

# Introduction

## ARAB WOMEN AND POVERTY

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By the end of 1994, more than 18 percent of the world's people were living in absolute poverty, more than 27 percent lacked access to clean water and sanitation, and about one out of five adults was functionally illiterate.<sup>1</sup> The income gap between industrialized and developing countries keeps getting wider. The top 20 percent of income earners receives 83 percent of the world's income, while the bottom 20 percent earns only 1.5 percent.<sup>2</sup> Rural poverty is still a benchmark characteristic of poverty, although urban poverty too, is emerging more significantly. The rural poor still represent the majority of poor people in developing countries. In recent decades the proportion of poor people in the world, and especially in developing countries, has gone down, and the increases in per capita income, life expectancy, and immunization are encouraging. World Bank statistics are alarming: if recent poverty trends continue, there shall be an additional 200 million poor people in the developing world by the end of this century. In most regions of the world, unemployment and underemployment are spreading rapidly. Poverty especially hits those social groups who have the fewest

resources such as, the unemployed, the weak, and the vulnerable. Rapid population growth contributes to increased poverty worldwide. Developing countries are caught in an infernal cycle: poor families tend to have more children to use as cheap family labor, and high population growth obstructs development patterns, thus stimulating poverty. Moreover, population growth in these countries reduces opportunities for productive employment.

Women suffer excessively and unevenly from poverty, underdevelopment, and social problems. Currently, more than 70 percent of the world's poor are women, and they are followed in number by the elderly. Women control fewer resources, earn lower incomes, and generally do not enjoy the same access to production and human resource assets as men. Gender discrimination occurs in all facets of life: in employment, education, nutritional support, and health-care. The limited access of women to the benefits of development constitutes a very important cause of poverty. Discrimination prevents women from receiving the education, training, primary health-care, child-care, and other assets that might make all the differences in their lives.

The Human Development Report published by the United Nations Development Program (1995) emphasized the link between gender and poverty. It stated that human development is in danger if gender variations will not be seriously considered. It also emphasized that no society in the world provides the same opportunities to women and men, and that women and men still live in an unequal world. Furthermore, the report stressed that "while doors to education and health opportunities have opened for women, the doors for economic and political opportunities are barely ajar". Thus, gender inequality has been noted to stand in the way of human development worldwide.

Given these considerations, the present issue of *Al-Raida* examines poverty among women in the Arab World, and especially in Lebanon. The file also includes the abstract of a national study which was conducted by the Institute of Women's Studies in the Arab World and funded by the United States Agency for International Development on the female labor force in Lebanon (completed in April 1997). This study will be published by the Institute in the near future.

1. *United Nations, Global Poverty, Fact Sheet in preparation for the World Summit on Social Development*
2. *United Nations, World Employment, Fact Sheet in preparation for the World Summit on Social Development*

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