

Statement by Mohamed Abdel-Ahad, Regional Director of Arab States, UNFPA at the DIFI's Seminar on the Impact of changing population dynamics on the Arab Family

Your Excellency, Mr. Abdallah Bin Nasser Al Khalifa, Chair Board of Governance of DIFI,

Your Excellency, Ms. Nour Al Malki, Chief Executive Director of the DIFI,

Your Excellency, Saleh Ben Mohamed Al Nabet, Minister of Development Planning and Statistics,

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very delighted to be here with you today to participate in this important seminar on the impact of changing population dynamics on the Arab family. I would like to thank the Doha International Family Institute for inviting United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA to contribute to the discussion. The seminar is both highly relevant and timely indeed. It is relevant to the contemporary discussion about the demographic transition of the Arab region, especially the existence of this large cohort of young people and the challenge facing families, societies and governments in meeting their aspirations for a better future. It is also timely as it comes shortly after the regional review of the Programme of Action of the international

conference on population and development, ICPD. The review included the completion of a global survey which addressed issues related to the family, its roles, rights, formation and structure, and in-depth analytical research on a number of topics, such as changing family formation and composition in the Arab region.

My statement is based on a presentation shared with DIFI earlier. The presentation addresses the Arab family in a rapid changing population and social settings.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

As you're aware, the family continues to be charged with providing security, protection and welfare to its members, communities, and the society. The ICPD urged governments to develop and adopt policies, laws and mechanisms to support the family to ensure sustainability, stability and the well-being of its members.

A series of reviews of ICPD POA in 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2013 indicated that the attention given by governments and civil society to family issues and concerns was relatively weak, insufficient and dispersed. The socio-economic, political, and cultural changes and transformations that have taken place in the Arab societies have impacted the process of family formation, compositions and characteristics without drastically changing the core function of the family.

These factors impacted the aspirations of young people and their economic potential to initiate a family as well as their opinion towards establishing their own families. The weak economic ability of young men and women to start a family due to shrinking job opportunities and low wages affects negatively the attitude to form family. Hence many of young people lost attraction to marriage until supporting factors change. By the time the economic situation of young people improves, it may be too late for them to marry.

Against this backdrop, attention of governments and civil society to family issues has been *scattered and not sufficient*.

In depth analysis of the impact of population and social changes on the Arab family requires addressing family initiation, continuity, dissolution and composition.

Regarding family initiation, there has been a notable increase in the median age of marriage. For instance, over the period 1991 to 2003, the age of marriage increased from 16 to 16.3 in Yemen, from 18.6 to 22.4 in Jordan and from 18.6 to 20.6 in Egypt. The expansion of access to education of girls is one of the main factors in raising their age at marriage.

However, early and child marriage is evident in some Arab countries. In a number of less developed Arab countries marriage is seen as a means of securing young girls future. For instance, one quarter of girls aged 15-19 are married in Yemen. Recent data from Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco and Syria, one out of every 10 gets married before turning 20. Early pregnancy and child birth is also notable. Statistics show that one in 10 young women had her first birth before she reaches 18. Even some of them had their first birth before 15.

Several Arab countries enacted laws defining minimum age at marriage while others have not. In contrast, celibacy is increasing among women in their thirties. This is partially driven by men's preference to marry young girls who are not empowered to protect their rights and easier to adapt to new life after marriage.

As for family continuity and stability, the proportion of men and women staying in marriage life has declined in all countries. The decline was higher in countries that had low ages at marriage, such as Yemen.

Data available on polygamy indicate that the percentage of women married to polygamous husbands is higher in Djibouti, Jordan, and Yemen reaching 6% - 8%, and lower in Lebanon, Morocco, Algeria, and Libya (2% - 3%).

Marriage among relatives is practiced in Arab countries. For instance, almost half of couples are relatives in Yemen, compared to 26% in Lebanon.

Regarding family dissolution, percentage of divorced women is higher than that of men in all Arab countries implying that remarriage is higher among men than women.

Divorce is rapidly increasing, particularly in the GCC countries. The rate of divorce reached 24% in Bahrain, 26% in United Arab Emirates, 34.8 % in Qatar and 37% in Kuwait.

Consequently the percentage of female headed households has increased. Overall, one in ten households is headed by a woman. These statistics are quite alarming and constitute a real risk to the role of the family in maintaining the society. Therefore, formation and maintenance of the family should be the focus of social and other relevant policies.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the past, families were generally characterized by people of multiple generations. Modernization, urbanization, and changing life style, led to gradual shift from extended to nuclear families of relatively small size. People live longer and healthier life; aging is increasing in most societies which increases cost of care of the aged population

Demographic changes will lead to significant challenges for families, specifically the role of the family as a commonplace for people of multiple generations. The challenges of the family are compounded with the increase in humanitarian emergencies, fragility, displacement and forced migration.

The twenties anniversary of the family is an opportunity for developing evidence –based family centered policies.

Thank you for your attention.

