



# Women's economic empowerment in the Arab region:

---

How chronic development  
challenges and the global crises  
triggered people's revolutions

---

By Kinda Mohamadieh  
2011 Edition

#### About the author:

Kinda Mohamadieh is the Programs Director at the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND) in Beirut. She holds degrees in economic law and public affairs from universities in Beirut, Lausanne and Los Angeles, with a focus on international development and nonprofit management. She specializes in international trade and development, social and economic policies, and youth unemployment in the Arab region, as well as human rights monitoring.

**Coordinator:** Alejandra Scampini

**Editors:** Diana Aguiar and Natalie Raaber

**Proofreader:** Kate Miller

**Final proofreader:** Ana Inés Abelenda

**Designer:** Diego García Pedrouzo

**Production:** Lynn O'Rourke



2011 Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)

This publication may be redistributed non-commercially in any media, unchanged and in whole, with credit given to AWID and the author.

Published by Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Toronto, Mexico City, Cape Town.

#### **Toronto Office**

215 Spadina Ave,  
Suite 150  
Toronto Ontario  
M5T 2C7  
Canada

#### **Mexico Office**

Salina Cruz 34, Colo-  
nia Roma Sur,  
Mexico, D.F.  
C.P.06760 Delegación  
Cuahtemoc

#### **Cape Town Office**

A6 Waverley Court  
7 Kotzee Road  
Mowbray, Cape Town  
South Africa  
7925

The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) is an international, feminist, membership organization committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and women's human rights. AWID's mission is to strengthen the voice, impact and influence of women's rights advocates, organizations and movements internationally to effectively advance the rights of women.

# Women's economic empowerment in the Arab region:

## How chronic development challenges and the global crises triggered people's revolutions

By Kinda Mohamadieh  
2011 Edition

### Introduction

The impacts of the global economic crisis on the Arab region, compounded by the impacts of the existing food, energy and climate crises, have come at a time when the region has already been facing major development challenges, including increasing levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. These development challenges are rooted in – and stem from – a disconnect between the economic growth models adopted by countries in the region and the development needs of a given country. Indeed, as surges in oil prices and migrant remittances have led to documented economic dividends in several Arab countries, development and equity indicators in those same countries appear to have stagnated. While the various analyses of the crisis's impact on markets in the region differ, citizens have felt the impact of the multi-dimensional crisis acutely, through, for example, the price hikes in food and energy prices. Moreover, the crisis has resulted in a loss of hope in job creation and poverty eradication, which many were hoping to see as a result of years of economic growth in the region.<sup>1</sup>

While Arab governments<sup>2</sup> (like many governments in developing countries) denied the implications of the crisis, the peoples of the region reacted to the growing stress on their economic and social conditions through protests that erupted in 2008 in various Arab countries and have been on-going. Throughout countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Libya, Syria and others, people's upheavals and protests took new dimensions during 2010/2011. The protests reflect the continued resistance to an accumulation of political oppression, coupled with severe and consistent violations of economic and social rights that stem from shortcomings in the adopted development model, widespread corruption, and lack of accountability. It is clear that the strains resulting from the crisis have added to the deterioration of conditions at the national levels.

At the centre of the development challenge in the Arab region is the inability to achieve effective levels of economic participation by women in various Arab economies; this is associated with

#### FOOTNOTES

1 - More on the levels and nature of economic growth achieved in the region is addressed in the next section.

2 - Arab countries include 22 countries embodied under the umbrella of the League of Arab States, and including: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Comoros, and Somalia.

obstacles women face on the social, political, and cultural fronts. Indeed, women in the region entered the global crises while already suffering from deteriorated conditions and high exclusion on these various fronts. While some progress on the human development indicators and in closing gender gaps has been

witnessed in areas such as education and health, that progress has – on the whole – not been reflected into higher economic participation and/or political representation.

This paper discusses socio-economic challenges in the Arab region and the impacts of the global

crises that deepened post-2008 and are still ongoing in the world. Within this context, the paper examines gender gaps and employment disparities in Arab countries. It also reflects on women's role at the centre of the people's revolutions and uprisings witnessed in the Arab region since the end of 2010.

## Economic growth detached from development needs: A chronic socio-economic challenge in the Arab region

Arab countries exhibit diverse economies, between Gulf countries that are mostly oil-producing and exporting, middle income countries that exhibit relatively open markets engaged with the world economy, and least developing countries. During the past few decades, Arab governments in non-oil producing countries have increasingly given weight to aid flows, foreign direct investment, trade liberalization, and remittances in designing various policy choices, while oil producing countries have continued to depend on income from oil exports (Mohamadieh and Peirce). In this context, the international financial institutions (IFIs) have played a major role in shaping economic and social policies in various Arab countries. Resisting and contesting foreign-applied conditionalities on economic and social policy-

making has been increasingly absent from public spheres in these countries. This absence is partly due to political repression and limitations on public participation in shaping policies, as well as the preoccupation of many opposition political parties and civil society groups in the struggle for their right to exist (Abdel Samad and Mohamadieh).

Arab countries have been witnessing growth in GDP since 2003, whereby they registered 7.3 percent GDP growth rate in 2003 compared to 3 percent in 2002. This continued throughout 2004, 2005, and 2006, where Arab countries registered an average growth rate of 7.3 percent, 8 percent, and 6.6 percent respectively (Joint Arab Economic Report 2010). According to the Joint Arab Economic Report (2009) that is published by the Arab Monetary Fund, the percentage of GDP growth rate achieved by Arab countries in 2008 was around 6.6 percent, up from 5.2 percent in 2007. Yet, this growth in GDP did not help address poverty or unemployment levels.<sup>3</sup> This is due to the fact that economic growth has not been fueled by productive activities, but rather has depended on oil revenues, real estate investments, returns from the tourism sector, and foreign aid.

The lack of comprehensive rights-based policy making in Arab countries has contributed to the disconnect between economic growth and development challenges.

Wealth creating policies have lacked redistribution interventions, leading to increasing inequality, witnessed particularly between urban and rural areas and between men and women. Social protection remains scarce in Arab countries, and is primarily available to government employees (Tzannatos, Haq and Schmidt 12). Moreover the major role of oil in the economies of the region has significantly influenced the characteristics of these economies and their role vis-à-vis citizens' rights.

In oil producing and exporting countries, the dominance of oil and the profit it generates – supporting the core of the welfare system – often came at the expense of vibrant economic, social, and political systems that reflect democratic participatory processes and respect for citizens' rights. In such economies where unearned income from oil dominates, while the productive role of the citizens remains marginal, the citizen relation to the state and to the process of securing their rights to public services and social protection becomes closer to a charity process rather than a healthy citizenship. In addition, the politics of oil – including foreign interests in maintaining oil supplies from Arab countries – has often resulted in the support of undemocratic regimes by major world powers. Overall, problems in governance systems and the centralization of political and

### FOOTNOTES

3 - When calculated in reference to the national poverty lines, poverty averages around 30 percent in least developing Arab countries, such as Comoros, Sudan, Djibouti, Yemen, Mauritania, and Palestine, and around 20 percent in Egypt, 13 percent in Jordan, 11.4 percent in Syria, 9 percent in Morocco, and 8 percent in Lebanon. Source: Arab joint economic report 2009, produced by the Arab Monetary Fund. Whereas, the global MDG report 2010 shows that level of poverty in the region of West Asia and North Africa is the lowest among other regions, but with a rising trend between 1990 and 2005 (6 percent in West Asia increasing from 2 percent in 1990 and 3 percent in West Asia decreasing from 5 percent in 1990). This calculation is based on the one-dollar a day calculations.

economic power have prevented economic achievements/ gains from being translated into progress in development, both in oil producing as well as oil importing countries of the Arab region. The economic marginalization from which the majority of citizens suffer in the Arab region is amplified among women, who face barriers at several levels, including the economy, society, and family.

The international crises, with their economic and development dimensions, aggravated existing development challenges. Between 2008 and 2009, different Arab countries witnessed regress in growth levels (except Yemen and Djibouti). The percentage GDP growth in the Arab countries as a whole averaged around 1.8 percent in 2009, down from 6.6 percent in 2008.<sup>4</sup> Overall, it can be noted that the crisis had greater impacts on countries that are more dependent on factors of growth that tend to fluctuate more so, such as oil, foreign direct investment, aid, tourism, and remittances. These include middle-income Arab countries (such as Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria<sup>5</sup>) and the Gulf countries (such as United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait), more so than the least developing countries (such as Yemen, Sudan, Djibouti). Countries nonetheless returned to higher growth in 2010, due particularly to the relative insulation of some countries in the region from global markets and low levels of market capitalization, in addition to the cushion of surplus liquidity that oil-producing countries had previously accumulated (Joint Arab Economic Report 2010).

## Box 1: Unemployment in the Arab region

On the employment front, the Arab labour markets are already characterized by low employment to population ratios and a broad informal sector. The low employment to population ratio is attributed to very low rates of participation by women and young people in labour markets (Tzannatos, Haq and Schmidt). According to ILO 2010 Preliminary Estimate, employment to population ratios stood at around 46 percent in Arab States during 2007 compared to 59 percent in South Asia, 61 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, 65 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa, 69 percent in South East Asia, and 71 percent in East Asia. These rates did not vary much during 2010 (qtd. in Tzannatos and Schmidt 4).<sup>6</sup> In addition to this low level of participation in labour markets, unemployment stands very high in Arab countries. Unemployment levels rose at times of significant economic growth, reflecting a structural problem in the economic growth policies adopted in the region and their ability to address development challenges such as employment and poverty. On average, unemployment stood at 14 percent in 2009, reaching up to 40 percent in countries like Sudan and Yemen, compared to the average of 5.7 percent worldwide (Joint Arab Economic Report 2009 and 2010 p.v). This sets the number of unemployed at 17 million (Shakouri), in addition to widespread informal employment. If we add the projected 20 million new entrants into the labour force between 2000 and 2020,<sup>7</sup> then

creating enough jobs for all those unemployed in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)<sup>8</sup> is estimated to require around 88 million new jobs.

The level of unemployment among young people (reported around 21.5 percent in 2010 by IL O), which is deeper among young women (reported around 33.3 percent in 2010 by ILO), was a major factor among the political, economic, and social problems that led towards peoples' mass mobilizations and revolutions in many Arab countries.

Unemployment in the Arab region did not significantly increase as a result of the global crisis – particularly in relation to what was experienced in other regions. Still, countries of the region witnessed a certain rise in unemployment and return of migrant workers from abroad, in addition to rising unemployment in receiving countries (including Gulf countries). Youth in the Arab region were the hardest hit: youth had highest unemployment levels in society. However, the severity of the problem before the crisis was compounded by the deteriorating quality of jobs as a result of the crisis, in addition to higher levels of discouragement and drop out from the labour market, especially among women and young people (Tzannatos, Haq and Schmidt 12). Gender specific considerations in employment policies were absent from the discussions of labour policies in Arab States, both nationally and regionally, both pre and post the crisis.

## FOOTNOTES

4 - According to the Joint Arab Economic Report (2010), growth in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries decreased from an average of 5.3 percent between 2006 and 2008 to 0.1 percent in 2009. Other middle income Arab countries witnessed such shrinking in growth; in Jordan growth shrank

from 5.6 percent in 2008 to 2.8 percent in 2009, in Tunisia from 6.3 percent to 3.1 percent respectively, and in Egypt from 7.2 percent to 4.7 percent respectively; Source: Chapter two of the Joint Economic Report 2010.

5 - Algeria is considered an oil exporting country and oil returns have supported in cushioning Algeria from the crisis.

6 - It is worth noting that these averages hide

a lot of disparities among Arab countries.

7 - Nabli Silva- Jauregui and Johansson De Silva (2007); referenced by ESCWA study 2009 "Women control over Economic Resources and Access to financial resources".

8 - There is no standard definition of the MENA region; it usually is used to cover all Arab countries plus Iran and Israel.



## On Government responses to the crises

The series of crises have left differentiated impacts on Arab countries and, accordingly, a differentiated impact on women in those countries. Governments tried to stabilize the situation by increasing government expenditures and expanding subsidization programs. Several ILO specialists have noted that “there have been relatively few new measures in the Arab region that can be readily identified as policy responses to the crisis...” (Tzannatos, Haq and Schmidt). The ILO adds that it is difficult to disentangle crisis response measures from measures that were already planned, and difficult to generalize among 22 Arab countries given the lack of data and diversity of the countries.

It can be said that all Gulf countries (United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and

Kuwait) took measures to loosen monetary policies and increase liquidity, while some took further monetary measures like insuring banks’ assets and injecting money into banks (Joint Arab Economic Report 2010, p.210). Middle-income countries were relatively less impacted in their financial sectors; they were, however, relatively more impacted in terms of exports, remittances, employment, foreign direct investments, and tourism. Egypt and Jordan suffered a significant decrease in bank lending to the private sector during 2008 and 2009 (Joint Arab Economic Report 2010, p.214). Some countries (including Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and Mauritania) took measures on the fiscal and monetary fronts. However, tax reductions were not done in a way that favored employment intensive sectors (Tzannatos,

Haq and Schmidt 10). Jordan, Tunisia, and Morocco provided liquidity injections. Together with Egypt, these countries decreased interest rates (Joint Arab Economic Report 2010, p.217). Tunisia and Egypt undertook a package of interventions, including increasing public spending and stimulation of economic growth through investing in infrastructure, providing support to private sector entities, as well as export support and subsidization. Jordan, Syria, and Morocco increased public spending on public projects (Ibid.). As witnessed in other regions, the gender dimensions of these crises were overlooked (Social Watch Report 2010), thus not bringing anything new to the existing lack of gender-sensitive and women’s rights-focused policies as well as other social and rights-based considerations in policy making processes.

6

## Gender gaps and employment disparities in the Arab region: A situation exacerbated by the global crises

Gender gaps in the Arab region take on various faces. The 2005 Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) entitled “Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World” identified gender inequality as one of the most significant obstacles to human development in the Arab region. The 2005 AHDR noted that stereotypical gender roles are deeply entrenched, limiting women’s employment and decision-making opportunities, which are still the lowest in the world.<sup>9</sup>

When discussing the implications of the economic crisis on women

in the Arab region, one needs to consider that this region – like all other regions – is not homogeneous: economies differ as to the social, political and cultural contexts. Indeed, there is not a single prototype of a woman in the Arab region; women’s political, economic, social, and cultural conditions vary considerably.

Reflecting larger problems with statistics collections and development studies, Arab countries lack gender-disaggregated data and considerations, which makes it more complicated to follow and

react to the specific implications of crises on women.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, domestic legal frameworks and discriminatory laws, in addition to patriarchal practices, have locked women into stagnant conditions in the Arab region. This in turn has contributed to limiting spaces for instigating policy responses to the crises that take into consideration the challenges facing women.

The following section will focus on gender gaps at the employment level in the Arab region, and the impacts left by the global crises on this front.

### FOOTNOTES

9 - See as reference

<http://arabstates.undp.org/subpage.php?spid=10>  
10 - Indeed, it was noted in the consolidated Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action: +15; published by the

ESCWA and the League of Arab States (October 2009) that “the absence of statistics and analysis related to the effect of recent global phenomena on women, such as the international financial crisis, world food crisis and climate change, prevents governments from defining policies to protect women in

particular and citizens on a wider base from the negative effects of such phenomena... many Arab countries lack statistics and data segregated by gender, which complicates the process of identifying, analysing and finding appropriate solutions for problems faced by women”; p. 7.

## Box 2: The situation of female domestic workers in the Arab region

*Words of Wissam Al Saliby, human rights researcher and blogger:  
<http://ethiopiansuicides.blogspot.com>*

Many of the foreign female workers in the Gulf countries are employed as domestic workers. The situation of female migrant domestic workers in the Arab countries keeps making world news headlines, under the titles of abuse, slavery, death and suicide.<sup>11</sup>

In most Arab countries, domestic workers are required to have a local sponsor, to whom their legal residency is tied. The sponsorship creates dependency which, in Arab societies, is justified by the need to "protect" the domestic worker – typically

a woman – and to welcome her in a family environment. In effect, though, coupled with racism against African workers and the lack of adequate State protection, the sponsorship system creates vulnerability and makes exploitation much more likely. In 2010, Qatar considered scrapping the sponsorship system.<sup>12</sup> Yet, despite human rights reports recommending reforms in the legal system for employment of female domestic workers in the Arab world, no tangible progress has been noted (Human Rights Watch 2010).

### FOOTNOTES

11 - The Guardian. "Nepali Slaves in the Middle East" April 2011.

12 - Top News. "No more sponsorship system in Qatar." 2010.

## On employment disparities

As noted above, unemployment levels in the Arab region remain among the highest in the world and the most pressing economic and development threat from which both men and women suffer. The Arab countries have the lowest share of females in the work force across the world, while female unemployment remains higher than male unemployment, and gender wage disparities are significant (UNDP and Regional Bureau for Arab States 56). Moreover, the ILO highlighted in 2009 that the largest gender gap in vulnerable employment as a share of total employment exists in the MENA countries, where women are predominantly located and absorbed by the informal sector (Social Watch 2010).

*Participation in labour markets and unemployment:* The share of the female population participating in the labour force did not increase significantly between 2000 and 2007 (Khalaf). In 2008, the ILO noted that despite a 7.7 percent increase in the number of women in the labour force, women still

constitute only 33.3 percent of the labour force, which is significantly lower than other regions (Khalaf 12). Despite this low level of participation, unemployment remains high among women and specifically among young women in the region. The ILO 2010 Preliminary Estimates registered around 16 percent unemployment among women in 2010, rising to 33.3 percent among young women, compared to overall rates of 10 percent, and 25 percent among young persons at large (qtd. in Tzannatos, Haq and Schmidt 4). For example, in Egypt and Jordan, young males experience unemployment rates around 10 percent while young females face rates of unemployment in excess of 40 percent (Social Watch 2010, p.11). These conditions lock women in higher levels of economic dependency and lead to disparities in social protection (where social protections exist). Moreover, these statistics often do not reflect the access (or lack thereof) to jobs for women nationals in Arab countries. For example, the rise in employment witnessed in Gulf

countries such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are based on the inclusion of foreign female workers and do not reflect the empowerment of female nationals (see Box 2 for more on the problematic conditions of foreign female domestic workers).

*Limited benefit from new access to education:* The overall stagnation of the markets as a result of the crisis, and the limited ability to create jobs, have left women unable to benefit from new access to education achieved in some countries of the region. While young women's unemployment might not appear to be statistically rising, this is due to the fact that women, especially young women, are often fast to exit from the labour market or get absorbed in unpaid jobs in family businesses (Tzannatos, Haq and Schmidt, p. 3 and 6). It is worth noting an analysis of 66 developing countries over the period between 1985 and 2006 by the OECD, which found that women's labour supply is counter-cyclical (qtd. in World Bank presentation).

Low income families respond to economic crisis by sending women to work, thus unskilled women with lower education increasingly end up in the informal sector or in vulnerable jobs. However, highly educated women tend to drop out of jobs in periods of lower economic activity.

*Concentration of women's employment in agriculture:* Women's employment in the Arab region is highly concentrated in the agricultural sector. Globally, the share of women in paid employment outside the agricultural sector has continued to increase (albeit slowly) and reached 41 percent in 2008. But this percentage is as low as 20 percent in the MENA countries, as reflected by the 2010 UN MDGs Review Report. In fact, the MENA region was the only region where women's employment in agriculture increased significantly in the last decade, from 33 percent of total female employment in 1996 to 39 percent in 2006 (World Bank 2009). The agricultural sector suffered a decline during the crisis, specifically in North African countries, which can be linked to a reduction of agricultural exports (Tzannatos, Haq and Schmidt, p.7). This placed increased stress on women's employment opportunities and source of income, thus increasing the incidence of poverty among them. The concentration of women's employment in this sector reflects the broader shortfalls they face in terms of access to education, health care services, and social security. To compound this, the crisis left countries even less able to spend on education and health, and thus with lower possibilities of effectively addressing such shortfalls. In addition, inadequate investment in rural infrastructure and limited access by women to land and credit persist. With limited economic and financial resources in the region, women are expected to have less access to financing from the private sector, mirroring an existing trend.<sup>13</sup>

Given these conditions and the limited diversification of economic activities in the region, women are expected to face greater obstacles in accessing or transitioning into new economic sectors.

*Income gaps and income poverty:* Gender gaps are reflected in the levels of accrued income, access to paid jobs or those jobs in the higher salary brackets, and access to social security. Moreover, income poverty reflects a strong gender dimension in the Arab countries. Indeed, female-headed households have a higher incidence of poverty than male-headed households (Social Watch 2009, p.33). This situation has worsened as a result of the crisis particularly because the main hit to employment in the Arab region has been more on the quality and level of vulnerability of the jobs rather than on the number of jobs, which was already very low.

*Persistent gaps on the educational front:* Aside from disparities in employment, wages, and poverty levels, gender gaps also appear in education, health, access to political positions and policy making circles, as well as participation at the family level and control of personal decisions. Human development indicators have shown though that progress has been made on education, specifically on primary enrolment rates (World Bank 2010).<sup>14</sup> For example, the ratio of female to male primary enrolment in MENA countries is 97 percent. However, these average achievements do not apply to all Arab countries. Moreover, this progress in enrolment remains partial, given that school completion rates among girls remain low. Indeed, females are still more likely to drop out of school than males in almost all MENA countries (Ibid.). For example, significant gender gaps persist in secondary and tertiary school enrolment in Morocco and Yemen (Ibid.). Dropout rates increase as the level of education increases.

## FOOTNOTES

13 - This lack of parity was reflected in studies that showed for example that in Lebanon 64 percent of male entrepreneurs who finance their own operations had access to bank loans compared with 48 percent of female entrepreneurs, and 45.7 percent of males in Egypt versus 14.6 percent of females. Source: World Bank Report: "The Environment for Women's Entrepreneurship in the Middle East and North Africa Region".

14 - Progress is registered as well on the health fronts, in female life expectancy and maternal mortality rates. Source: World Bank. "Bridging the Gap, Improving Capabilities and Expanding Opportunities for Women in the Middle East and North Africa Region." 2010.



*Education not translating into economic empowerment:* Even when higher education is attained, quality education is not necessarily guaranteed (ILO 2009), nor is securing a decent job or livelihood (a dimension of economic empowerment). This problem has been exacerbated by the crisis. Women with recently acquired access to more and better education, accompanied by certain margins of acquired freedoms and changes in social perception to women's role in some Arab countries, are facing higher barriers to entering the job market as a result of the crisis. Women from some Arab countries, who were employed as foreign workers in Gulf countries, were often forced to return home due to loss of jobs in the receiving country. Many are from middle income Arab countries such as Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan. Within such a context, opportunities to claim progress on the education front and certain limited changes

in social perceptions have taken a set back. On the other hand, women in oil-producing Gulf countries are often relatively less active economically than in other Arab countries, despite significant progress on the education front. The state maintains a welfare model in these countries with high subsidization to citizens. Consequently, the crisis has not – relatively speaking – impacted heavily on the conditions of women nationals in these societies.

Contributing to these gender gaps is a combination of patriarchy, the role of conservative religious approaches in law and civic life, and cultural stereotyping. These factors have resulted in a strong psychological barrier among Arab populations regarding women's participation in the public sphere (Sabbagh). This supersedes and amplifies the negative attributes associated with the existence of market barriers to, for example,

decent jobs. These factors also supersede the attributes of discriminatory laws, failure to implement the non-discriminatory legislation that already exists, in addition to the lack of awareness and demand by women of their own rights. Indeed, it was noted in an official report on the implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action+15 that *“despite the legislative reforms implemented in many Arab countries, there is a prevailing gap between legislations and reality given the constant negative cultural traditions; stereotyped images of women and men; unfair distribution of their tasks within the family, domestically and beyond; contradictions between laws, where these exist, and the everyday reality; and the social acceptance of discrimination and violence against women, which lead to the inflexibility or even regression of acquired concepts related to equality”* (ESCWA and the League of Arab States 2009, p.6).

## Concluding remarks: Women at the centre of people's mobilizations in quest of political, economic, and social rights and equality

The global crises have contributed to exacerbating an already deteriorated context in the Arab region, a context that has been characterized by political repression, lack of democracy, economic and social marginalization, high inequalities, and rights violations. This context has been embodied by neoliberal models and formulas promoted and adopted in the Arab region, as is the case in many other developing regions and countries. It was often associated with high levels of corruption and centralization of economic resources (Abdel Samad and Mohamadieh 2011). Within this context, the economic, social, and political marginalization and

injustices that women have been facing have been at the heart of the development problems in the region.

While women share the burden of the overall challenges in the region, their situation is additionally burdened by social, cultural, and religious norms. The global crises have put further stress on these conditions. Overall, the economic pressures placed on women and the setbacks in regards to their economic rights hinder the process of achieving progress on the political and civic rights fronts. Indeed, economic independence is an essential factor for achieving more freedom for women from various

forms of dependence, and thus higher levels of participation in the public sphere, and the ability to achieve greater political voice and representation. Access to education and job opportunities – grounded in the framework of decent work – are necessary entry points for economic independence. This cycle is definitely hindered as a result of the crisis. However, crisis responses by the governments in the Arab region did not show a willingness to learn lessons from the past and undertake the needed gender-sensitive policy reforms and other social and rights-based considerations in policy-making processes.

### Box 3: Reflection from Mrs. Afaf Merhi - The Egyptian Association for Civic Engagement in Cairo

Since the beginning of 2011, various Arab countries witnessed the mobilization of millions of citizens behind calls for change; women participated side to side with men. They all called for a cease of political repression and for the fall of dictatorships, as well as systemic reforms. Both men and women suffered under dictatorship regimes, whilst women's conditions were exacerbated due to discriminatory laws and severe gender inequalities, in addition to violence against them in public and private spaces. Accordingly, women were actively participating in the nation-wide street mobilizations, and presenting new visions for their nations, whether in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, Jordan, Syria, or other Arab counties. Women wanted to participate in the evolution of a new era for Arab countries in

which freedom, democracy and human dignity are respected.

Despite that, we still have not witnessed real reforms in terms of women's rights in the Arab countries. On the contrary, there are signs indicating the possibilities of regression from certain achievements resulting from years of struggle by women in the region, under the pretext that those achievements were undertaken by the previous regimes and should be scrapped. In parallel to the marginalization of women in the process of democratic reform, religious fundamentalists have started calling for invalidating some laws that secure women's rights, such as marriage and divorce related laws, and the law related to women quota that aims at promoting women's political participation. One can note that since 1956 –

when women acquired the right to run for elections and to vote in Egypt – until the elections in 2005 women's participation in political life remained among the lowest rates of political participation in the Arab region and the world.

In regards to economic challenges, women's participation in the labour force remains very low, while discrimination in access to jobs is evident, thus leading to high unemployment among women. Moreover, the private sector tends to hire women in specific jobs with lower wages than men. This situation is amplified due to the lack of commitment by Arab countries to international labour standards, along with the adoption of social and economic policies that led to an increase in unemployment and lack of sustainable rights-based development.

The long period of unmet necessary reforms compounded with the stress of the global crises saw the region climax towards a series of people's revolutions and uprisings that erupted since the end of 2010. These were an accumulation of the efforts and struggles of various societal factions and civil society groups, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), women's groups, labour unions, opposition political parties, and citizens

active in various forms of social and political networks. They presented models of change that were built on common work and solidarity across the various social factions and groups. Women were central to these people's mobilizations. In various cases, whether Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, Syria, Morocco and other countries, women were not only a support to the mobilizations but also organized at the heart of the mobilizations.

Women's role took various forms: some women organized at the industry and labour union levels, others engaged their families and took their children to the mobilizations, while others were core to the youth groups active on pushing the mobilizations through social media tools. Along side various civil society groups, women's groups offered support to the people's protests in various forms (*see Boxes 3, 4, and 5 for more information*).

## Box 4: Liberation...together with the other half of society or never

By Dr. Souad Triki from Tunisia; *University Professor and activist with the Association of Tunisian Democratic Women*

Once again, women have played a major role in the revolutions and mobilizations that the Arab region is currently witnessing. So is the case in my country Tunisia, and this is not strange to the history of humanity or to the history of the people's liberation movements in the Arab region. Women participated as direct victims and martyrs as they took part in the demonstrations and marches. They encouraged their sons and daughters to be part of the change and stood in face of fire shots to bury their children whom they lost in the process of building the revolutions.

But past experiences reveal that in post revolution periods, in which new governance systems and power relations are established and the organization of the new leadership takes place, often women's role and contribution is marginalized. Accordingly, women are forced to depart from the public sphere, in which they made the change together with men. The traditional patriarchal

divisions prevail, whereby women are confined to the private sphere. They are marginalized from political participation and decision-making. Thus, a separation wall is established between the majority of active women that took part in leading the revolutions and the new leadership post the revolution that becomes male-dominated. Women are thus rendered marginalized in the transition process.

Tunisia saw the establishment of the first Personal Status Law (1956) in the Arab region, declared polygamy unlawful, raised the legal age of marriage, recognized civil marriage and divorce, and enabled many rights that were considered highly progressive in its time and regional context. However today in Tunisia, there is a tendency to marginalize women from decision-making. As a result there is only 18 percent women in the "High Commission for the Defense of the Revolutions' Objectives, Political Reforms, and Democratic Transition". Moreover, only

two women take part in the interim government, heading the ministries of women and health.

Yet, the women's movement in Tunisia and their supporters in the democratic movement have been able to pass the principle of gender parity among candidates in the electoral process as a reform project that was adopted by the Commission planning the upcoming constituent assembly vote (planned for July 2011).

This step is historical in Tunisia and unprecedented in the Arab region. Various social progressive and democratic groups work to enforce this step in the national legislation, so as to preserve it and not fall back from it. However, the struggle of women continues, especially with the rise of fundamentalist groups post the revolution, who exploit the extremist religious discourse as a political tool, thus threatening the democratic transition and the protection of women's rights.

While Arab governments missed the opportunity to seek genuine reforms at the time of the global crises, now is the time for genuine change to take place. Both revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have demonstrated the interlinkages between the political, the economic, and the

social. These revolutions, along with peoples' movements in other Arab countries like Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain, were triggered by factors of economic and social exclusion and quickly built up to mass mobilizations with political demands. Accordingly, the way forward entails a comprehensive

process of reforms on the political as well as the economic, social, and cultural fronts and the establishment of a new economic and social model that reflects the development challenges of the region, prioritizes citizens' rights, and tackles exclusion on all fronts. This of course

applies to women's rights and progress in the region. Indeed, addressing women's participation at the economic level cannot be detached from the overall reform of the economic and development models adopted in the region. Systemic revision of policies for empowerment of women ought to be integrated into the overall revision of development policies and efforts towards poverty eradication, employment creation, and educational reform.

During the current transition period, women's groups along with other

civil society groups have faced the challenge of protecting the reforms acquired thus far and preventing a retreat from the process of democratic change. They should continue to pressure for further reforms. Moreover, these groups face the challenge of shifting from a defensive position to a more proactive role in public life, thus elaborating and promoting alternatives on all fronts: the political, social, and economic.

Women's groups in the Arab region have often not been vocal on economic rights as much as political and civic rights. Indeed, they were

relatively not as active in addressing the implications of the global economic and development policies on their national context, nor did they actively tackle and investigate the policy responses to the global crises. Today, they have a major role in ensuring that reforms integrate concepts of justice, human rights, non-discrimination, and equality. Furthermore, they face the challenge of ensuring that women's rights are at the centre of the undertaken reforms, including constitutional and other legislative reforms, as well as other political, economic, social, and cultural reforms. ♦

### Box 5: Reflection by Mrs. Fawziya El Khawaja, Human Rights activist from Bahrain

There is no doubt that women have a prominent and active role in any social or political mobilization in society. Since the Tunisian and the Egyptian revolutions that broke out in December 2010 and January 2011 respectively, followed by peoples' mobilizations in Libya and the rest of the Arab world, we have been witnessing women's evident and committed participation in these mass movements. This participation went beyond participation in protests and sit-ins, to the planning and promotion of the mobilizations, through electronic and other means of communication, like press, television and radio.

Women's role is active and influential. Several female

martyrs have fallen during the escalation of the conflict, while others were arrested and tortured. But this did not stop them; they continued their efforts and intensified their participation both in the mobilizations, as well as in raising awareness.

Despite this momentum and this remarkable participation, women face many challenges rooted in the traditional religious views to their role, such as views towards the use of the veil and their interaction with men in the public sphere. For example, in Yemen, the president raised the issue of traditions and participation of women along with men in protests and sit-ins, as if the role of women was the main problem facing the country

and not the regime that has been undemocratically ruling and oppressing people's rights for more than three decades.

In Bahrain, some civil society organizations called for the formation of a feminist group under the name of "Women for Bahrain" that tries to defy political, sectarian, and social divides that have been promoted in the Bahraini society, through focusing on re-enforcing national cohesion and social unity.

Women are no longer isolated from societal changes; they have been an integral part of the revolutions and uprisings in the Arab region, which will definitely contribute to women's and men's emancipation and freedom from oppression.

## Bibliography

- Abdel Samad, Ziad and Mohamadieh, Kinda. "The Revolutions of the Arab Region: Socio-Economic Questions at the Heart of Successful Ways Forward." Perspectives Special Issue (April 2011) p. 112. Published by the Heinrich Boell Foundation. Print.
- Arab Monetary Fund "Joint Arab Economic Report 2009". Web available only in Arabic.
- Arab Monetary Fund "Joint Arab Economic Report 2010". The report relies on IMF numbers and national sources; available online only in Arabic.
- Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and the League of Arab States. "Consolidated Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action: +15" (October 2009). Print and web.
- Guardian, The. "Nepali Slaves in the Middle East" published online April 2011.
- Human Rights Watch, "Slow Reform. Protection of Migrant Domestic Workers in Asia and the Middle East". 2010. Web.
- International Labour Organization (ILO) "Growth, employment and decent work in the Arab region"; prepared for the Arab Employment Forum Beirut, Lebanon 19–21 October 2009. Web.
- Khalaf, Mona Chemali "Women's Control Over Economic Resources and Access to Financial Resources" Arab Women and Development Series Number 36; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. 2009. Web.
- Mohamadieh, Kinda and Peirce, Oliver. "Facing Challenges of Poverty, Unemployment, and Inequalities in the Arab region: Do policy choices of Arab governments still hold after the crisis?", Paper produced by the Arab NGO Network for Development and Christian Aid, 2009. Web.
- Sabbagh, Amal. "The Arab States: Enhancing Women's Political Participation". 2005. International IDEA. Web and Print.
- Shakouri, Batool. Presentation "The Financial Crisis and International Migration in the Arab region". Chief population and social development section UN ESCWA. 2009. Web.
- Social Watch. "Gender in Times of Crisis; New Development Paradigm Needed" Thematic Report of Social Watch Report 2010. Web and Print.
- Social Watch, "The Arab Region: 30 Years of CEDAW" Published in Occasional Paper Putting gender economics at the forefront, March 2010. Web and Print.
- Top News. "No more sponsorship system in Qatar." November 2010. Web.
- Tzannatos, Zafiris & Haq, Tariq & Schmidt, Dorothea, "The Labour Market after the crisis in the Arab States: Trends, Policy Responses and Challenges in the Recovery" Prepared for Research Conference Key Lessons from the Crisis and Way Forward, 16-17 February 2011, ILO, Geneva
- United Nations Development Programme and Regional Bureau for Arab States. "Development Challenges For the Arab Region: A Human Development Approach" 2009. Web and Print.
- World Bank. "Middle East and North Africa Gender Overview" prepared by Talajeh Livani. 2007.
- World Bank, PREM Gender and Development. Presentation on the "Impact of the Financial Crisis on Women and Families" 2009. Web.
- World Bank. "The Status and Progress of Women in the Middle East and North Africa". World Bank Middle East and North Africa Social and Economic Development Group. 2009. Web.
- World Bank. "The Environment for Women's Entrepreneurship in the Middle East and North Africa Region". Web
- World Bank, "Bridging the Gap, Improving Capabilities and Expanding Opportunities for Women in the Middle East and North Africa Region". 2010.



## Impacts of the Crisis on Women's Rights: Sub regional perspectives

New from AWID is this 2010 edition of the brief series: Impacts of the Crisis on Women's Rights: Sub regional perspectives. We are excited to present an update, by region, to the exceptional research conducted in 2009 on the impact of the global financial crisis on women's rights. This update provides relevant new data, testimonies, and voices from women activists on the ground. Each case presents an opportunity to unpack the in-depth challenges faced by different women in diverse contexts while examining possible policy solutions from a feminist perspective. This work takes us on a journey to help us think beyond the financial crisis and its implications, and start reflecting about the new world being created. At AWID we believe these studies contribute to building and supporting women's movements.

**Brief 1:** The impact of the crisis on women in Latin America  
By Alma Espino and Norma Sanchís

**Brief 2:** Impact of the global crisis on women in developing Asia  
By Jayati Ghosh

**Brief 3:** Women of the Pacific and the global economic crisis  
By Karanina Sumeo

**Brief 4:** Impacts of the global economic and financial crisis on women in Central Asia  
By Nurgul Djanaeva

**Brief 5:** The Impact of the Deepening Economic Crisis on Women and Gender Equality in Western Europe  
By Wendy Harcourt and Lois Woestman

**Brief 6:** The Impact of the Crisis on Women in Eastern Europe  
By Eva Charkiewicz

**Brief 7:** The Global Economic Crisis and Gender Relations: The Greek Case  
By Lois Woestman

**Brief 8:** United States: The Continued Need for Social Sector Stimulus  
By Rania Antonopoulos and Taun Toay

**Brief 9:** The Impact of the Deepening Economic Crisis on Women in Eastern and Southern Africa  
By Zo Randriamaro

**Brief 10:** The Impact of the Global Economic Crisis on Women and Women's Human Rights Across Regions  
By Nerea Craviotto

**Brief 11:** Women's economic empowerment in the Arab region: How chronic development challenges and the global crises triggered people's revolutions  
By Kinda Mohamadieh

These publications can be found on the AWID website: [www.awid.org](http://www.awid.org)



This publication is part of AWID's initiative: Influencing Development Actors and Practices for Women's Rights (IDeA) that seeks to contribute to advancing feminist understandings of the relationship between development and women's rights issues with a particular focus on the aid effectiveness agenda and the Financing for Development process at the UN.