

H.E. Noor Al Malki

Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you to this colloquium on “the Empowerment of women in the Arab World,” and I would like to thank the esteemed experts from different parts of the world who accepted our invitation to share their knowledge, views and expertise on this important topic. I, also, extend my thanks to our distinguished guests and to all participants.

The aim of this colloquium is to discuss the challenges currently facing Arab women, to exchange the lessons learned from the past decade, to identify the successful policies that had the most impact and to recommend new policies to promote the empowerment of women in the Arab world. We aim also to dissipate some of the confusions, misconceptions and misjudgments about Arab women.

Most Arab countries have made relative progress in the status of women in the last decade and many governments have taken some measures to facilitate and accelerate this progress such as creating institutional mechanisms for women’s issues, passing new legislations, appointing women to leadership positions and creating more opportunities for them to participate in the economy. Most Arab countries are party to the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). However, with this rate, many Arab countries will not be able to achieve the Millennium Development Goal number 3: gender equality and the empowerment of women.

In our discussions in this colloquium, we should be aware that the challenges facing women in different Arab countries are not the same and avoid making generalizations about “Arab women.” The Arab world is not a homogenous corps across the borders of the twenty two (22) states. The Human development index reflects a diversity of situations and sometimes a gap between Arab states. Most of the Arab economies are either weak or emerging, except the economies of some Gulf countries, and are influenced by the rate of tension, violence and conflict in the Middle East. Still, in all Arab countries, women remain among the most vulnerable and in some parts of the Arab world; they do not have the same opportunities as men regarding the most essential human rights because of poverty and illiteracy.

However, it is important to acknowledge the impact of the ongoing political turmoil, because of the delay in the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the financial and economic crisis in the world, especially in the Middle East, on the achievement of gender equality in the region.

A recent UN assessment of the situation of women around the world in a number of

indicators used to monitor progress towards the MDGs proves that the challenges facing Arab women are not necessarily unique to the Arab world, but are rather generic problems encountering women all over the world. No country, even with high level of gender equality, managed to fully secure equal rights and treatments for women.

Despite the universality of gender problems, addressing the empowerment of women needs “cultural-sensitive” approaches that are in accordance with the socio-economic context and cultural and religious settings in different countries. And, the progress of each society in this area needs to be measured by comparing its achievements over time rather than comparing it with another society.

Arab women have, already, achieved irreversible improvements in their status in many Arab countries. The process for their advancement has mainly focused on education as the best way to reach dignity and equality. Many Arab countries have made progress in the elimination of discrimination against women in their legislations, although more efforts are still needed to reform family laws in many countries. The rates of women’s participation in the labor market are steadily improving. Still, the main challenge is the sustainability and institutionalization of these achievements.

Another challenge for you to consider is the lack of support women get to reconcile their family and professional roles. Empowering women and respecting their dignity means also their capacity to serve the family and the society through motherhood. In this context family friendly working arrangements, shared family-care leave and redistribution of the burden of unpaid work should be included in policies.

During the upcoming two days, we are going to consider numerous questions and concerns, to share our views and exchange our experiences and best practices and to provide recommendations and guidance to governments, and national institutions in developing policies that empower women in all fields, build their self-confidence, strengthen their participation in the process of development and consolidate cooperation with civil society in the field of advocacy of gender issues.

I would like to conclude by saying that investing in women will contribute to the economic development and social gains of the whole society and can lead to significant generational payoff.

Thank you.