

## UN urges freedoms for Arab women

**Discrimination against women is holding back economic and social development across the Arab World, a report by the UN's development agency says.**

Arab women must be given greater access to education, employment, health care and public life, the report says.

The Arab Human Development Report is an annual overview compiled by Arab academics and experts in the field.

Islam is not to blame for the problem, the report says, but rather political inflexibility, male domination and war.

### **Disadvantaged**

The BBC's Imogen Foulkes in Geneva says the United Nations Development Programme's report, entitled Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World, reveals deep-seated discrimination against women across the region.

Maternal mortality rates remain unacceptably high and women suffer more overall ill-health than men.

**The rise of women is in fact a prerequisite for an Arab renaissance**  
Arab Human Development Report 2005

Maternal mortality rates average 270 per 100,000 live births, but this rises to 1,000 in the Arab League's poorest countries.

In all but four Arab countries, fewer than 80% of girls go to secondary school.

Half of all women are illiterate compared to one-third of men.

But there are exceptions. In Tunisia, Jordan, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, more girls go to school than boys.

And across the region, girls appear to make up more than half the top-scoring pupils, despite the disadvantages they face.

"Arab countries stand to reap extraordinary benefits from giving men and women equal opportunities to acquire and utilise knowledge," the report says.

### **Masculine culture**

In public life, though, women's involvement is very limited: they make up an average of only about 10% of members of parliament, for example - the lowest proportion in the world.

The Arab experts and academics writing this, the fourth, annual AHDR suggest that some Islamic law should be re-examined to reflect modern Arab societies.

The authors also challenge the belief, often heard in the West, that Islam is the main reason for discrimination.

Instead they say a deep-seated masculine culture, conservative and inflexible political forces, conflict and, in some cases, foreign occupation are to blame.

"The rise of women is in fact a prerequisite for an Arab renaissance," the report concludes.

"At a time when the Arab world needs to build and tap the capabilities of all its peoples, fully half its human potential is often stifled or neglected."

The solution should lie in short-term affirmative action to expand women's participation and longer term, sustained collective action that would benefit of the whole region.

Story from BBC NEWS:  
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