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THE FEMALE MARCH

The real Arab Spring is about women and economic development.

THE INTERNATIONAL DAY of the Girl Child was celebrated on October 11. It highlights the marginalisation of girls and women. Women make up more than half of the world's population but own only one per cent of the world's wealth, earn only a 10 per cent share of global income, and occupy just 14 per cent of leadership positions in the private and public sector.

Closer to home, women in the Arab world have the lowest rates of female labour force participation globally: 26 per cent compared to a global average of 52 per cent. They face insuperable barriers, discrimination, legal and regulatory hurdles, lack of economic opportunities, poor working conditions, and the absence of the institutional, societal support needed to leverage them into economic and public life. The real 'Arab Spring' is about the necessary paradigm shift, the transformation of women's role in economic development and their empowerment.

WOMEN AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

What is the rationale behind the empowerment of women? There is a two-way relationship between economic development and women's empowerment, i.e. enabling women to access the constituents of development: health, education, earning opportunities, rights, and political participation. While economic development helps bring about women's empowerment, empowering women brings about changes in choices and decision-making, which have a direct, positive impact on development.

Poverty and lack of opportunity breed inequality between men and women, so when economic development reduces poverty, the condition of everyone, including women, improves. Gender inequality declines as poverty declines, so the relative condition of women (and children) improves compared to men with development. But economic development alone does not bring about parity between men and women. Policy action is necessary to achieve equality between genders. Such policy action is unambiguously justified because

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empowerment of women also stimulates further development, starting a virtuous cycle. In the other direction, continuing marginalisation and discrimination against women hinders development. The bottom line is that empowerment can accelerate development.

WOMEN ARE BETTER EDUCATED AND HEALTHIER

Arab countries have made rapid progress in reducing gender gaps in education and longevity, and in lowering fertility levels. Among the developing regions of the world, MENA achieved the largest decline (59 per cent) in the maternal mortality ratio between 1990 and 2008. Over the past decade, female school enrolments in the MENA have grown faster than male enrolments, with the female-to-male ratios currently in the high nineties and women are now more likely than men to attend university. They perform better at all levels of education. With a significant investment in women's education, Arab countries increased women's productive potential and capacity to earn. But the low levels of female participation in economic activity means that the region is not realising the return on its investment. The human capital of women is being wasted.

Why the poor performance? Barriers to entry are numerous. Purportedly 'protective' labour laws make it costly for the private sector to actively hire women. Employment in the public sector is not a good incubation environment for skills generation for transition to the competitive private sector. The lack of access to finance is another barrier. Globally, 47 per cent of women and 55 per cent of men have an account at a formal financial institution. The gap is wider in the MENA region: only 13 per cent of women as opposed to 23 per cent of men have an account. Absent a bank account, it is difficult to enter the formal economy and grow an SME.