

The terminologies used in this report

The Middle East and North Africa: the report covers the following 19 countries and provinces in the Middle East and North Africa: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, the Palestinian territories, Qatar, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

Gender: Gender is a set of conduct and concepts related to females and males established and spread by society. All societies and cultures transform biological differences between males and females into a set of social concept on behaviour and activities deemed appropriate, and on rights, resources and powers that should be possessed by males and females. As race, color and social class, gender is a social group which determines a human's opportunity in life and defines his/her participation in society and the economy.

Gender equality: this report defines gender equality by the following criteria: equality before the law, equality in opportunities (including equality in work income, equality in the access to human capital and the rest of production capacities which enables getting an opportunity and the freedom of expression (that is the capacity to influence and contribute to the development process (.

Empowerment: it means expanding the individual's capacities and capabilities to participate, influence, control and deal with the institutions that control their lives, in addition to the possibility of calling the institutions into account.

Summary:

Gender inequality, that is discrimination against women and girls in acquiring opportunities and assurances, is an important and clear issue for the economies of the Middle East and North African countries.

Often, gender inequality in the Middle East region and North Africa is being approached through anthropology, social or political perspectives. But, the cost of inequality is reflected on the economic levels as well. This report aims to push forward the discussion on gender inequality by approaching this issue from economic necessity.

The report also studies the possibility of women's contribution to the creation of a new development patter, an issue currently under discussion in three parallel reports on trade, employment and control management. The report identifies the major obstacles on the economic and socio-political levels hindering the increased participation of women in the labor force and empowering them. It also recommends a way to push this issue forward through a plan for change.

The paradox of the Middle Easter women's situation and the high cost resulting from their weak participation in the economy

The Middle East region is like the rest of the world with regard to the progress made in women's position. The different criteria such as women's education, fertility, life expectancy rate and individual income show that the countries in this region achieved a concrete progress in a number of fields in the past decades. Yet the region is tangibly behind others regarding the level of women's participation in economy and politics. Here lies the paradox. The Middle East women's participation in the labor force is substantially low, compared to the rest of the world. This modest rate is much lower than the assumption regarding the fertility rate, education and age structure of the females in the region.

The low participation of women in the political and economic fields incur a great cost

The impact and cost of this paradox is felt in all the social aspects and in a number of formulas. Gender inequality hinders the countries' economic performance. Also, social barriers which reduce competitiveness obstructs the country's capacity to exploit its best potential, which ultimately undermines the final outcome of growth and economic development.

The countries in the Middle East and North Africa can no longer rely on oil, the expatriates' remittances and the public sector to boost growth. It became imperative for these countries to look for new means of development which basically depend on exports and private investment, thus finding better ways to exploit their non-oil resources and particularly human capital. Women constitute the most important unexploited resource in the region. They represent 49% of the population and 63% of university students (in some countries), yet they represent no more than 32% of the labor force.

Social prosperity of a certain population which includes food consumption, housing, health care and the rest of commodities and market services is not defined by only the income of the employed individual, but also by the percentage of the working population. In the Middle East, each working individual provides for over two non-working individuals, over double the burden endured by workers in East Asia. The high unemployment and the high rate of unproductive population due to their young or old age in addition to women's low participation rate, renders the rate of dependence on productive labor in the Middle East the world's highest.

The region witnessed a downturn or stagnation of wages increment in the past two decades, at the same time, the unemployment rate has risen which made it hard for the productive population to increase their families standards of living.

It is essential to lower the unemployment rate, but it will not suffice to decrease the dependency rate on productive labor to an acceptable level. This can be done by increasing women's participation in the labor force.

Discrimination against segments of the population based on race, sex or religion has a negative impact on the society's general environment, growth possibility, good

governance and the efficiency of social institutions. Studies show that the inclusion and the multiplicity of the points of views improve the effective decision-making with regards to the allocation of resources. Women, usually have different points of view from men as to the general fields and the decision-making in the political institutions. It is regretful that women's presence in the political arena and their influence over the public policy is less in the Middle East than all the other countries.

Middle Eastern and North African countries were able to greatly increase women's productive capacities and their ability to generate income through the extensive investment in women's education. But the weak participation of women in the labor force indicates that the region is not earning a great part of its return on investment. We add to that the fact that education return on investment is higher in women compared to men. In other words, a larger participation of women in the labor force will increase educational return on investment of the economy as a whole, and results in enormous benefits by enhancing women's participation.

The limited participation of women in the labor force results in a high cost for the economy and the family. Studies conducted through the use of family statistics show that increasing women's participation in the labor force from its current rate to appropriate rates in harmony with the level of women's education in the region and their age division will raise families' income to a rate that could reach 25%.

For many families, this increase could be a ticket to join the middle class. Analysis based on statistics collected from different countries prove that, when countries are heading towards a high income, women's participation in the labor force contributes to create a faster growth of income.

Should women's participation in the region be equal to their capabilities, the growth of GDP/capita will be higher by 0.7% during the 90's.

The contributing factors to empowering women in other regions in the world were ineffective in the Middle East and North African countries

Despite the change of the region's economic reality, the practices of the past decade continued to influence behaviours. The reform in the 50's and 70's contributed to women's empowerment. Nevertheless, during the oil boom in the 70's, the quick skyrocketing increase of income allowed a small number of labourers to support a large group of unproductive individuals. Families were no longer in need of two incomes to increase their standards of living. Then came the economic slowdown in the 80's and some voices emerged to demand giving men priority in employment in a shrinking labor market since they are responsible for supporting their families. Accordingly, many governments took steps to limit women's participation in the labor market, while the media and popular organizations focussed on the importance of women's staying at home and their role as mothers.

Following the developments in the 90's, the issue of gender inequality resurfaced and gave reasons to the "women cause". The traditional image of man as the sole provider to the family no longer corresponds to the reality. Economic pressure forced families to face one option: women must work outside the household to help supporting their families. We add to that another reason, which is the high aspiration of the young generation in the region (6 out of 10 individuals in the region are below 25 years old). The successful educational policies created a generation of women with equal competence as their male counterparts and they demanded equal opportunities and income.

It is worth mentioning that the demand for women's employment is linked to a larger degree to the level and nature of growth than it is the case with males. The past social and economic policies focused on investments of high capitalist density and the policies of replacing local revenues and state investment by the national product, which left women with few job opportunities outside the state's female concentrated jobs (education and health), while the region adopted new policies focused on export, the private sector and is characterized by a high employment density, the demand pattern for women's services will greatly differ. These issues will be discussed with details in the parallel reports on trade and employment. This report focuses mainly on obstacles facing women's participation in the labor market to ensure that obstacles and inefficiencies in the management of the inflated labor market in the region will be dealt with.

Achievements in the fields of women's education and health

Most countries in the region allocated important resources to the fields of women's education and health which led to an impressive outcome. The governments of the Middle East and Northern Africa spent during the last century 5.3% of their GDP on education, the highest in the world and 2.9% on medical services. These developments greatly changed the form, the characteristics and the volume of the labor force.

Women's education average rate marked an increase from 0.5 year in 1960 to 4.5 years in 1999 while the rate of educated women rose from 16% in 1970 to 52.5% in 2000. Furthermore, prior to 2000, 9 girls were enrolled in elementary schools for every 10 boys. This gap is decreasing more on the level of high school education, that is 74% of girls are following their high school studies compared to 77% of the boys. In conclusion, it seems that the Middle East countries are on their way to eliminate the gap between the sexes in the elementary and high school phases by 2005, which was demanded by the development objectives of the third millennium to spread the gender equality and women empowerment. All UN members endorsed the plan. Women also continue their education for a longer period. In this region, we noted that one of four women continues their university education and the number of women enrolled in universities and colleges in a number of the countries in this region outnumber those of men. Also, the girls pursuing their education are inclined to be better students than the males. Yet, statistics on the rates of education completion show that the drop-outs rate is higher among females in all school phases, which is probably due to early marriage.

Also, women in the region live longer and healthier lives. Life expectancy rate at birth increased ten years for women since 1980, thanks to the improved medical services and the shrinking rate of mortality at birth. Furthermore, the region registered an acute decline in fertility rates since 1980 from 6.2% to 3.3%. Women's education is the main reason behind this evolution, since the educated woman is more inclined towards late marriage and the use of contraceptives, but governments policies also played an important role in this progress.

Did not reflect positively on women's participation in the labor force

Since the 60's, women's participation to the labor force grew by 50%, from an incredibly small starting point. Despite this growth and the great potential of women's participation in the labor force, the actual participation rate is still the lowest in the world.

What slowed down women's entry to the labor market?

The economic heritage of the past, which continues to suppress women's participation to the labor force, includes a set of offer and demand factors, some of which were enhanced in a vicious circle.

We find that countries with high density population and rich in natural resources (Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen (suffers a lower rate of women's participation than the countries with high density population and poor in resources (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia (while noting that the West Bank and Gaza Strips are an exception. The high income rates that doesn't depend on production (like oil revenues (are less dependent on income generated from production which reduces the presence of feminine labour. In addition to that, the high returns and the social wealth distribution policy enabled these countries to invest heavily in the field of female education, which renders women's participation rate in these countries far less than its potential. On the other hand, resource-poor countries had to depend on growth of high/employment density which relies on women's economic participation, thus making women's participation close to its potential.

Demand factors play a role

Even though demand factors were fully studied in the parallel reports, two of these factors deserve a special interest. The most important factor is unemployment. The weak growth in the Middle East and Northern Africa during the 90's led to a weak performance of the labor market, which led it to loose its capacity to absorb the increased offer of employment. Employers favored the employment of men, for they deemed that men's income are more important to provide for the families. The women, who realized that their chances of employment are almost null withdrew from the labor market. Thus, decreasing high unemployment rate is a fundamental condition to increase women's participation in the labor force. This goes hand in hand with the necessity to dissipate the fears stating that women's participation will increase the unemployment rate.

As for the other demand which we will study, it is related to the pattern of the prevailing development in the Middle East and Northern Africa, particularly the mushrooming of public employment rate, the strict government protection, the un-opened trade policies and a weak investment climate. Women in most of the countries of the region were inclined towards a heavy participation in the public sector jobs, the prevailing view that state jobs such as education and nursing are more suitable to women was also a contributing factor. We add to that that the public sector's non-discriminatory practices (even favoring(in employment and defining wages, in addition to the good working conditions in the public sector including paid maternity leave. But, with the shrinking employment in the public sector, government jobs will not continue to be an important source for women's employment as it used to be in the past.

As for the private sector, the situation is reversed. Women faced great discrimination in that sector and often occupied lower paid jobs with little horizon. We must note here some exceptions such as Morocco and Tunisia which succeeded in expanding its export industries (especially textile and clothes (and achieved successes in boost the level of women's participation in the private sector. Yet, Morocco and Tunisia are exceptional cases, while most countries maintained its un-opened trade policies.

Gender discrimination in the labor market doesn't explain the low participation

Gender discrimination in the labor market (such as the income gap between males and females_in offering_employment (indicates that women are subjected to discrimination. But this discrimination is similar to what we find in other countries with much higher women's participation in the labor force. Also, the gap between incomes and discrimination in offering employment doesn't explain the difference of age structure of the female labor force compared to other countries. The region's household statistics show that women are less inclined to work when they are married, especially if they have children. Hence, we conclude that the prevailing discrimination in the labor market does not provide alone a convincing explanation of the problem.

Yet, the consolidation of socio-economic factors could provide an explanation

The figures regarding women's participation in the labor force reflect the interaction between the official regulations in the laobr market (laws and organizations (??? and customs and social traditions which disapprove of women's work outside the household and create obstacles to their integration into the labor market. To understand how these factors interact to affect women's role in the labor market, we must study the interaction of relations between the two sexes, the motivations, economic and non-economic obstacles in the decision-making process inside the households.

In the Middle East and North Africa, relations between the two sexes are formed within the traditional pattern of the gender, which is characterized by four qualities:

- The family's centralization, considered as the major social unit, instead of the individual. In the families, men and women play complementary but unequal roles. Men and women perceive the family as an important cultural structure.
- Acknowledging the man's role as the sole provider to the family.
- A conservative perception which considers that the family's dignity and honor are related to the woman's reputation and imposes restrictions on the mingling between the two sexes.
- The balance power is unequal between men and women which is reinforced by the family's rules.

This pattern assumes that women should marry young and that their major participation on the family's and society's levels lies in their role as mothers and housewives. It also assumes that the family is headed by a man whose job allows him to provide for the family and that the woman depends on the man to provide for her which justifies the man's controlling his wife's behaviour in general.

The labor market's organizations reinforce and support this pattern. The labor laws in most of the countries in the region do not explicitly discriminate against women (far from that, they stress women's right to obtain equal remuneration for equal jobs). These laws guarantee paid maternity leave and protect women from being fired in the case of marriage and pregnancy. Yet, these advantages are in vain, because they are seldom applied and women lack the capacity to protest these practices which are inconsistent with these laws. Gender discrimination is practiced in invisible and unofficial ways, often by depriving women from the employment's benefits paid outside the wage.

Employment allowances are exclusively paid to men and a woman cannot be paid these allowances unless she proves that she's the sole provider of the family (widow, handicapped husband, a husband on a wheel chair). In practice, this discrimination decreases women's return generated through job performance, compared to men since women are majority in the public sector (which usually provides this additional allowances). Since most men work in the private sector (which rarely pays these allowances, we find that the policy of paying allowance exclusively to men weakens rather than increases the family's support. This issue is considered essential because the region is currently witnessing economic changes which will increase families' burden and cost.

In addition to that, a set of regulations restraining women, such as the quality and quantity of work hours offered to women and the necessity of obtaining the husband's permission to work or to travel renders women less flexible in the professional arena. These regulations weaken employer's wish to hire women and make them less competitive in the labor market. Also, these regulations could weaken the nation's competitiveness in the global markets, especially in the modern industry sectors such as IT and communication.

Finally, discrimination within the family's rules weakens women's participation in the labor market. Granting men a unilateral right of divorce and the woman's legal duty to

obey her husband has added another barrier to women's entry to the labor market. The wife's refusal to obey her husband could lead to her losing alimony, divorce, or losing custody of the children. Due to the above/mentioned reasons, the woman's interaction with the exterior world without her husband's consent could inflict upon her numerous risks.

These laws were created to protect the family by defining the responsibility of the provider. Yet, the man's shouldering this responsibility also grants him a higher authority, guaranteed by the laws, the policies and the institutions, which are maintained even if he fails to provide for his family. As a result, the woman is dependent on the man financially, legally and socially.

We find today that the economic and uneconomic reasons hinder women's entry to the labor force and that demand for women's service in the labor market is inconsistent with regions economic situation. Few families today can live comfortably by relying on one income. But the traditional conservative pattern still refuses to acknowledge that women need more flexibility to play multiple roles (as mothers, wives, employees and citizens (to enhance the families' prosperity.

New gender program in the region

The current generation, men and women, differ from their parents' generation. They were brought up in smaller nuclear families with less gender inequality. The new generation pushes for a new social status and for gender equality in the public and private sectors.

The demographic evolution phenomenon is no different from what the west has witnessed with the baby boom generation. Yet, in the West, the great number of young men and women determined to challenge the existing inequality and the institutions supporting discrimination was the contributing factor for changing the prevailing perception of the man as the sole provider and the decreased discriminatory practices in work and wages.

What should be implemented

In the economic field, the new gender project should continue under the slogans of efficiency and equality in society and economy with the final objective of offering women a greater possibility to obtain opportunities and economic security. Within this framework, gender equality can be achieved through activating two fundamental pillars of good governing foundation: enhancing women's inclusion in the decision-making process to create a more equal environment which believes in women's economic and social rights and finding better ways to hold institutions accountable to provide justice and equality. In the final conclusion, gender equality is linked to good governance, that is the respect of all people's rights and taking their needs into consideration.

The new gender project consists of four extensive points which deals with gender inequality:

- Reconsidering the legislations that violate the principle of equal rights which is integrated into most constitutions of the countries in this region.
- Establishing an infrastructure supporting the participation of women in the public arena. Women are more restrained than men to their material surrounding. Investment in the infrastructure (like transport, water and communication) will allow for expanding women's horizon. The same is true for expanding market services which enable women to combine work and family responsibility.
- The continuous interest in education, particularly the fields that offer women better vocational skills. In that respect, women suffer more than men because they face additional challenges (early marriage and giving birth (which impede their vocational path and makes their skills outdated.
- Reforming the laws and labor legislations to be in harmony with the new development pattern and the dependence on the creation of employments in the private sector. Some regulations increase women's labor cost in comparison to men's which makes it difficult to hire women in the private sector.

Who should implement

The public arena is the arena for authority, influence and power, which made it traditionally restricted to men. The call for gender equality entails the integration of women into that arena and claiming a share of the authority and influence. Some could explain these claims as a threat to the social order and one that undermines the existing authoritative structure. But, gender equality is essential to accelerate economic growth, create productive jobs and reduce poverty.

Change must start from the top, but with the support of the popular base. The two key players in that change are: the state and the movement calling for women's rights. Women's rights will remain a slogan until a great percentage of women feel they must exert an effort to materialize their rights. Governments should also play a key role in achieving equality.

Women should be more active in the political field. Women's participation in the political process is the key to realize change. The aspects of the gender traditional pattern are not limited to the legal aspects, but rather exceeds them to the weak representation of women in the political life and all levels of the decision-making process. Regardless of the fact that most constitutions and laws granted equal rights to the woman as a citizen and a voter, women's participation in politics and leadership is still limited.

There are many ways to empower women to express and political activity including the adoption of a quota system in parties or representative parliaments. But the quota system faces a great opposition and lacks the necessary support. Those in favour say the quota system will be a compensation for the obstacles preventing women from obtaining their equal share of representation and some positive discrimination is a must. Women's participation can be empowered through the civil society's leadership, popular activities, decentralization and training on leadership and mass media.

The state's leadership remains a central issue. It is imperative that women participate in the political process to make a difference. But, the growth of this participation will be gradual. In the political environment of the Middle East and North Africa, the popular activities will be in vain unless it was supported by a state leadership committed to creating a more equal environment.

Unlike the past when it was possible to apply policies supporting women only by the state, the proposed reforms today will face power centers which stand to lose by this process. Therefore, the government's leadership should be directed towards creating a political and popular supportive will and to establish collations based on reforms. In the absence of these steps, supporting the reform will be weak and success will be for a short term.

Expanding coalitions through partnership and dialogue with the rest of the centers of power and authority, including religious establishments and civil society organizations enhances the legality and popularity of any political suggestion. The public debate and announcing new initiatives contribute to preparing the audience to the coming change. This won't be possible without investing in the institutions that formulate the goals of the feminine movement through a detailed study and an effective propaganda.

The horizons of women's right in the Middle East today seem to improve continuously. Investments in the field of education and health began to bear fruits in empowering women, and these effects will multiply in the future. Yet, there still is a need to do more. While the government is reconsidering its development plans to create better opportunity to its youth. Resolving the woman's cause should be part of the solution. Dealing effectively with this issue will entail a political will and perseverance. The road is still long and the journey should begin today if families in the region wanted to benefit from development's full potential, human and others.