



Address by Ms. Amat Al Alim Alsoswa
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Launch of the AHDR 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World
Sana'a, Yemen, 7 December 2006

Your Excellency Mr. Prime Minister,
Excellencies, Distinguished Guests;
My Dear Colleagues, the Members of the Arab Human Development Report Team;
Ladies and Gentlemen;

I would like, at the outset, to express my deepest appreciation to His Excellency Prime Minister Abdul Kader Ba Jammal, and to the Government and people of Yemen, for granting us this opportunity. On behalf of the Report's co-sponsors: the United Nations Development Programme; the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development; the Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations; and on behalf of the team that prepared it, I thank you warmly for your gracious hospitality and your generosity of spirit.

The Report we are launching today, 'Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World', is the fourth and final installment of the first Arab Human Development Report series. Dr. Rima Khalaf has contributed to the founding and the steering of this process and nurtured its rise to fame as a UNDP flagship product. We regret her inability to join us today and wish her a speedy recovery from the ailment that prevented her from being part of an event she was much looking forward to.

UNDP and the Regional Bureau for Arab States are interested in the development debate across the Arab world, and we wish to express appreciation to the AHDR authors, who have highlighted issues of significance to our societies, and provided a vision to unshackle the restraints to progress and prosperity in our countries.

According to the Report, the rise of women essentially entails:

- ❖ Complete equality of opportunity between women and men in the acquisition and employment of human capabilities;
- ❖ Guaranteed rights of citizenship for all women on an equal footing with men; and
- ❖ Acknowledging of, and respect for differences between the sexes. It is not acceptable to use gender differences to support theories of inequality, or any form of discrimination.

The Report cites pervasive obstacles, or core challenges, that impede women's progress towards reaching the heights of their capacity. In public life, cultural, legal, social, economic and political factors obstruct

women's equal access to education, health services, job opportunities, and citizen's rights and representation. In private life, the Report contends that traditional patterns of upbringing and discriminatory family and personal-status laws perpetuate inequality and subordination.

I would be remiss, however, if I neglected to cite the examples of women's progress towards empowerment, for the Report affirms that the hard-won gains of generations of women's rights campaigners and their allies in governments and civil societies have culminated in a legacy of achievement in the spheres of social sciences and literature, exact sciences, business entrepreneurship, arts and media, and athletics. In the political realm, women now participate in parliaments, cabinets and local councils across the region. In Iraq, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, women have doubled, or even tripled, their representation in parliaments; however, the Report acknowledges that much more must be achieved to extend empowerment to the broad base of women.

The Report further points to progress towards gender equality under the law, and cites Arab public opinion polls that support the attainment of equal rights and freedoms. Labour laws are showing signs of progress with many states granting women the right to equal pay for equal work, while guaranteeing the right to maternity leave and in some cases, the right to child-care. The Report praises countries that have taken steps to modernize family laws, and adopt proactive measures to balance spouses' rights to end marriage through divorce. The most profound discrimination is found in the region's personal status laws, which the Report contends are permeated by "legally sanctioned gender bias," but cites more progressive legislation in the Maghreb, which has sought to alleviate "the injustices against women in personal status matters without infringing upon the principles of *Shar`ia*."

The Report further celebrates progress in women's learning. Data show that equality between the sexes in higher education has been achieved in twelve Arab countries, and that girl's enrolment in primary school is at least 90 percent that of boys in all Arab states except three. These examples signal a change in the Arab world. Yet the Report attests that the deficit in education is a major factor in preventing women in the region from participating effectively and fruitfully in public life.

The region's movement towards free market economies, together with women's growing advocacy has, similarly, combined to increase the contributions of women entrepreneurs in Arab economies and to influence the private sector. In virtually every Arab state, women have formed their own business organizations.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have tried to convey to you in essence the salient findings and directions of the Report, but in truth, the content is much richer than my account. But from what I have said today, perhaps its most important message is clear: that the rise of women is in fact a prerequisite for an Arab renaissance, inseparable from the fate of the Arab world and its achievement of human development.

As the UNDP, we take these Reports as important milestones in the configuration of the region's debates and interventions on human development. We are also concerned, however, with realising the recommendations of these Reports on the ground. To that end, the AHDRs have complemented and enriched existing UNDP programmes in the region, and they have also served as important catalysts for the emergence of new ones. On both the regional and local levels, issues of democratic governance, knowledge and Information and Communication Technology, HIV/AIDS and the advancement of women are some of the important vanguards of our strive for comprehensive and equitable human development. Also, we fully intend to break new grounds in realising the mandates and appeals of the Reports, by enhancing the range of services on and around women's political, social, legal and economic advancement; by tackling issues of environment and water; and by responding to needs in the region around trade and economic growth.

This Report concludes the first series of Arab Human Development Reports. UNDP is committed to its continued production and contribution to the region's development agenda and policy debate. For the remainder of 2006, and into the new year, we will embark upon an external review of the AHDR process as a whole and undertake broad-based consultations to collate thematic ideas for future reports. We believe this consultation to be a critical element for furthering the sense of ownership of the process among existing and emerging constituencies and stake holders in the region.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to extend my appreciation to all those who have contributed to preparing and producing this Report, especially the core group of authors and the Advisory Board, all of whom have spared no effort in analyzing the issues of Arab human development and assessing opportunities for progress. Their inspiration has been the achievements and potential of the Arab world, an inspiration that illuminates the way forward towards the rise of women and towards greater Arab human development.

Thank you very much.