

World Demographic & Ageing Forum

# Population Dynamics in Muslim Countries – Perspectives from a Moslem Woman Scientist

Speech delivered by Dr. Abla Sibai on the occasion of the launch of the book „Population Dynamics in Muslim Countries – Assembling the Jigsaw“

*The launch was convened at the 8<sup>th</sup> World Demographic & Ageing Forum (WDA Forum) in St. Gallen, Switzerland, August 27-30, 2012*

*September 22, 2012*



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## **WDA Forum**

World Demographic & Ageing Forum

Kornhausstrasse 18 w P.O. Box 2239  
CH-9001 St.Gallen, Switzerland

phone: +41 71 242 79 79  
fax: +41 71 242 79 78

info@wdaforum.org  
www.wdaforum.org



## Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed an honor to be here with you this evening on the occasion of the launch of the book: *Population Dynamics in Muslim Countries - Assembling the Jigsaw*.

While I cannot do justice to the book or to the 23 distinguished authors with my brief introductory remarks tonight, I would like to take a few moments to commend the tremendous efforts of the editors of the volume, Professor Hans Groth and Professor Alfonso Sousa-Poza, for bringing together an unique group of leading multidisciplinary experts to delve into a very timely and diverse set of topics.

In assembling the jigsaw, the authors of the 18 chapters travel through time, place, and persons to learn more about the Muslim population in three continents: Europe, Africa and Asia. They take us on a journey that examines the impact of various contexts and circumstances, such as political crisis, cultural and social restrictions, gender role allocations and family structures, among others, on population dynamics in the Muslim world. This is a world, as you know, that encompasses 50 countries, a rapidly growing population of over 1.5 billion, and accounts for close to one quarter of the total global population.

Through careful analysis, the book raises a set of provocative issues that will fascinate readers in various disciplines, including healthcare, social and political researchers, economists and demographers as well as advocacy groups.

In particular, I would like to strengthen four main themes which are the key messages from this book:

1. First, and in contrast to the widely perceived discourse that often treats the Muslim world as one entity where global strategies, and global actions and solutions are believed to work equally alike in all contexts, the book reveals tremendous diversities across regions and countries. Differences are reflected in political regimes, in natural resources and economic systems, in demographic challenges and opportunities, in socio-political priorities and options for reform, and more recently in the geopolitical consequences of the revolutionary waves of the 2011 Arab Spring.
2. Second, the association between Islam and demography, notably procreation and fertility, remains debatable. In contrast to the Muslim fertility stereotypes, the decision whether to support birth control measures in Muslim countries has been more a political and economic issue than a theological one. In some anti-natalist countries such as Egypt and Iran, policies have aimed at decreasing fertility to control population growth and ease the mounting pressures on local resources. In pro-natalist countries such as the oil rich Gulf countries, reducing dependency on imported migrant labor has been the main argument behind resisting family planning programs. The same contention has also been made by marginalized populations, such as the Palestinians or the Shiite population in South Lebanon, their reason, however, is to become a majority in their own communities or against their rivals.
3. Third, the power of demography in shaping a country's overall political, democratic and economic development is now very obvious. While none of us could foresee the scale of uprisings that shook the Arab region since December 2011, demographers have long warned of the risk of upheavals associated with the rapid growth in Arab youth populations, characterized by high levels of poverty and high rates of unemployment. Scientists portrayed the conditions of the mishandled Arab youth as an explosive situation that needed only a spark to ignite. Addressed in this book under different titles and within different themes and contexts, the youth bulge, the youth dividend, the youthqua-

ke, or the youth generations of the baby boom, several authors emphasize that, for countries to reap the gift of the demographic dividend of their youthful population, governments will have to make large-scale radical structural and social reforms, with priority being given to labor market reforms and institutional change that promote job creation and private sector growth.

4. Fourth, while most Muslim majority countries rank very low on the UNDP Gender Inequality Index, it is worth noting that it is not Islam that has denied females their legitimate rights and kept women confined to the narrow reproductive and homemaker life choices. In fact, the Quran emphasizes the value of education and granted women the rights to be involved in business and to own property. The problem of patriarchal authority has less to do with religion and more with specific political and social contexts in various Muslim countries. For us to meet the demographic challenges of the coming years, there is a need for equitable gender systems: policies that combat these injustices and reforms that remove the grip of the patriarchal hierarchy in governance, political authorities and traditional family matters.

As one of the authors of the book's chapters, I am honored to join my colleagues in the discussion of these issues, and I also want to say that my academic perspective is to a great degree enriched by my experience as a female, a mother, a Muslim and a scientist who lives and works in the Arab World.

The book, *Population Dynamics in Muslim Countries*, breaks new grounds in academic studies but also provides a significant corrective intervention to the biased stereotypes of Islam and population dynamics.

It stimulates new directions for analysis of the Muslim populations. It is a call for justice, dignity and reform.

Abla Mehio Sibai, PhD  
Professor and founding Head of the Center for Studies on Aging in Lebanon  
Dept. of Epidemiology & Population Health  
Faculty of Health Sciences  
American University of Beirut (AUB) - Lebanon  
Email: am00@aub.edu.lb



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