Int. J. Middle East Stud. **41** (2009), 59–60. *Printed in the United States of America*
doi:10.1017/S0020743808090107

SPECIAL SUBSECTION

Lila Abu-Lughod, Fida J. Adely, and Frances S. Hasso

OVERVIEW: ENGAGING THE *ARAB HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2005* ON WOMEN

The *Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World (AHDR 2005)*, published in Arabic with English and French translations, was launched at the end of 2006. With a title carefully crafted to avoid Western development buzzwords like "empowerment" and to signal the inclusion of all women living in the region, it is the third in a series of detailed studies meant to unpack the themes of the original overview report that garnered both acclaim and criticism when it was published in 2002.[1] The other two topical reports examine what were billed as "deficits" in knowledge and in freedom.[2] This one tackles what the original report framed as the third major obstacle to the flourishing of the Arab world: the deficit in gender equality.

Why should Middle East scholars engage a report produced by the United Nations Development Programme that is a hybrid text combining research, analysis, and policy recommendations? First, as Hoda Elsadda has noted, the Arab human development reports constitute a major phenomenon in the "production of knowledge" about the Arab world.[3] They circulate internationally but are also discussed widely in the Arab press and intellectual circles. As Middle East scholars in this post-Saidian era in which the politics of knowledge cannot be ignored, we must take the reports seriously. Second, the reports are the fruit of the labor of many intellectuals and scholars living in the Arab world who wrote background papers and debated points with development experts to produce the final publications. The reports thus merit the attention of scholars who have conducted research on and analyzed many of the same social phenomena these reports treat.

This is especially true of the *AHDR 2005* on women. It analyzes a subject that has become the object of a rich and sophisticated body of feminist scholarship that emerged both from the English-speaking academy and the Arab world in the past three decades.[4] It was coauthored by Islah Jad, a leading feminist scholar from Palestine, who comments on the articles in this special subsection of *IJMES*. Some major scholars of women and women's movements in the Arab world contributed background papers even if they were disappointed to discover how little of what they wrote ended up in the final document.

Lila Abu-Lughod is William B. Ransford Professor of Anthropology and Gender Studies in the Department of Anthropology, Columbia University, New York, N.Y.; e-mail: la310@columbia.edu; Fida J. Adely is Assistant Professor in Arab Studies at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.; e-mail: fja25@georgetown.edu; and Frances S. Hasso is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio; e-mail: fhasso@oberlin.edu

© *2009 Cambridge University Press 0020-7438/09 $15.00*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743808090107 Published online by Cambridge University Press

When we organized a symposium on the report in early 2007 at Columbia University, followed by a roundtable at the Middle East Studies Association annual meeting in Montreal, we realized how much excitement this report is generating.

As scholars who work on women in the Arab world, we believe the report deserves serious attention. Respectful of the process that produced this complex, uneven, and sometimes self-contradictory document, we argue nevertheless that a good deal can be learned by analyzing it, especially from our standpoint in the U.S. academy, where historians and social scientists in Middle East and North Africa studies have been rethinking gender issues. We focus on the key themes and frameworks of the *AHDR 2005,* as well as the way the research on which it is based was conducted and interpreted. We consider the report's relationship to transnational institutions of governance and the geopolitical contexts in which representations of Middle Eastern women circulate. We assess the theoretical paradigms and political ideologies that frame both the representation of problems and the solutions proposed. Our perspectives are grounded in our own ethnographic research on marriage, family, schooling, the nation–state, social movements, and media in the Arab world. By publishing together our critical engagements with the *AHDR 2005*, we hope to open up the debate to a wider scholarly audience.

NOTES

[1]For a wide range of references to both Arabic- and English-language assessments of the reports, see, in addition to the articles in this issue, Hoda Elsadda's article on the *AHDR 2005* in the conference proceeding she has edited, *Intaj al-Maʿrifa ʿan al-ʿAlam al-ʿArabi* (Cairo: Supreme Council of Culture in Egypt, in press).

[2]Good critiques of the reports can be found in *Arab Studies Quarterly* 26 (2004).

[3]Elsadda, *Intaj al-Maʿrifa ʿan al-ʿAlam al-ʿArabi*.

[4]Although much of this academic work has been published in English, it has been increasingly in dialogue with critical feminist scholarship developing in the Arab world and in Arabic. As Marilyn Booth has noted, by the 1990s the production of knowledge about women had moved back to an Arab world that offered the "first historical analyses of women's status published just before the turn of the twentieth century in Lebanon, Egypt, and Turkey, as interventions in shaping a nationalist narrative." Marilyn Booth, "New Directions in Middle East Women's and Gender History," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 4 (2003): 128–32.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743808090107 Published online by Cambridge University Press