

A Critical Feminist Reading of the Agenda for Sustainable Development in light of the current stage in the Arab region

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On Thursday, March 20, 2025, the Women's Working Group of the Arab NGO Network for Development held a virtual seminar entitled "A Feminist Reading of the Current Stage in the Arab Region."

The seminar reviewed the current stage a decade after the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (2030), with a focus on Goal 5 related to gender equality and the extent of its achievement. The meeting featured Dr. Mohammed Al-Saadi, an economist, independent consultant, and university professor at major universities in Morocco, and Dr. Howayda Adly, a professor of political science at the National Center for Social and Criminological Research in Egypt. The meeting was moderated by Dr. Gihan Abu Zeid, a researcher and consultant.

The seminar discussed the shocking gap between the digital achievements announced about women's empowerment in the Arab region and the reality that women live under wars, conflicts, neoliberalism, and corruption. The seminar pointed out that a quarter of countries in the region are still under the weight of armed conflicts, as well as water and electricity privatisation policies that have turned basic rights into commercialised commodities, and regimes neglect of development plans. Authoritarian development plans restrict freedoms and in favour of specific groups. The speakers also highlighted the challenges facing women in the Arab region, from being expelled from their land in favour of investment projects, their labour in the shadow economy without rights, to being marginalized as displaced women in reconstruction plans. The seminar also discussed the catastrophic conditions in countries such as Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Lebanon and Yemen, where infrastructures are crumbling and maternal mortality

rates are high while 70 per cent of women in Gaza live below the poverty line.

As well as that, unfair trade agreements, such as Agadir, have destroyed the livelihoods of two million women in agriculture and forestry and the privatisation of water in Jordan has transformed the right to women workers in Egypt have been forced to accept wages a commodity, while female workers in Egypt were forced to accept very low wages, without health insurance. Meanwhile, the privatization of water in Jordan turned a basic human right into an expensive commodity, while female workers in Egypt face low wages and no social security guarantees.

Dr. Mohamed Al-Saadi's Intervention

Dr. Al-Saadi discussed the impact of the austerity policies widely adopted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and implemented by many Arab countries. These policies have had negative effects on social protection and subsidies for essential goods, without achieving a noticeable improvement in economic indicators such as growth or reducing budget deficits. These policies led to a reduction in support directed towards the most vulnerable groups, increasing the suffering of the poor and exacerbating their economic and social problems. He pointed out that the primary victims of these policies are women, who face additional challenges due to cuts in public spending on services such as healthcare and education. This has resulted in women bearing the burden of unpaid work within the family, while also facing increased difficulty in accessing decent work opportunities and fair wages. Moreover, the deterioration in the quality of healthcare and educational services

negatively affects women, both as beneficiaries and as workers in these sectors. All of these factors deepen the gender economic gap and increase women's economic vulnerability, especially those working in the informal sector, where they lack any form of social protection. Dr. Al-Saadi referred to a statement by the American investor Warren Buffett, who described current economic policies as a form of class warfare that serves the interests of the rich.

Finally, Dr. Al-Saadi proposed two main alternatives: First, to challenge the prevailing narrative and develop a new intellectual framework that redefines the social contract, focusing on economic rights from a new perspective. Second, he suggested abandoning austerity policies and called for the reallocation of spending to prioritize social sectors over the interests of large corporations.

Dr. Howaida Adly's Intervention

On her part, Dr. Howaida Adly reviewed the dangers of the lack of a deep and comprehensive vision for social protection in the Arab region, emphasizing that social protection is not just a tool for relief but a human right that should be guaranteed for everyone throughout their life cycle. She argued that transitioning from the traditional relief approach to a more empowering and inclusive approach could achieve justice and fairness.

She pointed out the stagnation of social protection systems, which have not yet reached a level that guarantees justice and inclusivity. Although the failure to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a global crisis, the Arab region faces an even more complex reality due to internal conflicts, corruption, and neoliberal systems that exacerbate social and economic disparities. This situation led some researchers to describe the last decade as the "lost decade" for development, due to weak achievements and the accumulation of crises.

She highlighted the rise in extreme poverty in Arab countries, in addition to the increase in multidimensional poverty, which is not measured only by income but also by other criteria such as education, health, and housing. In this context, economic policies are formulated separately from social policies, which leads to a lack of coordination in addressing challenges and results in partial, unsustainable solutions.

She also referred to the promotion of flexible work, which is considered one of the key examples of policies that expose women to exploitation and reinforce their economic vulnerability. While current policies focus on addressing the symptoms of poverty, they fail to tackle its structural causes, which deepens the gaps and keeps the current situation unchanged.

The absence of just social policies results in more victims, especially with the decline in investment in human capital, whether in education, health, or training. This decline weakens the state's capacities and undermines the expected outcomes from economic policies. To achieve real change, the region needs to adopt an inclusive economic growth model that addresses the root causes of poverty, promotes inclusivity, and builds social protection systems that restore balance between economic and social dimensions, placing women and vulnerable groups at the heart of development policies.

Discussions highlighted the marginalization of rural women in Arab countries, pointing to the discontinuation of girls' education in many rural families, as they are used as agricultural labor within the family. This is coupled with a preference for educating males over females, as boys later return to own the land, while girls are deprived of their rights to land and resources.

Although the failure of lending as a strategy to support poor families has been proven, development programs in Arab countries still rely on this approach and employ civil society organizations to implement it. This situation raises fundamental questions about the priorities and orientations of these organizations, and whether they are effectively addressing the needs of communities or serving other goals.

In this context, it has become necessary for civil society organizations to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of international economic and development policies. This evaluation is a crucial step to understand the impacts of these policies on different communities in Arab countries and to work towards finding real alternatives that promote social justice and sustainable development.

Recommendations from Partner Organizations and Participants:

In the face of these challenges, there is a need to adopt alternative policies to achieve social justice and reduce inequalities by placing a greater tax burden on high-income earners. These additional revenues can be used to support social protection programs and public services, helping to reduce the economic gap between social classes. Progressive taxes are considered fairer because they contribute to wealth redistribution in a way that alleviates pressure on low-income groups. They can also fund large-scale programs such as health insurance and free education, which would provide a comprehensive social safety net that helps improve the quality of life for vulnerable groups.

- **Adopt a comprehensive vision and strategy for social protection systems** based on the principles of social justice, responding to actual challenges, with a focus on empowering individuals and communities to achieve a dignified and sustainable life, and managing social protection systems effectively.

- **Adopt a new development model** that guarantees the provision of basic rights, such as quality education, healthcare, and decent work.

- At this critical moment, **political forces and civil society must rally around a new political discourse** that highlights the human rights nature of social protection, emphasizing its inclusion in constitutional and legal frameworks to ensure its sustainability.

- **For women's empowerment**, there is a need for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding that goes beyond statistics and indicators to address the real roots of challenges, placing women at the heart of sustainable development efforts.

- There is a need to adopt **alternative economic systems** that have proven effective in countries with similar developmental conditions, such as the Sufficiency Economy in Thailand.

- Arab countries, suffering under the weight of wars, are experiencing an exceptional developmental decline. This necessitates adopting carefully studied developmental inputs that address current challenges, as ready-made global solutions have been designed without considering the complexities of the reality and the consequences of Western-funded wars.

- Civil society organizations must **review economic empowerment policies** promoted by governments, as their costs vary among different social groups.

- It is crucial to **integrate local communities into developmental processes** and adopt strategies that enhance the capacities of communities to express and defend their interests.

In conclusion, the discussions emphasized that the real challenges do not lie in the slow progress of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, but in reducing women's issues to numerical indicators, such as increased parliamentary representation or the rise in small loans, while neglecting the fundamental structural constraints. These include the dominance of multinational corporations and the alliance of patriarchy with political authoritarianism.