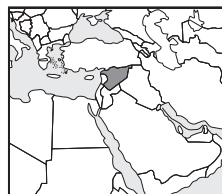


■ SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

Gender equity: among the best of the worst



Poverty is strongly linked to human rights issues. Lack of economic growth, low human capacity and widespread corruption hinder poverty eradication efforts, while public participation to shape social and economic policies is very limited. Some attention, however, is being paid to women's empowerment in governmental decision-making.

Centre for Environmental and Social Development

Issam Khoury

Economic overview

Syria's economic growth rate continues to struggle due to a weak fiscal and monetary policy, which concentrates on depriving the public sector of its economic surplus and disables it from renewing its factors of production. The per capita GDP growth rate averaged only 1.8% between 1990 and 2000.¹ Meanwhile employment policies have led to structural deficiencies in the economy and to the emigration of most of the qualified workforce.

The 2005 General Budget for Syria has been confirmed for the fiscal year with total allocations of SYP 460 billion (USD 8.8 billion) compared to SYP 449.5 (USD 8.6 billion) in 2004. A budget draft law, which according to Prime Minister Najji Ettry aims to effectively balance government revenues and expenditures, has also been approved. The draft law hopes to balance the Government's finances while improving local production and the standard of living. Additionally, the draft law concentrates on growth while assigning adequate resources to investment projects. It also includes controls on current spending, especially administrative spending. Finally, the draft law aims to increase the ratio of tax revenue to national product.

The economic growth rate, however, is expected to rise due to:

- A rise in world oil prices, which would improve economic revenues and the balance of trade, and provide the state budget with extra revenue. Petroleum derivatives industry in Syria will produce 58% of public sector revenue in 2005 and 25% of the total national product.
- An increase in agricultural sector activity to 29% of national production
- Increased participation of the private sector. Private sector production reached 57.9% of total economic production in 2001, compared to 68.5% in 1970 and 57.4% in 1980. Most

agricultural products are produced by the private sector, whereas the processing industry represented only 8.6% of the private sector in 2001 compared to 14.1% in 1990.

- Improved private sector participation in capital markets as the result of policies which encourage this activity, despite a drop from 55% in 1990 to 53.2% in 2001.

Eliminating poverty and hunger

The United Nations estimates that 25% to 27% of the population live below the poverty line. The population growth rate reached 2.7% between 1994 and 2002, and current growth rates mean that Syria's population will reach 25 million by 2010. Meanwhile, the economy only grew at a rate of 3.4% in 2002 up from 2.5% in the mid-1990s. This growth has not benefited all citizens, since the wealthiest 20% of the population receives nearly all of the national income and the unemployment rate is estimated at 20%. Disguised unemployment is even higher, and roughly 12% of university graduates and 30% of high school graduates are unemployed.

A family income study by the Central Office of Statistics reported that average family spending per month rose from SYP 17,900 (USD 345) in 1997 to around SYP 20,600 (USD 397) in 2005. The same study identifies 9.9% of the population as poor. The proportion varies between the city and the countryside, with the poverty rate reaching 12.1% in rural areas.

During 2004 in its efforts to join the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the Government raised the real income levels of state workers by raising salaries and fees by 20%. The Government was also obliged to raise private sector wages, which improved economic growth by 1% in addition to the 2% attributed to the rise in oil prices. The Government also raised teachers' salaries in remote provinces by 30% compared to 1991 salaries. Unfortunately these increases do not compensate for the poor working conditions of teachers, the long distances they must travel or the high housing costs and taxes they must pay.

Despite these wage increases, teachers can be included in the disguised poverty rate. Perhaps the average poverty rate of 9.9% estimated by the Central Office of Statistics is too optimistic; however an accurate poverty rate is difficult to estimate due to the lack of independent survey data.

Hunger is not prevalent although the situation of many families has caused some children to become homeless, forcing them to scavenge for food to survive. There is fear that the number of these cases will increase due to economic difficulties such as a sudden collapse of the currency or the failure of oil production to improve economic performance.

Poverty is strongly linked to human rights issues. Economic growth is required in order to pull Syrians, exhausted by high taxes, out of poverty. Low human capacity levels and widespread corruption in the public sector have also contributed to poverty. The Government's anti-corruption publicity campaign had little effect. Some groups believe that the campaign was a ploy to avoid the real change called for by scholars, researchers, members of Parliament and government ministers.

The Government does not possess the instruments needed to bring about reform and it does not allow any public participation in these matters. New economic projects survive only because of foreign assistance and management - this fact itself points to the failure of Syria's economy to protect citizens from the growing poverty cycle.

Women in government

The UNDP Gender-related Development Index, which measures the same three dimensions as the Human Development Index - a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living - but adjusts them for inequalities between men and women, ranked Syria 88th among 144 countries in 2002. Despite its low ranking, the country fairs well for an Arab state, since many states do not even figure on the list due to a lack of gender-related data.

Syria is considered a pioneer among Arab nations since women have been allowed to vote and stand for election since 1953. In the League of Arab Nations, Syria is second only to Djibouti in giving women the constitutional right to vote.

Women's participation in Parliament has steadily increased from 2.2% in 1973 to 12% in 2005.² With the Government's support, Syrian women expect to reach a 30% level of political participation. Women's participation in Syria is near the rates of women in the United States, where they represent

1 UNDP. *Human Development Report 2004. Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*. 2004. hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2004/

2 Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in national Parliaments". www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm

15.2% of the House of Representatives and 14% of the Senate. Syrian women still lag far behind Rwandan women who have the highest level in the world with 48.8% representation in Parliament.³

The first woman minister to be appointed was the Minister of Education and National Instruction in 1976. Two women ministers were appointed in 1991 - Dr Najah El-Attar as Minister of Culture and Dr Salha Sun'ur as Minister of Higher Education. Currently there are two women ministers - the Ministers of Immigration and of Social Affairs and Labour - out of a total of 32 ministers. These two ministries are usually assigned to women. To date, women have not been appointed to any of the more powerful ministries even though there are many women who are qualified and experienced for the positions.

Women joined the diplomatic corps in 1953 and the first woman ambassador was appointed in 1988. Currently there are three women ambassadors. Dr Buthaina Sha'baan, Expatriate Affairs Minister, formerly held a high post in the Foreign Ministry. The ratio of women to men in the diplomatic corps is 1 to 10.

Judicial law has been in effect in Syria since 1961 and does not discriminate between men and women. Woman can work in the judicial system in the same way as men and are subject to the same conditions when it comes to appointment, promotion, compensation, rights and duties. Women became part of the Judiciary in 1975, and are now active in civil, criminal and commercial law, working at all levels of the courts, including the magistrate, the first instance, and the appeals courts. A woman has also served as attorney general and as a member of the Court of Cassation (the highest court) since 1998. Nine percent of judges are women, as are 14.5% of state lawyers and 19% of general lawyers. There are no women judges in the religious courts or in the Court of Probate.

The laws which govern local city and village governments also give men and women the same right to vote. In 1975 there were only 27 women on the councils whereas in 1999 the number reached 189 or 21.1% of all local council members. In 2005 elections will be held and a considerable increase in the number of women candidates is expected.

Women in professional unions and popular organizations

Women began to join popular organizations and professional unions as a result of their participation in the labour market in a variety of trades and professions owing to their higher rates of education.

Women's participation in the labour force is 19%. Approximately 20% of the members of trade union associations are female. There are women union leaders and women participate in the formulation of policies and programmes. Working women became members of the Council of Trade Unions Association in 1982. In 2005 there were 13 women

³ *Ibid.*

TABLE 1

Human development indicators	
Annual population growth rate (%), 1975-2002	3.1
Life expectancy at birth (years), 1970-75	57
Life expectancy at birth (years), 2000-05	71.9
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births), 1970	90
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births), 2002	23
Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births), 1970	129
Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births), 2002	28
Maternal mortality ratio reported (per 100,000 live births), 1985-2002	110
Maternal mortality ratio adjusted (per 100,000 live births), 2000	160

Source: UNDP. *Human Development Report 2004. Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World, 2004.*

on the Association's council, 16 women in the executive offices in the provinces, and one woman leading an association of trade unions.

Despite Syria being an agricultural country with a rural population of 39%, women's participation in rural unions is only 1.2%. Statistics show that women's participation in agriculture in 2000 stood at 58.7%. In 2004 they represented 54% of agricultural workers. However many working women in the countryside are not included in agricultural statistics. This brings to light the discrimination many rural women suffer, and suggests that they are not allowed to participate in any decision-making in the agricultural sector.

Women also practice law but their membership in the Bar Association remains low. Although the majority of women lawyers work in Damascus, there are no women in the Damascus branch of the association. There are, however, some women members in provincial branches of the Bar Association. Some women lawyers have run in Bar Association elections but have not been successful.

Government actions to promote women's empowerment

Compared to other Arab nations, Syrian women have increased their social participation but there is still a lack of women's representation in decision-making organizations. This is despite the position many women have reached in the scientific and academic world and the Syrian Government's policy to promote women's empowerment. The Government included women's empowerment in its Ninth Five Year Plan for the first time by setting priorities for women's economic participation and increasing women's involvement in the executive, legislative and judicial branches, as well as in other decision-making positions. Additionally, the National Committee for Women's Affairs created a national strategy to empower woman. One of its objectives is to increase women's participation in decision making-positions to 30% in 2005.

Legislation regarding women's rights in Syria is scarce when compared with most other nations, but when compared to other rights issues in Syria, there have been notable advances.

Despite the legal provisions mentioned above, women's participation - especially in the provinces - is poor and in some cases is worsening. Many licensed civil organizations are carrying out development projects with rural women, sometimes offering small loans for projects. Meanwhile, independent and unlicensed civil organizations are involved in education projects and awareness-raising activities.

The Government should find ways of opposing the discrimination that many Syrian women still face.

Recommendations

In order to effectively and efficiently work towards improving gender equity and eliminating poverty, the following must occur:

- A comprehensive survey on poverty and gender-related poverty must be undertaken in all parts of the country, with the participation of both civil and government agencies.
- Licenses must be given to all civil society development agencies.
- Development plans that consider the reality of different regions and different groups of the population must be formulated.
- The expertise of social and psychological professionals must be tapped.
- The help of foreign economic and development experts from countries with similar conditions as Syria must be sought.
- All loans and donations must be supervised in order to eliminate corruption in development institutions.
- The use of emergency law and martial law must be eliminated to encourage freedom.
- The local press should play a role in the development process. ■