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DIALECTS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: THE
INTERNATIONAL CIRCUITRY OF THE *ARAB*
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2005

This essay analyzes three problems with the landmark *Arab Human Development Report 2005* on women as a means of reflecting on some consequences of the transnational currency of a particular “dialect” of women’s rights. Given the current geopolitical context, it first asks how the report’s attribution of “unique” shortcomings in the Arab world to cultural and religious factors might make it vulnerable to appropriation for dangerous arguments about “the clash of civilizations.” Second, it asks how the urban, middle-class, cosmopolitan perspective on women’s lives, aspirations, and everyday conditions colors the report’s analyses of education, employment, and the role of family, eliding critical aspects of political economy and ignoring alternative values. Finally, it considers how the report’s reliance on the dominant secular, liberal political paradigms that this “dialect” of women’s empowerment indexes—modernization, human development, and (neo)liberalism—both narrows its recommendations and limits its potential appeal, given the Islamic revival and economic problems in the Arab world.