultural sectors is low. Recent research indicates that the percentage of female unemployment increased from 19.8 percent in 2001 to 25.1 percent in 2006 (UNDP, 2008: 35). These levels in 2006 were three times higher than those of males. More recently, among young people ages 15 to 25, unemployment levels are 23 percent for males and 61 percent for females (MED, 2008: 9). In this matter, the government reports that the MDGs have failed to issue prospects for eliminating the gender gap in the non-agricultural employment sector. There has also been no indication of conducting public awareness campaigns to encourage female employment and to undermine cultural biases against women's employment.

Women's political empowerment in Egypt has digressed in the past years. The ratio of elected and appointed women in the People's Assembly (the Lower House of Parliament) declined from 3.9 percent in 1990 to 1.8 percent in 2005 (MED, 2008: 9). Moreover, women only occupied only 1.8 percent of the seats in local councils. In the Shura Council (Upper House of Parliament), women occupied the most seats, 6.8 percent in 2005. In 2009, an important milestone for women's political empowerment was undertaken, providing a quota of 64 out of 454 seats in the lower house of parliament (AFP, 2009). Thus, in the 2010 parliamentary elections, women mainly from the National Democratic Party acquired their full quota for parliamentary seats. These quotas ensured that the ruling party would not jeopardize its power, as a result of women candidates, on the other hand it ensured that the number of NDP seats would increase. Even though this presents a breakthrough for women representation in recent years, its effectiveness for a more general women empowerment project from below is still to be seen. The role of these women in changing already existing legislation, or in enacting new pro women legislation is still far-fetched since they all belong to the ruling NDP. For instance, a vote barring women from acquiring judicial positions was taken in February 2010. Even though the High Judicial Council barred this decision, the debate is still taking place against women's rights. According to Human Rights Watch, many judges were opposed to including female judges in their ranks. Women are mostly appointed as judges by presidential decrees, rather than normal appointments (HRW, 2010). The Egyptian government contends that major impediments to women's empowerment lies in the social and cultural practices of Egyptians, yet, there are no campaigns or actions undertaken against such cultural discriminatory practices. Therefore, major public awareness campaigns and major legislative reforms need to be enacted to empower women and to gain gender equality in Egypt. Thus, without addressing discriminatory laws and practices against women in Egypt, women's empowerment under MDG goals cannot be attained.

MDGs and Discrimination against Women

The above-mentioned measures have been enacted to reduce discriminatory legislation in Egypt, yet progress level and the enforcement of reformed legislations have been slow in implementation. The government initiated the creation of the National Council for Women in 2000, which addresses "gender biases and harmful traditional practices as well as to increase girls' enrollment in schools" (MED, 2008: 24). The

reform of personal status laws represents important aspects of changing discriminatory practices against women. Its major goal is to increase women's rights and to facilitate their access to courts, especially concerning personal status disputes regarding divorce. A major law in this regard was passed concerning the nationality law, as was discussed earlier, where women are now able to pass their Egyptian nationality to their children born of non-Egyptian husbands, however, with difficulties (MED, 2008: 24). Women have also been granted the right to file for "no-fault" divorce (MED, 2008: 43). This divorce is known to be "khol^o" in Islamic practice. Under this law, a woman receives a divorce with the condition that she gives up her right to alimony and her right to all property she had gained during her marriage (Afary, 2004: 117). Even though these two legislations are perceived as benchmarks of gender reform projects, they have their loopholes and have not realized full gender equality without legal ambiguity. Clearly, there is more need to reform legislation, but more important are public awareness campaigns and strategies that target grassroots understanding of gender equality and empowerment. Therefore, the MDGs should address those discrimination issues in Egypt that pose obstacles to the realization of its goals.

Conclusion

To rely only on MDG measurements does not necessarily lead to the achievement of basic education for all or to the improvement of gender equality and women's empowerment in the Arab world. Arab scholars and policy makers have been consumed with writing MDG reports that are overwhelmingly filled with percentages and numbers of women's access to education, social, economic, political, and maternal health empowerment without targeting the root of the developmental problem, which lies in discriminatory laws and practices against women. The MDG Action Agenda between the years 2010 and 2015 states the importance of "investing in expanded opportunities for women and girls and advancing their economic, legal and political empowerment" (UNDP, 2010: 39). These strategies do not take into account the eradication of discriminatory laws and practices, which represent the backbone of any developmental project in the Arab world. As argued throughout this study, the achievement of the full potential for the MDGs in the Arab world, cannot be attained without eradication discriminatory laws and social norms against women. Access to universal primary education, and ensuring low drop-out rates amongst girls in the Arab world, cannot be achieved without an understanding by parents that girls' education is as important as that of boys. Therefore, effective public awareness campaigns through education and the media need to address the problems of discrimination against women in Arab societies. Women empowerment in social, cultural, economic and political fields cannot be realized effectively, without addressing and changing cultural and social norms from below.

The MDGs have not been entirely successful in eliminating the social and legal constraints and discriminatory behavior against women in the Arab world throughout the past ten years. Therefore, discriminatory laws against women should be abolished, positivist laws to ensure women's rights should be developed like a unified penal code for instance, and most importantly, Arab governments should withdraw their amendments to Article two of CEDAW. Steps should be undertaken to develop women's access to the employment market and decrease the gender gap. The content of the different Arab curricula should be reformed not only to develop the rights of women, but should also

address discriminatory social practices against women, to eliminate discrimination at the grassroots level. Without directly addressing discrimination against women in the Arab world, the realization of the MDGs in 2015 by all Arab Countries is highly unlikely.

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