

Poor Women's Empowerment and the Challenges Ahead for the Arab World

■ Nancy Okail

Increasingly, gender equality is identified as one of the most crucial elements for the overall development of any country. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) placed the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women at the top of the development priorities. At the same time, the Arab Human Development Report (2003) sets "gender inequality" as one of the three most significant deficiencies behind the regression of our region.

In this respect, world leaders, scholars, intellectuals and international development organizations began to stress the significance of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. Despite being recognized as a high priority, there is no clear definition of what is precisely meant by such empowerment. There are three dimensions of empowerment – economic, social and political; nevertheless, empowerment is usually dealt with as one general all-encompassing concept. Consequently, discussion about empowerment has often taken a rhetorical path where little has been said about the specific objectives needed for women's empowerment, and the obstacles standing in their way. Furthermore, most of the views expressed nowadays come from abroad or mostly from well-educated and highly-situated women in our society who are already empowered enough to have their voices heard. Undoubtedly, these voices have had a significant impact in pushing forward the call for gender equality and putting women's rights at the top of the development agenda. However, few have stopped to hear the voices of women at the grassroots level before speaking on their behalf and

designing projects to meet their needs. Although such a vulnerable group represents the larger percentage of the population of developing countries, they are unable to convey their own perspectives, priorities and the challenges ahead of them.

There is a huge gap between the perspective of those vulnerable women and other sectors of the society, not to mention the Western perspective. As a woman coming from a developing country, I had believed for a long time, as many others in the world, that if women acquire economic independence and earn their own sources of finance, they will automatically gain power, have the ability to make their own decisions and demand equal rights to men. However, working with poor women in Egypt's most deprived rural areas (on micro-credit projects for female-headed households), was an invaluable experience that provided me with a totally different perspective and an illuminating insight.

It is true that these women are ultimately concerned with fulfilling their primary needs and earning enough funds to support their families and that micro-credit projects support them a great deal in achieving this objective. Nevertheless, those who succeed in generating their own funds are not actually empowered and do not gain any further rights. The additional funds they earn due to their micro-credit might barely bring about economic empowerment; but that is where it stops. Decisions on how to spend these funds and who takes control over it stay in the hands of their spouses or the man in the family – in the case of single women.

There are several elements contributing to this unfortunate and rather unfair situation. First, in traditional societies, women's work is undervalued; becoming the primary breadwinner of the household is even perceived by the society as an embarrassment that the family is ashamed of and tries to hide it. Consequently, the man remains the sole controller and the primary decision maker in the house, thus obliterating any meaning of social empowerment. Second, this is further complicated by the rigid interpretation of religion that does not treat men and women equally and places several restrictions on their rights and freedom. This is extremely dangerous; speaking in the name of religion, and giving those restrictions a holy mask impedes any attempt for contesting those restrictions and examining their validity.

Third, and most importantly, these women spend a considerable proportion of their day trying to earn money and at the same time they are still expected to exclusively take full responsibility for the needs of their family. Such demanding obligations do not leave them any room for any other personally or socially fulfilling activities. The problem with almost all projects and programs designed to empower women is that they are not adapted to their own culture and circumstances. Very few projects give account to circumstances in rural areas, such as the long distance women have to travel to move from one area to another in order to run their income-generating activities and have enough time to accomplish the housework and prepare meals for their children.

That is why "empowerment" in the Arab world acquired an implicit negative meaning; people thought of it as an externally imposed concept. For many men it is a foreign concept against our tradition, and for many women it is an extra burden as they cannot see the fruits it may bring.

Empowerment in its general sense means providing a person with the tools needed to face the world and its challenges whether that be economic tools, new skills or enhanced human capacity like raising awareness and improving literacy rates. As Plato wisely said centuries and centuries ago:

If women are expected to do the same work as men, we must teach them the same things.

Nevertheless, these tools should be consciously offered, paying close attention to the conditions and the environment into which they are being introduced. On one of those micro-credit projects, I was asking women why they refused to take the free of charge literacy classes that the program offers. Their response was that they simply do not have time and that even if they do, they do not see the reason for literacy. These women lack the reason for education because they were not enlightened on the importance of such an asset. This sheds light on how it is not enough to provide them with a new skill; what is most important is to raise their awareness of the importance of such skills. It is absent from

the minds of many international donor organizations who design those projects that these values are not primarily embedded in the social culture.

As much as conveying such views to the rural poor is a very challenging mission, it is extremely important for closing the gap between what is being offered to support them and what they actually need. Without such endeavors we will not be able to achieve empowerment in its full sense.

It is imperative for our region to promote social and economic empowerment which will ultimately lead to the third dimension of political empowerment. In our region this is not confined to women alone; political empowerment is a missing element in the society as a whole. On one hand, people in the Arab world are faced with oppressive regimes that do not allow an effective participation in the public arena. On the other hand, we are suffering from accumulated apathy – especially the poor who do not have their voices heard and have lost hope that they would make any difference. In order to get those people to participate in public life, they must retain confidence in their government and be reassured that their opinions are valued and their voices needed. Voicelessness and lack of political participation is not a problem of gender alone; it is a problem of a society as a whole. But for people to be able to make informed decisions we must provide them with the necessary skills and tools to give them power to stand up for their own rights.

Empowerment in that sense is both a means and an end for poverty alleviation and development in general. According to the World Bank (2002),

Empowerment refers broadly to the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life. It implies control over resources and decisions. For poor people, that freedom is severely curtailed by their voicelessness and powerlessness... Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives.¹

Thus, as part of rebuilding our region, it is imperative to empower poor women, the most vulnerable of all groups, and support them in becoming effective and influential members of our society, which requires each and every effort to develop. But in order to achieve this, it is necessary to include their own views while setting our development goals and agendas of priorities; it is highly crucial to get their own voices heard.

Endnotes

1. World Bank, 2002, Empowerment and Poverty Reduction Source Book, Washington D.C., available online at www.worldbank.org