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# COMMENTS FROM AN AUTHOR: ENGAGING THE *ARAB HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2005* ON WOMEN

I think it is safe to say that the *Arab Human Development Report 2005 (AHDR 2005)* was the first report to be criticized and even attacked by its own authors. Some contested not being "fully" the "owner" of the report because they were forced to share it with some "disappointing" partners; some attacked it for not fully representing their fundamentalist secular beliefs. Others showed their discontent with its theoretical incoherence and its clear neoliberal approach. These differing stands reflect the spectrum of conflicting views and approaches in the Arab world about women's issues; they also reflect the lack of a spirit of teamwork.

Critics of the report gave substantial weight to the theoretical line and guidance of the U.N. system in "imposing" certain views. Actually, as a top U.N. bureaucrat noted in the introduction, the views expressed in the *AHDR 2005* were politically controversial and not in line with the organization, to some extent causing the report's delayed launch.

The neoliberal line and the contradictory stand over postcolonial authoritarian regimes vis-à-vis women's issues resulted purely from the lack of consensus among the authors and the advisory board over almost every single statement in the report. Hours of discussion focused on what to call what is happening in Iraq (occupation or liberation?), whether Islamist movements are empowering or disempowering women, the envisioned role of the state, whether women's movements and activists work from within or outside the state, and so forth. Thus, the report is full of compromises to accommodate all "real" emerging differences in the region. Nonetheless, the report made some vital points clear enough, presenting a coherent "story line":

- The report refutes categorically any use of women's rights by the occupying powers in the region (Americans and Israelis) trying to cast themselves as "women's liberators" or as a development power. On the contrary, the report thoroughly documents all forms of destruction and regression of any developmental effort achieved by local authorities before the foreign occupation.
- The report makes women in the Arab world visible by generating comparable data to break the stereotype of Arab and Muslim women in world literature. One might look at this data as a form of governmentality, but this lacuna is complemented by a large number of case studies

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and anthropological research to give a fuller picture of the various realities of women in the Arab world. Care about this fuller picture manifested itself in the refusal to use the category of "Arab woman" as a unitary tool for analysis; instead, "women in the Arab world" came to represent the diversified realities of women in the region, whether Arabs or non-Arabs.

- Claims that the report came to "empower the state instead of women" might not be accurate. The report takes a clear stand against authoritarian states and their use and abuse of women's issues. Moreover, it portrays the state as a space for conflict and contestation, not as a solid, unitary unit representing a hegemonic, uncontested power.
- The report makes clear that in many respects Islam and mainstream Islamist movements are not disempowering women or "containing" their advancement. The authors tried to understand why these movements are attracting women—and to explain how other nonreligious forces could recognize and engage with these movements without taking a position of superiority empowered by the universal discourse on women and foreign financial pressure. The report condemns all authoritarian practice against these movements or by these movements.
- The report calls for "rooting" universal discourse on women's rights locally—not using it to seal over the varied local voices and visions about women's needs and interests.
- Finally, the report takes a very bold stand in calling for strong social movements that can produce their own discourse on women's issues and rights that reflects the differing realities, needs, interests, and aspirations of women in the region. At the same time, a critique of nongovernmental agencies "advocating" abstract and individualized rights manifested itself at various points.

The report fails, however, to give enough attention to the impact of globalization on women in the region because it does not generate enough knowledge based on class, age, region, race, ethnicity, handicap, and religion differences and their impacts on women's lives. This lacuna was related to "internal" views shared by some of the authors who were strongly driven by a neoliberal and women's liberal rights approach and "confident" in their beliefs about what is "good" for women.

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