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## Economic empowerment of Arab women as an input to enhance their role in crisis management

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### Abstract:

The past few years have seen the emergence of crises in different parts of the world. These crises are still affecting the Arab countries economically and socially, which requires the search for entrances and effective strategies in order to solve them, or to minimize its negative effects. One of the important strategies to face crises is the strategy or entrance of empowerment.

By considering that woman is an essential and crucial component of the communities' prosperity, different international organizations have adopted the principle of women's empowerment as a key objective in their programs. As an example, the United Nations Development Program has developed a program that encourages the empowerment of women in decision-making at all levels ranging from houses through to the government.

In this context, the issue of this paper is determined by asking the question about the contribution of economic empowerment of women as an input to enhance its role in crises that afflict the Arab societies?

**Keywords:** women, empowerment, crisis

## **Introduction:**

The prevalence of the empowerment concept using in the eighties of the last century has contributed to a large extent in considering women as a development strategy based on the necessity of their participation in the development process as an actor and a producer.

In spite of the improvement in the participation of Arab women in public life over the past decades, their participation in politics, decision-making and governance is still relatively limited.

Under the changes experienced by the Arab societies, and the resulting crises affected organizations, the economic empowerment is an important gateway to strengthen the role and status of women in crisis management.

### **1. The importance of women's economic empowerment**

The prevalence of the use of the concept of empowerment in the eighties of the twentieth century had paved the way for considering women as an important mean of the development strategy. This mean is based on the necessity of the participation of women in the development process as an actor and a producer not only as a recipient of assistance or as a population fraction to be helped in the community. The importance of this issue comes also from the inevitability for women to organize themselves to become an effective political force for change, and to contribute in resolving the crises and problems of society.

#### **1.1 The concept of empowerment:**

The concept empowerment occupied a considerable position management science and it has received a great interest by researchers, as a result of its connection with several other concepts having political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions.

From an Islamic perspective, the term empowerment has been already mentioned in several verses in the Koran. As an example the following verse:

*"And Allah will surely help one who helps him. Allah is indeed, powerful, Mighty"*

*Hij 41*

*And we have established you in the earth and provided for you therein the means of subsistence. How little thanks you give!*

*Aaraf 10*

The above verses embody the meaning of the succession in the earth.

The word empowerment is also understood implicitly in the following hadith of the prophet (PBUH):

*Promise this nation by the high prominence, greatness, religion, victory and empowerment in the earth" (Narrated by Imam Ahmad).*

Among the contemporary definitions of empowerment as a concept, we find:

1. Empowerment is to encourage individuals to take personal responsibility for the development in the way that encourages people to carry out their work via the delegation of authority in decision-making at the lower level.
2. Empowerment strategy aimed at freeing the potential and the inner capacity of individuals, and to involve them in building the organization's operations, given that the success of this strategy depends on the individuals' harmony with the organization's vision and goals.
3. The World Bank definition stated that: "Empowerment means to expand the capabilities and potential of individuals to participate, influence, control and deal with institutions that organize their lives, as well as possessing the possibility of accountability of these institutions."

The following definition of empowerment is clear and more inclusive because it considers it as "the process of capacity consolidation that aims to preserve the rights of men and women and duties of each one of them. In addition to this, the empowerment implies the provision of cultural, material and moral and educational means to enable him / her to participate in decision-making and to control the resources both at the household and the public life levels".

To achieve empowerment in organizations, it must employ basic operations such as, coordination between the organization department, and the opportunity for workers to gain access to accurate information and data on which they depend on. The purpose of all this is to make good decisions in which training is considered as the most important requirement for an effective empowerment.

## **2. The concept of women' empowerment:**

Since the beginning of the World Decade for Women (75-1985) and up to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the world's attention has been paid on the cause of women in making development and enabling her to perform their roles effectively as men, and to participate in decision-making in the various spheres of political, economic and social life. This global attention accompanied the attention of many countries and international bodies and regional organizations. So what is the truth of this empowerment?

### **2.1. Definition of women's empowerment:**

The empowerment of women means strengthening the role of women equally with men as a mean to improve the status of women in society in different aspects of life: political, economic, social and cultural aspect. This sense is the basis for the advancement of any society. Empowerment aims the expansion of the role of women and their participation in public life strategy that increases the self-reliance.

The empowerment of women is also described as the process by which women are able to recognize their situation.

In this meaning, women can acquire the skill and experience, and are improving their capacity of self-reliance. Additionally, empowerment means the capability of performing all of the highest societal value roles whether in the political, legislative, legal, educational, economic, health spheres.

The most important result of the process of empowerment is that women are becoming freer in determining their choices and activities aimed at improving the standard of living. The benefits of this process do not refer to women only but to the society as a whole.

Moreover, the concept of empowerment of women is linked closely to the participation and development. In this context, it is assumed that the empowerment and participation are two sides of the same coin. It requires the active and vigorous participation of women in the development and the continual improvement of their capabilities and skills to possess strengths that enable them to bring about change in the society. This power lies in the sources of knowledge and self-confidence, capabilities and work within the framework of the group rather than individual action. The process of empowerment allows women to improve their status and to achieve the equality with men both in policy-making processes *vis-a-vis* decision-making, and in the different aspects of life (economic, politics, culture, social).

## **2.2. International background of the empowerment:**

1. The first World Conference on Women called by the United Nations General Assembly in New Mexico in 1975. Then, the second conference in Copenhagen in 1980, and the Third Conference in 1985 in Nairobi which issued an important document: Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the year 2000.

2. Beijing Working Paper: the Fourth Conference in Beijing held between 4, 15 September 1995 showed the commitment of countries in the world to advance women and engage her in all the economic issues as well as supporting the vision and equality of women with men (gender perspective). The goal is to take their right inseparably from those assigned to the human being in general.

3. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has adopted a follow-up paper after the Beijing Conference in 1996 collaboratively with the European Union.

4. Millennium Development Goals 2000: the declaration involves the eight goals called the "*Millennium Development Goals*" and it is held by 189 nations.

## **2.3 Areas and domains of women' empowerment:**

Women's empowerment has three basic aspects: the economic empowerment, political and social one.

**2.3.1. The political empowerment:** This empowerment emphasizes the following issues: the proportion of women in local councils and decision-making positions, the percentage of women in the civil service, the proportion of women who had been registered to vote and to be elected and the percentage of women on the boards of representatives and the senate.

As part of the political empowerment of women, the Beijing Conference in 1995 called for the allocation of parliamentary seats for women in parliaments (the so-called quota) project and the need to raise the representation of women not less than 30% up to 2005. The Arab countries and has taken a number of decisions in this regard.

**2.3.2. The economic empowerment:** This type of empowerment implies the change in the ratio of employment rates, the participation of family members in the home and child-care business, the difference in salaries and wages between women and men, the percentage of

ownership, the percentage of expenditure on health and education and the percentage of available opportunities for women to develop their technical capabilities such as services provided by the technical government or non-government sources.

**2.3.4. The Social empowerment:** The empowerment of this framework combines the number of women in civil society organizations compared to women in decision-making; the total number of members in the projects sites both the official and the non-official circles. In this context, there are those who distinguished between three types of empowerment: self-empowerment that intends to achieve on personnel level such educated behaviors, social empowerment which looks for the realization of women ability and social roles, and finally the economic empowerment that is often used to describe the recovery of income.

### **3. The concept of economic empowerment of women:**

Women are one of the resources which are not optimally exploited in the world. For that reason, all international and local organization strive to promote the role of women in society and the economic life as well.

#### **3.1. Definition of economic empowerment of women:**

Women' economic empowerment is a process by which women can move from lowest economic ranks to the highest one in the society. This trajectory gives the woman the strength and power via her increased control and governance of the economic and financial resources. This power guarantees at the first the financial independence of women.

- The United Nations defines empowerment of women by five key criteria, namely: the sense of dignity, the right to determine her choice, the right to access to the resources and opportunities, the right to control and take decisions concerning her family, the ability to influence social change and finally to create a fairer and more national and international social and economic system.

- Empowerment of women means fundamentally the sensation of their intrinsic values and their rights to determine their options after giving them the full right to access to the different opportunities and resources. Furthermore, the meaning of the concept includes the arrangement of her life inside and outside the home and the ability to influence social change in an attempt to create a social development and economic with more equity at the national and global levels.

From the definitions above, it is clear to state that the economic empowerment of women is their ability to get their economic rights and the development of these rights to exercise an active role in the community development.

The empowerment in this sense takes two ways: either to participate in the economic activity such as trade, investment or engage in self-employment, or participate in the labor market as an employee or working either in the public sector or the private sector.

It must be emphasized that the economic empowerment of women in any of the economic domains such as investment or trade should not conflict with their primary role in the family and their basic function in consolidating the family ties according to the Islamic values.

### **3.2. The importance of women' economic empowerment:**

By reference to the Millennium Development Goals, we find that the third objective of these goals has focused on the endorsement and the promotion of the gender equality. The aim of this enactment is to eliminate the disparity and the difference between men and women in primary and secondary education during a period not exceeding 2015. The issue of gender equality is a key factor of the Millennium in which eight goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators are determined.

The realization of the third goal will lead directly to achieve the universal primary education goal (The second goal of the Millennium). The improvement of girls' education paves the way for raising the awareness among women to benefit from the health services, and that means the improvements in the health of mothers (fifth goal) and the reduction of the infection chances by HIV and AIDS (Goal VI). In addition to that, the high knowledge of women who bear the responsibility of the family and child care will impact positively in reducing deaths of children under the age of five (fourth goal). The high educational as well is associated with high levels of productivity and income, and improves the chances of economic independence, which will contribute to alleviating poverty and also reduce malnutrition rates (the first goal).

In another framework, the elevation of women status is accompanied by their participation in the formulation of plans and programs of development and implementation. This fact contributes to the establishment of an efficient management process of the natural resources and a good preservation of the environment (seventh goal). When women go to work and professions and sectors in expansion stages, they will be highly protected from the economic participation of foreigners and the trade liberalization measures on one hand; on the other, the state's economy will be strong, relying on human capital, having a varied export structure and it will be able to compete in global markets. Indirectly from what has been cited above, the eighth millennium development will be achieved automatically.

Generally, the empowerment of women in all sectors of life is vital for the following reasons:

1. Building strong economies.
2. Establishing societies more stable and more equal.
3. Achieving what was agreed upon by the international community in terms of sustainability, development and human rights.
4. Upgrading the quality of men and women, family and community life.
5. Push forward the activities of the business sectors and encourage the attainment of its objectives.

By contrast, the lack of women empowerment hurts welfare and hinders development. It adversely affects the personal lives of men, women and children, and leads to low levels of productivity projects, and thus weakens the rule and jurisdiction power in the country and as a result reduces the effectiveness of the development policies.

### **3.3. Measuring the indicators of women' economic empowerment:**

Levels of women' empowerment changes constantly, this fact implies the difficulty to measure its indicators. Consequently, several indicators have been resorted and determined by the United Nations to facilitate the task of counting. These indicators are the following:

- a. The economic contribution: the level of unemployment, the level of economic activities, and income from entering the labor market.
- b. The economic opportunities: the quality of women' economic participation, the quality of job held by women, women' earnings relative to men' income, number of women in high management positions.
- c. Participation in decision-making: the opportunities of the private sector career, the extent of women' participation in decision-making structures, the extent of women' participation in determining policies that affect society in all its categories.
- d. Education: quality of education, opportunities for women' scientific self-development, the proportion of women education, the number of women in various education levels and the rate of women who have spent years in schools or universities.
- e. Health: Health care, contraception and control of birth, psychological and medical care.

#### **4. The reality of women economic empowerment in the Arab world:**

The term "empowerment of women" has emerged in feminist forums in the Arab and Muslim world, as a natural result of the debate that took place and is going on with each conference or forum. The forums deal with women' issues and it has been shown clearly clear in the Beijing Conference + 5 and Beijing Conference+ 10. The concept of empowerment has been ingrained practically in 1985 from the meeting "DAWN" group which is the acronym of Alternative Development with the participation of Women for a New era.

Since the empowerment of women is an important aspect of human freedom, we find according to the application of gender empowerment measures, a penultimate rank held by the Arab women over the world, followed only by sub-Saharan Africa. According to the annual report 2013 of Women Participation Foundation Centre for the Arab Women Studies: women in the UAE have achieved positive engagement in the social sphere such as: the participation in decision-making bodies, council's leadership and parliamentary. We find also that, according to the Human Development Index of the private United Nations Development Program 07/2008, UAE women had the rank of 43<sup>rd</sup> position among 177 countries, and the 29<sup>th</sup> position largest in the world in the gender empowerment measure, which is the first among the Arab countries.

#### **4.1. The establishment of the Arab Women' Organization:**

The Arab League Council agreed on the establishment of this organization to work under the Arab Countries University. The first meeting held in Egypt, November 2000 and organized jointly by the National Council for Women in Egypt and the Hariri Foundation in Lebanon and the Arab League, and entered into execution in March 2003.

The Arab Women Organization was founded in order to achieve three main goals:

- Empower Arab women and strengthen their capabilities in all fields as a essential condition for the progress of the Arab community.
- Awareness of the importance and centrality of the Arab woman to be an equal partner in development with men.
- Establishment of the necessary coordination and cooperation between the Arab countries in order to accomplish the goals of empowerment and awareness-raising efforts.

Several conferences have been held, including: third conference in Tunisia in 2010 under the theme "Arab women are a key partner in the path of sustainable development", the fourth conference in 2012 in Algeria under the theme "Entrepreneurship and leadership of women' business in the Arab world: leadership and development."

#### **4.2 Status of Arab women in terms of the economic empowerment degree:**

In order to monitor the status of Arab women and be closer to their reality, as well as to know the obstacles that face the achievement of women economic empowerment in the Arab world, we will rely on some of the statistics in this area.

##### **4.2.1. At the level of participation in the labor market:**

Women' participation in the labor market means the number of workers to total employed in the age of 15 years old and above. As a result of the improvement in the participation rate of women in economic activity, the Arab women' share has been evolved by 5% in the overall market rate, a rate approximates nearly twice the proportion of the annual evolution of men estimated at 2.7%.

**Table (01): the evolution of women' participation in the labor market in the Arab world**

Years	1950	2000	2010
<b>The ratio of the total employed (percentage)</b>	18	27	32

**Source:** Joseph & Hanan, a report on ways to improve employment opportunities for women and the effectiveness of its application, submitted in the Fourth Arab Conference for Human Resources Development, in session at the King Faisal Conference Center, Riyadh, February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001, p. 33

The participation rate of women in the world workforce occupied 51% in 2008, has increased by about 09 percentage points from 1980, which accounted for 27% in 2008, then it dropped to 26 per cent in 2009. This percentage is half the global average.

**Table (02): the rate of labor force participation by gender in Arab countries for the year 2009 (percentage)**

Country	UEA	Qatar	Bahrain	Arabia Saoudite	Kuwait	Libya	Lebanon	Oman	Tunisia	Jordan
Female (%)	41.9	49.9	32.4	21.2	45.4	24.7	22.3	25.4	25.6	23.3
Male (%)	92.1	93.0	85.0	79.8	82.5	68.9	71.5	76.9	70.6	73.9
Algeria	Egypt	Palestine	Syria	Morocco	Iraq	Yemen	Cote d'ivoire	Djibouti	Sudan	Somalia
37.2	22.4	16.5	21.1	26.2	13.8	19.9	73.7	61.5	30.8	56.5
79.6	75.3	68.4	79.5	80.1	68.9	73.5	85.4	78.7	56.5	84.7



**Source:** prepared by researchers, relying on: office of the United Nations Development Program, Human Development Report for 2011, sustainability and fairness for a better future for all, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, the United Nations Development Program, United States, 2011, pp. 143-146.

The numbers in the table above indicate that the contribution of women in public authorities vary from one Arab country to another. This variation refers to different factors: social, economic, political, and cultural. However, women participation is still low compared to the contribution of men in most of the Arab countries except Comoros and Djibouti.

#### **4.2.2. On education and health levels:**

On the educational level, the overall picture shows considerable progress as most Arab countries managed to close the gap entirely or significantly between primary school enrollment between male and female, and also within the category of young people of both sexes in different educational levels. Nevertheless, a large female class still suffers from illiteracy. Human Development Reports for 2013 and the Global Monitoring Report on Education for All 2012 noted that the population of the Arab countries amounted to 353.8 million people, of whom 256 946 million are familiar with reading and writing, which means that the number of illiterates is up to 96.836 million illiterate. It noted also that the synopsis of these reports shows that the rate of illiteracy in the Arab world reached 19.73% of the total population in which illiteracy rate among females attained 60.60%, while the illiteracy rate among males is at 39.42% level.

#### **4.2.3. At the level of women participation in development:**

The period between the preparation and after the Beijing Conference of 1995 had experienced major shifts in terms of attention to the issue of women and development and the obstacles faced by them in capacity-building and participation in the overall development strategy.

Although this global attention, the role of women in the official Arab economies is still modest. This is due to a lot of women problems and the feminization of poverty, unemployment , property issues, barriers to education, training, barriers disease, violence obstacles, difficulties of women 'economic participation, the situation has been aggravated by armed conflicts.

#### **4.2.4. Index of Gender Gap for 2013 to some Arab countries:**

The report of the World Forum (DAVOS) in October 2013 identifies gender gap of 136 countries in terms of their ability to bridge the gap between the sexes in four key areas:

- a. Participation and economic opportunity: payment rates and the level of participation and access to jobs that requires high skills.
- b. Education: access to basic and higher education.
- c. Health and life expectancy: The average ages and proportionality between the sexes.
- d. Political participation: rates of representation in decision-making circles.

The report notes that at the global level seen in 2013 that 96% of the gender gap has been filled in the field of health care. In the area of education the gap stood at 93%, and in the field of economic equality the gap has been reduced by nearly 60% and in political participation by 21%.

It appears from the results of the report that the world has made significant progress in terms of education and health, while there is still a long way in front of women' political empowerment.

**Table (03): the gap between the sexes indicators for 2013 for selected countries in the Arab world**

Number	Country	General rank (from 136 country)	Participation and economic opportunities	Education level	Health and average of ages	Political participation
01	Bahrain	112	0.515	0.991	0.961	0.067
02	Egypt	125	0.443	0.920	0.977	0.035
03	Jordan	119	0.415	0.992	0.971	0.061
04	Kuwait	116	0.525	0.994	0.961	0.037
05	Lebanon	123	0.442	0.980	0.980	0.010
06	Morocco	129	0.395	0.900	0.971	0.072
07	Yemen	136	0.385	0.698	0.973	0.023
08	Oman	122	0.449	0.974	0.976	0.022
09	Qatar	115	0.573	0.994	0.952	0.000
10	Arabia Saudite	127	0.322	0.976	0.976	0.077

**Source:** Global Gender Gap Report 2013 – World Economic Forum - <http://www.weforum.org/issues/global-gender-gap>

The table above identifies the most prominent indicators of the gender gap for a selected group of countries in the Arab world. They pave the way for a debate about the extent of their precision or their vagueness, and at what degree can these indicators reflect of the reality of the gap in the Arab country. However, that we can reach a conclusion in which each stating that in the list of Arab States has made significant achievements in line with the global level in bridging the gap both in terms of education and health, but they are all without a global level by a wide margin in the field of economic equality and political participation. This means that the success in the indices (education and health) is threatened by failure in the other two indicators (economic equality and political participation).

### **Conclusion:**

This overview presents the following points:

1. Women are an essential component to develop and expand the economies.
2. Men and women should go hand in hand to establish a cooperative development strategy without any sort of racism or a kind of discrimination.
3. Women should take good position in the society in order to assume the suitable responsibilities convenient with their characteristics.
4. The empowerment of women has a positive close relationship with that of men. The result of this harmony is the generation of wealth and the prosperity of the economy.

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