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Arab Development**

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I Introduction:

What I wish to share with you today are some of my thoughts on what has so far been achieved and what one can hope will be the interventions in the near future on behalf of youth and gender in the Arab world. A key question at the start is what are the links between youth and women? It is true that both are vulnerable groups and both are currently marginalized and need empowerment. And yet, one tends to think of youth as the agents of change, and especially if they are encouraged to participate, whereas women and especially in the Arab world have been socialized to take a backseat in participation.

In this presentation, I will first go over some of the key trends that relate to gender and youth empowerment in the social, economic and political environments. And then I will turn to the need for a clear strategy and the way forward.

I know that it is difficult to generalize in providing a diagnostic of the socio-cultural environment that women share in the Arab world, but I can at least bring forth some of my concerns about traditional attitudes and values towards gender. Has something gone wrong in our march towards inclusion? We know that in our region, we have experienced some of the earliest social women's movements from across the world that were successful in the emancipation of our grandmothers. More recently, one can also observe that the speed with which Arab women have accessed education over the past three decades is astounding by world standards. And yet, culture now seems to be less accommodating in opening the doors for women to enter the workforce and employment. My interpretation is that there has been a regression in attitudes and values towards the goal of eliminating gender discrimination and I believe that available evidence for Egypt at least will confirm this hypothesis.

It is also true that across Arab countries and between regions within countries, youth share very similar vulnerabilities, despite the disparities in incomes and development levels. The two common features of disadvantage for youth are first, the level of unemployment which has persistently been the highest in the world for the past two decades, and second, the prolonged "waithood" and delays in forming families as compared to a decade ago (the youth bulge). What has happened in the Middle East is very different from the story in the West, where youth delay marriage because they are able to enjoy their independence and the more personal freedoms in their relations with the opposite sex. For Arab youth, getting married is the only door to independence and fulfillment. The problem is worth exploring by social scientists and hopefully with a multidisciplinary methodology, because evidence suggests that the problem is not only the financial cost of marriage but rather the social and economic status of young men and the security perceived in marriage for young women by their families.

It would seem to me that many of us believe that the specificity of our culture in Arab countries and the larger Islamic world dictates that women should spend but not earn income, and own but not operate



assets. Looking back at the past few decades, history would tell a different story. Contrary to these beliefs, Arab women have made enormous strides, in fact much faster than women in other cultures on at least two fronts. In terms of education, Barro and Lee show that mean years of schooling jumped from just over 1 in 1960 (the lowest level in the world) to more than 5 according to the most recent datasets. Again with regards to fertility and family size, some of the most Islamic countries such as Iran, have been able to reduce fertility from close to 6 in the 1980s to 2 or less more recently.

The problems that Arab women and youth are facing at the turn of the Millennium would seem to also do at least partly with success or failure at the national level in the management of overall economic policy and its channels of interaction with macroeconomic performance and social equity. Current unemployment levels, especially for women, are high on account of very protective labor laws, the lack of enforcement of decent work conditions and the absence of these facilities that make women's work possible such as nurseries for their preschool children or safe options for travel over long distances.

All the same, the scope for debate on the role of women in Islam is enormous and will continue to be contested by the two opposing poles in the interpretation of the concepts and practice of Islamic tradition. In fact, I would venture to say that the role of women in Islam is as much of an object of concern and puzzlement as is that of democracy in an Islamic context. The persistence of autocracy and paternalism in the Arab family would even seem to be reproduced in autocracy and monopoly of the political environment. In fact, the shortcomings in gender parity and continued gender exclusion in our Arab world would seem to be paralleled by the obstinate failure to bring about competition and competitiveness in our political process.

The most important questions we need to ask, is whether we have enough evidence of regressive attitudes and values among Arab youth, and what can be our response.

To date, we do have a great deal of information, data, time series, and opinion polls and attitudes surveys, on the full battery of indicators that relate to women's position in the economic sphere as well as the political and the social. All of the social indicators show progress, especially on the education and health fronts. But to the contrary, one can see a serious plateauing in terms of the average representation of women in labor markets and political and even judicial institutions.

In many Arab countries, researchers have given us all the evidence necessary to detail and analyze gender discrimination. Egypt's 2009 Survey of Young People (SYPE) shows that in terms of time use, young women spend hours longer doing housework than their male counterparts. In terms of leisure time, young men spend hours more than girls of the same age everyday meeting friends or playing sports. Access to the Internet is everywhere biased in favor of males who in Egypt spend twice as long as girls using it.

In the age group 18-29, more than 70% of young men and 41% of young girls believe that they should obey their brother even if he is younger than her. This evidence is further supported by our knowledge of attitudes that are being inculcated in young boys and girls, whether by parents, school and/or the media. Again, I would strongly urge that we better investigate the roots of such discrimination especially in our school curriculum, teacher training and media messages.



In Egypt, and on behalf of young girls and boys, we have just completed the preparation of a Youth Well-Being Index that covers 54 indicators grouped under 10 domains. This will allow us to measure progress and monitor performance towards achieving targets such as those of the MDGs but much broader in scope.

I would like to turn my attention to Arab and worldwide experience in policy making and programming on behalf of women and youth.

A review of trends in the development experience of Arab countries would support the contention that four factors have helped reduce the problems of youth exclusion as well as support women's progress in claiming their right for equality with men at home, at work and in their community at large. These four factors are government efforts on demography and population control, government efforts in access to quality education, government efforts at poverty reduction and government efforts in promoting an employment-intensive growth trajectory.

With respect to the demographic challenge in the Arab world, the links between youth and women is the most obvious. On the one hand, the demographic bulge, its timing and size, are a function of the fertility trends of twenty years ago. On the other, the youth bulge promises a fall in the dependency rate in families and hence improved living standards for the family and all its members, on condition that more adults including the women enter the workforce. Government policies and programs to encourage family planning have varied considerably in their methods and their degree of success across countries, whether Arab, Islamic or other. This is why we can clearly state that proper management of demography and population growth can have positive outcomes on poverty reduction and the well-being of women, their children and families at large. In fact, it would be interesting to study the policies on demography across Arab countries as a key to understanding the current status of women in terms of all of the measures of empowerment. I would venture to make the hypothesis that Arab countries such as Tunisia, which invested in a consistent and effective policy for population and reproductive health, has done much better for its women on the gender measures of empowerment.

The second factor that has governed the path towards liberation of women in the Arab world has been access to education, which confirms the experience worldwide. What is different for the Arab countries is that education alone has not been sufficient to ensure gender equality either in the economy or in politics. The lesson here is that policies and programs are sorely needed for young Arab women to access the labor market via tailor-made training programs in entrepreneurship for self-employment as well as programs to support the capacity of young mothers to return to work if they wish to. In that context, I am disappointed not to see much ongoing applied research on the subject of entrepreneurship and labor market access for women.

The third area of government intervention that has helped both youth and women is poverty reduction. Research on poverty is of relatively recent vintage when it comes to analysis of particular programs such as those applying conditional cash transfers or the millennium villages. The many dimensions of poverty are also an opportunity to explore youth interventions and gender interventions that target youth and women and are also led and managed by them. To mention just one or two I can think of, these are the mobilization of youth at the national level to eradicate illiteracy, the mobilization of young women



to implement universal preschool education, and the mobilization of both youth and young mothers especially in delivering social and health care on a volunteer basis in the communities where they live.

The fourth and most difficult factor to provide policy advice on is employment and job creation for youth and women. It has been demonstrated across the Middle East and since the first oil boom of the 1970s that growth is not necessarily conducive to job creation. Employment must be encouraged via specific incentives provided to private business and to civil society organizations.

For the private sector, one candidate is an incentive whereby the government contributes to the social security payments of employers for all newly hired workers for a span of say ten years. This would have multiple benefits during the period of the youth bulge such as the expected formalization of micro-enterprises and the shift in perception among youth away from the prestige attached to white collar jobs. For non-government organizations, the incentive could take the form of a government subsidy contribution for any one of a specified list of projects and interventions that cater for achieving targets under the umbrella of the MDGs.

In principle, the private sector can shoulder more than three quarters of investment, expenditure and employment generation in the Arab world. However, for this to materialize, the government must wield all of its regulatory and incentive tools to ensure two vital conditions for youth and women, whether entrepreneurship or self-employment. The first condition is the provision of an enabling environment, all the way from infrastructure to institutions of the market. The second is the enforcement of legislation that protects workers and supports decent work opportunities. In Egypt for example, the evidence is that a major obstacle that discourages the labor market participation by women, young and less young, are the conditions of work in the private sector. What are documented are serious instances of extraordinarily long hours, exploitative wages, and sexual harassment.

It should be noted that Arab economies still have enormous room for reforming legislation and enforcing the rules that govern business and NGOs. There have been many improvements, including in Saudi Arabia and Egypt more recently, but we are still a long way from reaching a situation where we have an environment that is competitive and makes us deserve the title of an emerging economy. An example of an impediment to small business is that the Social Fund, which has existed in Egypt for 20 years and has been assigned the primary task of supporting micro-lending and assistance to microenterprises, uses intermediaries— mostly NGOs – who are assigned to provide credit but are not allowed to accept savings along with handing out loans.

II The Way Forward:

The first lesson that we have learned from our past attempts at integrating youth and gender in our development trajectory is that we need evidence. The evidence you bring as researchers is the crucial basis for policy making, programs and projects. Evidence-based policy making must itself start from a set of objectives and preferably a broad vision for inclusion for all those vulnerable segments of society, whether women, young, or poor. To use UN language, we also need management tools that measure inputs, outputs and outcomes and make full use of monitoring and evaluation that are results-based. We have shown that so far, a solid start has been made across most Arab countries to integrate the tools of



gender budgeting, and of targeting specific groups of beneficiaries. And yet, the capacity is still missing to engage on two crucial aspects of policy making. The first is the identification of best practices for scaling up, and the second is building capacity for results-based management itself and all of the elements that provide transparency and accountability.

What are the elements of a strategy for empowering youth and gender? These elements can be classified into three groups.

The first are simple and straightforward sectoral programs to develop and promote better access to high quality education, health and sanitation, housing and environment. With the exception of countries in conflict and the least developed Arab countries, our region has sufficient resources and has made good progress in achieving the MDGs. In my view and in the spirit of a care economy that is comprehensive and sustainable, this is the best way to capitalize on the strength of our culture and on its family support systems that exist in our societies.

The strategy here will be to make these complex links and build bridges between what is traditional and what is modern. For example, the vast majority of aging parents are willingly looked after by the younger generation and therefore there is still room for innovation in modern health care provision to provide win-win solutions for the elderly and that build on the good will of family ties and structure while introducing economies of scale and more scientific health care methods. Such innovation would achieve what is too late in western cultures given that they have long ago opted for nuclear families that have alienated the young from the old.

The second is the vision of making the Arab world a region of excellence in the provision of services. This has obviously started with the opportunities afforded by oil surpluses and invested in centers of excellence. In this context, we have already seen what wonders that were unimaginable only a decade ago, and which appear already on the ground at research institutes and universities in some Gulf countries. There are many potential programs that make use of research and the knowledge society and of the tools and benefits of globalization, such as ICT and renewable energy. We have only seen a small example which needs to be followed up by concerted efforts to link the needs of the diverse economy with the research agendas of these knowledge production and higher education centers.

The third and last set of proposed initiatives is under the heading of empowerment through participation. The set of programs suggested here include those for civil society to expand and take up the unutilized energy of women and youth. For women, the bulk of these programs would be community-based and build their capacity to help themselves and other women in both the social sphere and the marketplace. The skills that are most in need are management, organization and leadership in order to partner with local government in service delivery as well as to become a major source of monitoring for good governance. As for youth, the most important avenue for participation is the promotion of youth-led and youth-run voluntary projects that target MDGs and other national goals. Such voluntary youth activities help to build interpersonal and social skills and strengthen self-respect and trust in others. These activities can range from the eradication of illiteracy and all the way to combating drug abuse or juvenile delinquency.



III Conclusion:

It would seem to me that given the evidence on gender discrimination and youth exclusion, it is time to move to clear gender and youth strategies for integration and mainstreaming at the national and regional levels in the Arab world. Gender strategies should start where all of the cumulative research and analysis have brought us. Our knowledge-base has sufficiently expanded on conditions, determinants and policy experiences that rule urban settings, rural settings and slum areas. We are hopefully at the stage where we have formed visions of where we could be five years from today, ten years from today and even for a longer horizon. We are also hopefully aware of the strategies, policies, programs and projects that follow from that vision.

For youth in the Arab world at large, the cost of shifting from a state-led to a market economy is multidimensional. It includes a new mindset that accepts flexible and diverse working conditions and one that is comfortable with risk taking and understands the notion of self-employment and entrepreneurship...

For Arab women, the need is for bottom-up pressure, demanding better services, as well as for more pressure from women activists and women at the top. Across the Arab world, we now have active NGOs, councils for youth, councils for women, federations of women employees and ombudsmen. The diligence of civil society and those at the top who are engaged in those issues, has enabled the opening of sensitive files.

Finally, I would like to reiterate that we should dispel the myth that jobs for women are competing with jobs for men. This is very similar to an older myth from the 1960s. In the newly independent Arab states, it was believed that wealth creation by the capitalist class was at the expense of wealth creation for the proletariat. By now we know that the question to ask is not that about the distribution of a fixed value of output and incomes, although a valid question, but rather how to employ all of our human resources in order to maximize equality of opportunity to work, produce and enjoy ones earnings for all members of society, whether women, men or youth.