

E/ESCWA/SDD/2003/28

**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA**

RECEIVED  
23 -07- 2004  
LIBRARY & DOCUMENTS SECTION

**ARAB WOMEN: TRENDS AND STATISTICS,  
1990-2000**



United Nations  
New York, 2004

---

Note: This paper was prepared by Ms. Maysaa El Gamal, Professor of Sociology at the American University in Cairo. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of ESCWA.

This paper has been reissued for the purposes of the conference and was taken from part one of the original document E/ESCWA/SDD/2003/28, entitled *Report of the Centre for Arab Women 2003* (in Arabic).

04-0280

## **Executive summary**

Determinants of women's status and well-being in the Arab world reflect to varying degrees similarities with other developing regions in the world. Women's health conditions, the medical facilities available to them, their educational level, their participation in the labour force, their legal and political rights, and the cultural boundaries they live under all determine women's socio-economic and political status in whichever region or country they live in.

The cultural particulars of any region, its historical and social heritage, and the development progress of any society further affect the status of women, whether in the social, economic or political realms. While most Arab countries share a common cultural and historical heritage, sub-regional variations and diversities exist among them, be it in their population size, demographic patterns, educational levels, their economic development, or the weight of their cultural determinants. Such variations render the study of Arab society particularly difficult. Just as there are wide structural, economic and socio-political variations among Arab countries, it is erroneous to assume that there is a uniform, stereo-type image of the Arab woman.

Sharp differences in wealth among the Arab sub-regions, the manner in which cultural norms of segregation are translated, economic and cultural proximity with the western world, and the degree of economic and political liberalization, all govern and explain the variations in women's socio-economic and political status in the different Arab countries. While cultural determinants of women's status tend to be most prevalent in a number of Arab countries, it is wrong to assume that women's well-being and empowerment are solely dependent on changing such cultural norms. Structural factors perpetuate women's unequal access to the resources needed to realize their full and equal participation in society.

While women in the Arab world have realized relative social and economic gains over the last two decades, particularly with regard to education and increasing participation in the labour force, the gender disparities between women's and men's educational and employment status reflects lingering structural and cultural shortcomings in most Arab countries.

The overwhelming emphasis in the Arab world on the social role of women as wives and mothers unequivocally contributes to the phenomenal population growth which most Arab countries confront. Added to the poor educational status of Arab women and the staggeringly high illiteracy rates among the female population, population growth becomes inevitable.

Lingering high fertility rates in the Arab region relate to – and are propelled by – a number of factors. The relatively low mean age at first marriage for females in the region, which according to the latest available data for 2003 stands at around 21.3 years (compared to 22 years in 1990-1995), together with high illiteracy rates and poor

educational levels among the female population, all explain such high fertility rates in the region.

Arab women's literacy rates in the twenty-first century still portray a dismal picture. According to the last available data for the year 2000, over half of the female population of the Arab world aged 15 years and above are illiterate. Female school enrollment record at the primary and secondary levels has not improved over the past decade, with gender disparities in enrollment rates still lingering.

Women's enrolment at the tertiary level of education, and their field of study, also exhibits the same pattern since the early nineties. In general, low gross enrolment ratios still linger at the university level, with regional disparities in the ratio of girls' enrolment at this educational level most apparent in the least economically developed countries of the region. Djibouti, Mauritania, Sudan and Yemen record the lowest tertiary enrolment ratios for girls, with the highest enrolments present among the Gulf states.

In terms of their field of study at the university level, girls tend to be concentrated in the fields of arts, education and humanities. The concentration of women in these educational fields, reflects to some degree the cultural biases in relation to the expected role of women in society. Far from possessing inferior learning capabilities that would disadvantage them in the scientific and technical fields, women have been generally encouraged and "socialized" to enter other fields that are perceived as more culturally attuned to their "gender".

Education is the single most important factor affecting the future development of any society. The Arab world is no exception. Throughout history, countries that today stand at the top of the development scale have enjoyed high educational standards and focused increasingly on investing in research and scientific development. While higher education may not be universal in many countries in the developed world, the quality of tertiary and university education provided in these countries ensures that a generation that possesses the necessary skills graduates to the market place. Planners and policy makers in the Arab world may have to make serious choices between universal free tertiary education and qualitatively changing their university education systems to ensure a place for their countries in the midst of a continually advancing world market. Investing well in education in general, and in women's education in particular, is crucial for the region's development.

In terms of economic participation, the rate of women's economic participation in the Arab region remains among the lowest in the world. Only 20 per cent of the economically active population in the Arab world are women, compared to an economic activity rate of above 50 per cent in the developed world. Arab women's unemployment rates remain staggeringly high, nearly double that of men, reaching a regional average of 12.6 per cent and recording as high as 37 per cent in Oman, and 20 per cent or above in Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine.

Arab women's employment share in all three sectors of the economy—agriculture, industry, and services—is also extremely dismal, with gender gaps reaching phenomenal levels. Gender distribution by economic sector shows that women's highest employment share is in the services sector, claiming 18.1 per cent of all those employed in this sector, followed by agriculture where women claim a regional mean of 13.2 per cent of all those employed in this sector, and a meager share of 6.8 per cent of employment in industry.

Women's representation in the higher public, managerial, political and business posts in the Arab world shows tremendous bias against women in such leading positions. On average, women claim a mere 11.4 per cent of all such positions, with their share falling to as low as 4 per cent in some Arab countries. While the constitutions of most Arab countries recognize women's equal civil and political rights to those of men, the mere existence of constitutional guarantees ensuring the rights of women do not necessarily translate into women realizing their full and equal civic, legal, economic and political place in society. Women's staggeringly low representation in the decision-making circles in many Arab countries has rendered women's constitutional rights largely ineffective in ensuring their participation in political life.

The patriarchal structure of political and social life in most Arab countries has immediate relevance to our understanding of the socio-economic status of women and their well-being and rights in this part of the world. Unlike institutionalized systems of government, where the individual's rights are guaranteed as a citizen regardless of gender, in most developing countries among which the Arab world is no exception, the political, social, economic and legal realms of life are largely controlled through informal and personalized networks. The patriarchal organization of Arab societies makes the study of constitutional guarantees for women's rights, well-being, and political representation and participation all the more sensitive in many Arab countries. Women in the Arab world have been largely marginalized from the formal political arena. While their relatively poor educational level and high illiteracy rates worked against their political representation in the past, their educational advancement over the last two decades has not witnessed a simultaneous increase in their political representation and involvement in the formal realm of government. In fact, Arab countries that have the highest rates of female educational attainment in the region are among the countries with the poorest representation of women in public office.

The Arab woman still faces considerable challenges and barriers to reach equal status with her male counterpart. The road ahead is still far, if at the turn of the new millennium and the advent of the twenty-first century, some Arab states have not yet recognized the right of women to vote and run for public office, nor have they formally accepted the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

## **I. POPULATION DYNAMICS, FAMILY AND HEALTH**

Over the past two decades, the Arab world has been undergoing considerable demographic transitions, both in terms of its population growth and distribution patterns. The demographic transition of the Arab world has been induced by improved health and medical facilities resulting in reductions in absolute mortality rates and consequently in an increase in life expectancy rates, in addition to economic transformations, and – to some extent – changing cultural norms. It may take sometime for the full extent of such demographic transition to surface, depending largely on the policies adopted by individual governments. Nevertheless, the immediate effects of such a transition are presently in place, presenting a double edged sword for most countries. Whether the demographic transition will be grasped as an opportunity for socio-economic growth, or whether it will add a further economic burden, depends largely on how governments and decision-makers will respond to such an opportunity or challenge. For many Arab countries, limited financial resources compound the challenge posed by such a demographic transition.

The family in the Arab world remains to be the predominant unit of social organization and cultural identity. In such a socio-cultural setting, women are confronted by considerable pressure to start a family almost immediately after marrying in order to establish their social position and uphold their cultural identity. By and large, women's enforced role in the Arab world is primarily one of wives and mothers, and secondly as social actors. The absence of the former severely restricts women's social status in this part of the world, precluding women from seeing marriage and child-bearing as an option, but rather as a duty.

The multifaceted role expected of women ultimately constrains their productivity and hinders their socio-economic advancement as equal actors in society. Access to education, health care, political participation, and economic and financial independence become secondary to the cultural and social pressures of marriage and childbearing. Such inveterate socio-cultural factors perpetuate the failure to recognize women's central role as household managers and income contributors, facilitating disproportional financial flows to men. Households headed by women confront additional difficulties with even more limited resources and the lack of access to gainful and steady economic activity.

The overwhelming emphasis on the social role of women as wives and mothers unequivocally contributes to the phenomenal population growth which most Arab countries confront. Added to the poor educational status of Arab women and the staggeringly high illiteracy rates among the female population, population growth becomes inevitable. Available data for selected Arab countries indicates that between 1980 and 2002, the population in the region grew at an average of 2.9 per cent per

annum, representing the highest rate of population growth of any region in the world during the last two decades.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. Ratios of women to men

The ratio of males to females is biologically stable at birth. A population's ratio of women to men is determined by three factors: the sex ratio at birth, mortality patterns and migration levels. While data on migration levels in the Arab world are poor, case studies show that interregional migration levels have not increased over the past decade – or have even declined due to poorer levels of economic growth throughout the region, suggesting that migration levels might not have any substantial effect on the populations' present sex ratio in the region's individual countries.

Mortality rates on the other hand have witnessed a steady decline over the past two decades, with life expectancy at birth in 2000-2005 estimated at 74 years for women and 72 years for men in the ESCWA region, with an average difference of two years in life expectancy between the two sexes.<sup>2</sup> In 1980, life expectancy at birth in the ESCWA countries stood at 63 years for women and 62 years for men, indicating an improvement in life expectancy at birth for both sexes by 9 and 10 years, respectively.

TABLE 1. LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH, 1980-2005

Country	Women		Men	
	1980-1985	200-2005	1980-1985	2000-2005
Algeria	62.0	71.8	60.0	68.7
Bahrain	71.4	76.3	67.1	72.1
Comoros	55.0	62.2	51.0	59.4
Djibouti	46.7	41.6	43.5	39.4
Egypt	57.8	69.9	55.3	66.7
Iraq	63.3	66.5	61.5	63.5
Jordan	65.8	72.5	61.9	69.7
Kuwait	73.7	79.0	69.6	74.9
Lebanon	68.0	75.1	63.9	71.9
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	64.2	73.3	60.6	69.2
Mauritania	49.1	54.1	45.9	50.9
Morocco	60.1	70.5	56.7	66.8
Oman	64.6	73.2	61.6	70.2
Palestine	66.2	74.0	62.7	70.8
Qatar	69.8	72.1	65.4	69.4

<sup>1</sup> Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region 2002-2003, UN, New York, 2003, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

TABLE 1 (*continued*)

Country	Women		Men	
	1980-1985	200-2005	1980-1985	2000-2005
Saudi Arabia	64.1	73.7	61.4	71.1
Somalia	44.6	50.5	41.4	47.4
Sudan	50.6	58.4	47.8	55.6
Syrian Arab Republic	64.4	73.1	60.8	70.6
Tunisia	63.6	72.2	62.6	69.6
United Arab Emirates	71.4	78.4	67.1	74.1
Yemen	49.4	69.9	48.9	60.7
Arab region	61.2	68.2	58.0	65.1

Source: ESCWA Gender Statistics, 2003.

The mean average of life expectancy at birth for the 22 Arab countries according to the 2000-2005 data is somewhat different, representing 68 years for women and 65 years for men, with a difference of 3 years between both sexes in the average regional mean. Compared to the 1980-1985 data, figures show that life expectancy at birth has increased over the past two decades by nearly 7 years for both women and men in the Arab world (see table 1).

The regional mean is affected by the staggeringly low life expectancy years for women in countries like Djibouti (41.6 years for women and 39.4 years for men), Mauritania (54.1 years for women and 50.9 years for men), Somalia (50.5 years for women and 47.4 years for men), and Sudan (58.4 years for women and 55.6 years for men). Sixteen out of the 22 Arab countries have a life expectancy at birth for women at or above 70 years, while life expectancy at birth for men stands around 70 years or above in only ten out of the 22 countries.<sup>3</sup>

While life expectancy at birth for women is slightly higher than that of men, the population ratio between women and men remains in favor of the later. This may be explained if maternal mortality rates are taken into consideration, which according to available data for 12 Arab countries stands at an average rate of 48.1 maternal related deaths in every 10,000 women. Again, these rates are staggeringly high in countries like Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen, where maternal related deaths stand at 160, 150, and 140 per 10,000 women, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> ESCWA, Gender Statistics and Country Profiles, ESCWA web site, 2003, and ESCWA/SDD/2003/brochure/2.

TABLE 2. POPULATION STRUCTURE BY GENDER AND AGE GROUP, 2003  
(Percentages)

Country	Total Population		Population aged -15		Population aged 15-24		Population aged 25-59		Population aged 25-59		Year
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	
Bahrain	42.5	57.5	48.9	51.1	46.9	53.1	36.9	63.1	50.5	49.5	2003
Egypt	50.1	49.9	49.0	51.0	49.2	50.8	50.9	49.1	53.8	46.2	2003
Iraq	49.3	50.7	49.1	50.9	48.9	51.1	49.3	50.7	52.6	47.4	2003
Jordan	47.9	52.1	48.8	51.2	48.7	51.3	46.6	53.4	48.7	51.3	2003
Kuwait	39.8	60.2	49.0	51.0	46.3	53.7	33.7	66.3	41.6	58.4	2003
Lebanon	51.0	49.0	49.0	51.0	49.4	50.6	52.3	47.7	54.8	45.2	2003
Palestine	49.1	50.9	48.9	51.1	48.6	51.4	48.6	51.4	57.3	42.7	2003
Oman	42.6	57.4	48.9	51.1	47.5	52.5	34.0	66.0	45.4	54.6	2003
Qatar	36.6	63.4	48.9	51.1	48.4	51.6	28.2	71.8	33.5	66.5	2003
Saudi Arabia	46.3	53.7	48.8	51.2	48.6	51.4	42.5	57.5	47.5	52.5	2003
Syrian Arab Republic	49.6	50.4	48.9	51.1	49.2	50.8	50.1	49.9	53.9	46.1	2003
United Arab Emirates	35.0	65.0	49.0	51.0	45.3	54.7	26.1	73.9	36.2	63.8	2003
Yemen	49.2	50.8	48.9	51.1	48.6	51.4	49.9	50.1	51.7	48.3	2003

Source: ESCWA Gender Statistics, 2003.

The population ratio between women and men according to the 2003 available data for the 13 ESCWA member countries (see table 2) places the regional mean at 95.3 women for every 100 men,<sup>4</sup> compared to 92 women for every 100 men in 1970-1990.<sup>5</sup> The decline in the gap between both sexes in favor of women over the last two decades may be explained by improved health care facilities for women in most Arab countries – moving maternal mortality rates down, although they remain high in relation to world rates – and the corresponding rise in life expectancy for women.

### 1.2. Fertility rates

Figures for the last decade, 1995-2005, indicate slight decreases in total fertility rates (TFR) throughout the Arab world. In 1995-2000, total fertility rates stood at an average regional mean of 4.6, compared to an average regional mean of 4.2 in 2000-2005.<sup>6</sup> Compared to the world average of 2.7, the Arab world's TFR is staggeringly high.

<sup>4</sup> ESCWA Selected Gender Indicators, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Arab Women 1995, Trends, Statistics and Indicators, United Nations, New York, 1997, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Women and Men in the Arab Countries, ESCWA/SDD/2003/brochure/2.



Only four out the 22 Arab countries have managed to reach or even surpass the world average TFR of 2.7. Data for 2000-2005 indicates that Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Tunisia, with TFR of 2.3, 2.7, 2.2, and 2.1, respectively, have succeeded in bringing their TFR at or below the world average. Six other countries have TFR slightly above the world average, standing at roughly 3.0 (Algeria 2.8, Egypt 2.9, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya 3.3, Morocco 3.0, Qatar 3.3, and the United Arab Emirates at 2.9). The remaining 12 countries (Comoros, Djibouti, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen) have an average TFR of 5.5 per women, nearly double the world rate. In Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, and Yemen the total fertility rate reaches as high as 5.8, 6.0, 7.0, and 7.6, respectively. These same countries have either experienced minute declines in their TFR since 1995, or have stayed with the same staggeringly high fertility rates unchanged (see table 3).

TABLE 3. TOTAL FERTILITY RATES, 1995-2005

Country	1995-2000	2000-2005
Algeria	3.3	2.8
Bahrain	2.6	2.3
Comoros	5.4	5.0
Djibouti	6.1	5.8
Egypt	3.4	2.9
Iraq	5.3	4.8
Jordan	4.7	4.3
Kuwait	2.9	2.7
Lebanon	2.3	2.2
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	3.8	3.3
Mauritania	6.0	6.0
Morocco	3.4	3.0
Oman	5.9	5.5
Palestine	6.0	5.6
Qatar	3.7	3.3
Saudi Arabia	6.2	5.5
Somalia	7.3	7.3
Sudan	4.9	4.5
Syrian Arab Republic	4.0	3.7
Tunisia	2.3	2.1
United Arab Emirates	3.2	2.9
Yemen	7.6	7.6
Arab region	4.6	4.2

Source: ESCWA Gender Statistics, 2003.

The existing high fertility rates in the Arab region relate to – and are propelled by – a number of factors. The relatively low mean age at first marriage for females in the region, which according to the latest available data for 2003 stands at around 21.3

years (compared to 22 years in 1990-1995),<sup>7</sup> together with high illiteracy rates and poor educational levels among the female population, together induce the high fertility rates in the region.

Education might be the single most important factor that affects fertility rates. Studies as well as raw data illustrate a strong inverse relationship between educational attainment and fertility levels. Countries that fall below the regional mean for TFR in the Arab world, and the four countries that have TFR in line with the world average, tend to have better girls' enrollment and attainment records than countries with exceedingly high fertility rates.

Lower fertility rates are further related to the increased acceptability and use of contraceptive means. The latest available data (2003) on the use of contraception methods among the married female population in the Arab world aged 15-49 years is around 45.6 per cent,<sup>8</sup> compared to 31 per cent in 1990-1995.<sup>9</sup> Among the standard indicators of fertility rates are income levels, literacy rates, and the singular mean age at first marriage. Collectively, these factors empower women to postpone marriage and, consequently, child-bearing.

The effects of high fertility rates in the Arab region have taken, and remain to take, their toll on the region's demographic balance and its economic performance over the past two decades. With the continuing high rates of fertility and the relative increase in life expectancy rates, the traditional demographic balance based on high fertility rates and high mortality rates is bound to change. The decline in the later coupled with persisting high fertility rates will result in overall population growth as well as a considerable increase in the number of people in the age bracket 15-65 years. As argued in a recent ESCWA report,<sup>10</sup> while such an increase puts substantial financial pressure on the individual Arab countries in terms of added demands for investments in the social, medical and educational sectors, the rise in the youth population – if investments are targeted properly – may presents a window of opportunity for countries to expand their labour markets and propel their economic growth. At present, most of the Arab countries with exceedingly high population growth face a problem that their labour markets cannot absorb such an increase in the number of new entrants. As noted in the same study on economic and social developments in the region, "the simultaneous process of fertility decline along with the slow growth of the elderly population offers a number of countries in the region a window of demographic opportunity through which increased personal savings and investments become possible. This opportunity will allow the dependency ratio to

---

<sup>7</sup> Arab Women 1995, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> ESCWA Country Profiles 2003, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Arab Women 1995, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Survey of Economic and Social Developments, op. cit.

decline since the number of dependent young population (0-14) will be declining faster than the increase in old-age dependency".<sup>11</sup> As such, the overall dependency ratio will decline for a while until offset by extended life expectancy.

However, to realize such a window of opportunity, labour markets need to be more flexible to absorb new entrants, offering new job opportunities. Government policies need to address such concerns to increase labour force participation, with more investment placed in education, health, technical skills, and high technology transfer to generate a labour force able to meet the demands of a labour market increasingly intertwined with a highly competitive global economy. Without such conscious policies to elevate the skill levels of the labour force, the potential value of the youth population in the region could turn into a soaring problem of unemployment and economic stagnation, putting increasing pressure on the region's already weak economies.

Whether the (Arab) countries will be able to make the most of the emerging demographic bonus and achieve higher economic growth depends on how efficient their economic and social policies will be in converting the increased savings into productive investment and whether increased savings will be enough to generate economic growth. A large labour force requires a large stock of productive facilities in order to prevent the productivity level from declining. Thus, the percentage of national income that must be invested merely to keep productivity from declining is some three times the annual percentage rate of the increase of the labour force. In other words, if the labour force is growing by 3 per cent per annum, a net investment of 9 per cent of national income would be required to keep productivity from declining.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.3. *Infant mortality*

The infant mortality rate is defined as the number of infants who die in a given year before reaching the age of one, per 1,000 live births. One of the major causes of infant deaths is diarrhea related diseases stemming from poor hygiene practices and contaminated water used for drinking. Fortunately, infant mortality rates have been declining since the introduction of oral rehydration therapy (ORT), which has been instrumental in offsetting the dehydrating effects of enteritis. Other immediate causes of infant mortality include neonatal tetanus, malnutrition, acute respiratory infections, and parasitic and infectious diseases. Newborns are additionally at risk when excessive bleeding from the umbilical cord occurs during hazardous delivery conditions.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region, op. cit., p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>13</sup> Arab Women 1995, op. cit. p. 50.

1990-1995 data places the average regional infant mortality rate for girls at 50 per 1,000 live births, and at 55 per 1,000 live births for boys.<sup>14</sup> Latest available data on infant mortality in 2003 covers but a few Arab countries. For those, infant mortality stands at an average of 36 per 1,000 live births for girls and 40.7 for boys.<sup>15</sup> As such, available data – although covering a relatively small number of countries to provide an accurate regional picture – indicates a decrease of roughly 14 and 9 infant mortalities per 1,000 live births for girls’ and boys’, respectively, over the last decade.

#### 1.4. *Maternal mortality*

Maternal mortality is defined as death during pregnancy or within the post-partum period – 42 days following delivery – measured per 100,000 live births. The latest 2003 available data on maternal mortality for 12 Arab countries shows a staggering picture. On average, 481.2 women per 100,000 live births die from pregnancy or delivery related causes.<sup>16</sup> In Somalia, Sudan and Yemen, maternal mortality is listed at a shocking 1,600, 1,500, and 1,400 per 100,000 live births, respectively.

Available data for 1990-1995 for 18 Arab countries places the regional average for maternal mortality at 175 deaths per 100,000 live births. If the listed data for the above 12 countries is accurate, then maternal mortality has nearly tripled over the last decade. For instance, the 1990 available data for Sudan lists maternal mortality rate at 700 deaths per 100,000 live births compared to 1,500 deaths per 100,00 live births today. In the case of Yemen, maternal mortality is listed at 330 per 100,000 live births in 1990, as opposed to 1,400 deaths per 100,000 live births today.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>15</sup> ESCWA Country Profiles, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## II. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND LITERACY LEVELS

While considerable effort has been placed in the Arab world on enhancing women's access to education and in closing the gap between women and men at all educational levels, population growth, poor economic performance, and lingering socio-cultural norms working against women's realization of their equal rights and opportunities have in varying degrees hindered the goal of planners and policy makers in the Arab world to achieve respectable levels of education among Arab women and to realize gender parity at all educational levels. In situations of meager – and in some countries regressing – economic performance, the poor in general and women in particular are the first to suffer the brunt of underdevelopment. Where limited financial resources force a choice on the family as to which child should receive an education, girls have been sacrificed in favor of their male siblings. Again, the overriding cultural perception that girls' primary role is to grow-up to be wives and mothers greatly restricts their opportunity to receive an education which would prepare them to become equal actors in society along side their male counterparts.

The challenge faced by most governments in the region to educate their people remains a daunting task. Most governments have succeeded in improving the educational level of their populations in general, and their female population in particular. However, the enormity of the task leaves much to be realized.

Data on investment in education in the ESCWA countries shows that investment in education has grown considerably over the past forty years, at a growth rate of 4.2 per cent, compared to a world rate of 0.9 per cent and a rate of 2.5 per cent for developing countries.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, such substantial increase in education investments has not resulted in an equal increase in production output per capita in these countries, suggesting that investments have served to “enlarge” the number of school enrolment without much substantive improvements in the quality of education provided and the skills developed, leaving the same mismatch between the “type” of skills supplied and those “needed” by the labour market. In fact, with the absence of the skills needed in the labour market, such high enrolment rates have resulted in dangerously high rates of unemployment in many Arab countries.

Poverty further compounds the problem of poor educational levels and prevalent illiteracy among Arab women. The need in many families for an additional income has resulted in prevailing rates of child labour, particularly in rural areas and urban slums, where children are often forced to work in the fields or apprentice in low paid unskilled jobs to generate income for the family. Even in countries where basic primary education is both obligatory and free, the price of going to school and forfeiting the income brought home by a working son or daughter is too high for many

---

<sup>17</sup> Survey of Economic and Social Developments, op. cit., p. 55.

families. When faced by a choice out of economic necessity, most poor families sacrifice the education of their daughters in favor of their sons. Recent data shows that some 68 million of the total Arab population are illiterate, with an estimated 11 million children not attending school.

## 2.1. Literacy rates

Over the last two decades, since the 1980s, literacy rates in many Arab countries have shown reasonable improvement. Nevertheless, today the literacy rates in a number of Arab countries remain extremely low, particularly among the poor, underprivileged, rural, and female populations.

Latest available data for the year 2000 on literacy levels among females ages 15 and above in the Arab world place the regional average at 49.4, compared to 37.4 in 1990, indicating a 12 per cent increase over the last decade in women's literacy rates. Men's literacy rates on the other hand show a regional average of 65.9 and 73.9 between 1990 and 2000, respectively, with an increase of 8 per cent in men's literacy rates over this period. The gender equality index correspondingly shows a substantial gender gap in favor of men, with the ratio of literate women to men in 1990 standing at 0.57:1, and 0.67:1 in 2000 (see table 4).

TABLE 4. LITERACY RATES, AGES 15+ AND GENDER  
EQUALITY INDEX, 1990-2000  
(Percentages and ratios)

Country	Literacy rates for those ages 15 and over						Gender equality index		
	1990		1995		2000		1990	1995	2000
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women /Men	Women /Men	Women /Men
Algeria	39.1	66.4	45.2	71.1	51.3	75.1	.59	0.64	0.68
Bahrain	74.8	86.9	79.5	89.2	82.7	91.0	0.86	0.89	0.91
Djibouti	27.4	55.5	32.8	60.4	38.4	65.0	0.49	0.54	0.59
Egypt	33.6	60.3	38.5	63.5	43.7	66.6	0.56	0.61	0.66
Iraq	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Jordan	71.7	89.9	80.1	90.5	84.4	94.9	0.80	0.89	0.89
Kuwait	72.8	79.5	76.0	82.3	79.9	84.3	0.92	0.92	0.95
Lebanon	73.2	88.5	77.0	90.5	80.4	92.3	0.83	0.85	0.87
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	50.9	83.0	59.8	87.4	67.6	90.9	0.61	0.68	0.74
Mauritania	23.9	46.4	26.7	48.7	29.5	50.6	0.52	.55	0.58
Morocco	25.0	52.7	30.5	57.7	36.0	61.9	0.47	0.53	0.58
Oman	38.4	67.9	50.7	74.6	61.7		0.57	0.68	0.77
Palestine	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Qatar	76.1	77.4	80.0	79.0	83.2	80.5	0.98	1.01	1.03

TABLE 4 (continued)

Country	Literacy rates for those ages 15 and over						Gender equality index		
	1990		1995		2000		1990	1995	2000
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women /Men	Women /Men	Women /Men
Saudi Arabia	50.6	77.6	59.7	80.8	67.2	84.1	0.65	0.74	0.80
Somalia	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sudan	31.2	58.6	38.3	63.5	46.0	68.3	0.53	0.60	0.67
Syrian Arab Republic	47.5	81.9	54.1	85.4	60.4	88.3	0.58	0.63	0.68
Tunisia	46.4	71.7	53.0	76.0	60.1	81.4	0.65	.70	0.74
United Arab Emirates	71.0	71.5	75.1	73.2	79.5	75.2	0.99	1.03	1.06
Yemen	13.0	55.4	18.4	62.1	25.0	67.4	0.23	0.30	0.37
Arab region	37.4	65.9	43.4	69.7	49.4	73.9	0.57	0.62	0.67

Source: UNESCO, Statistical Yearbook, 1999.

TABLE 5. ILLITERACY RATES (15-24 YEARS) IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES, 2003

Country	Women	Men	Both Women and Men
Algeria	39.1	21.1	30.1
Bahrain	15.0	8.1	10.9
Djibouti	41.6	22.0	32.1
Egypt	53.1	31.7	42.3
Iraq	75.6	44.1	59.6
Jordan	13.4	4.2	8.6
Kuwait	18.3	15.0	16.5
Lebanon	17.8	6.9	12.6
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	28.1	7.6	17.5
Mauritania	68.1	48.2	58.3
Morocco	60.6	35.9	48.3
Oman	32.8	17.0	24.2
Qatar	15.0	18.6	17.5
Saudi Arabia	29.2	15.4	21.3
Sudan	49.5	28.4	39.0
Syrian Arab Republic	36.1	10.3	23.1
Tunisia	35.7	16.0	25.8
United Arab Emirates	18.5	24.0	22.2
Yemen	69.9	29.5	49.7
Arab countries	49.0	27.0	37.6

Literacy levels for women have improved in all Arab countries over the past decade, 1990-2000. While women's illiteracy rates remain substantially high in many Arab countries, with Djibouti, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan, and Yemen still showing considerably high illiteracy rates well above the regional mean, other countries tell a success story. In Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, women's literacy rates reach 80 per cent and above, with the gender equality index showing near parity in Bahrain and Kuwait (0.91 and 0.95, respectively) and in favor of women in both Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (1.03 and 1.06, respectively).

The situation is relatively better for women in the age group 15-24 years. With governments paying increasing attention to female education over the last two decades, the present youth generation aged 15-24 show better literacy rates than that of the general population. In 1990, the average regional literacy rate for women in this age group stood at 56.8, compared to 78.6 for men in the same age bracket. By 2000, the literacy rate among women within this age group reached 69.9, compared to 84.1 for men. Between 1990 and 2000, women in this age bracket witnessed a 13.1 per cent increase in their literacy rate, while men experienced a 5.5 per cent increase. In 1990, the gender gap in literacy rates was in favor of women in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, and reaching close to parity levels in Bahrain and Kuwait at 0.99, and in 0.98 in Jordan. By 2000, Bahrain reached total parity in literacy rates among the women and men in the age group of 15-24 years, while in Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates the gender gap was in favor of women (see table 6).

TABLE 6. LITERACY RATES FOR AGES 15-24, AND THE GENDER EQUALITY INDEX, 1990-2000  
(Percentages and ratios)

Country	Literacy rates for those ages 15 and over						Gender equality index		
	1990		1995		2000		1990	1995	2000
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women /Men	Women /Men	Women /Men
Algeria	59.5	82.2	65.7	84.6	71.4	87.1	0.72	0.78	0.82
Bahrain	95.1	96.3	97.4	97.5	98.6	98.3	0.99	1.00	1.00
Djibouti	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Egypt	50.9	70.9	56.7	73.8	62.3	76.4	0.72	0.77	0.82
Iraq	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Jordan	96.4	98.1	99.5	96.4	99.8	99.3	0.98	1.03	1.01
Kuwait	87.6	88.5	91.1	90.7	93.5	92.3	0.99	1.00	1.01
Lebanon	88.6	95.7	91.0	96.6	93.0	97.5	0.93	0.94	0.95
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	81.7	99.0	87.8	99.7	92.2	99.8	0.83	0.88	0.92
Mauritania	35.7	55.4	37.3	56.4	39.2	56.8	0.64	0.66	0.69



TABLE 6 (continued)

Country	Literacy rates for those ages 15 and over						Gender equality index		
	1990		1995		2000		1990	1995	2000
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women /Men	Women /Men	Women /Men
Morocco	42.0	68.1	50.0	72.7	58.1	76.2	0.62	0.69	0.76
Oman	75.5	95.5	89.6	98.6	96.3	99.7	0.79	0.91	0.97
Palestine	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Qatar	93.0	88.3	95.6	90.9	97.1	92.7	1.05	1.05	1.05
Saudi Arabia	78.7	91.5	85.8	94.0	90.4	95.6	0.86	0.91	0.95
Somalia	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sudan	53.8	75.2	63.2	79.3	71.5	82.7	0.72	0.80	0.86
Syrian Arab Republic	66.8	92.2	73.1	94.0	78.6	95.4	0.72	0.78	0.82
Tunisia	74.3	92.6	82.5	95.3	88.0	97.2	0.80	0.87	0.91
United Arab Emirates	88.9	82.1	92.2	85.2	94.6	87.9	1.08	1.08	1.08
Yemen	25.0	73.5	34.7	79.4	45.2	82.6	0.34	0.44	0.55
Arab region	56.8	78.6	63.8	81.6	69.9	84.1	0.72	0.78	0.83

Source: UNESCO, Statistical Yearbook, 1999.

## 2.2. Primary enrollment

Gross enrollment ratios for girls and boys between the years 1990-1994 and 1995-1999 show roughly uniform ratios over the nineties' decade. In 1990, eleven out of nineteen countries for which data was available show an enrollment ratio for girls in excess of 80 per cent, while in 1995-1999 nine out of 18 countries on which data is available have a girls' enrollment ratio above 80 per cent. In Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates, girls' enrollment ratio exceeds 90 per cent in 1990-1994 through till 1999, except for the United Arab Emirates where the figure falls to 87 in 1995-1999.

The gender equality index for 1990-1994 indicates that in 11 out of 19 Arab countries on which data is available, the GEI in primary enrollment exceeded 0.90, while in 1995-1999 it reaches this level in 11 out of 18 countries. Bahrain shows a GEI in favor of girls, standing at 1.03 in 1990-1994 and 1.01 in 1995-1999. Kuwait and Libyan Arab Jamahiriya also show a GEI in favor of girls in 1990-1994, standing at 1.03 and 1.01, respectively (see table 7).

While on a regional level, primary school enrolments for girls have improved over the last decade, the situation remains bleak in countries like Djibouti, Sudan, and

Yemen, standing below 50 per cent enrollments over the past decade. In both Djibouti and Sudan, boys' enrollment at this educational level are equally poor, indicating an overall poor country performance in enhancing primary education. In Yemen, where boys' enrollments far exceed that of girls, the GEI stands at 0.40, indicating a huge gender gap in favor of boys.

A number of countries in the Arab region show enrollment ratios that exceed 100 per cent. Such anomalies may be explained by having a large number of students who remain enrolled at the primary level beyond the official age, or repeat cases of the same grade. Rather than indicating universal primary education and genuine progress, "a ratio that far exceeds 100 per cent could instead be a measure of poor attendance or of an inferior quality of tuition".<sup>18</sup>

TABLE 7. PRIMARY ENROLLMENT RATIOS FOR GIRLS AND BOYS AND GENDER EQUALITY INDEX, 1990-1994 AND 1995-1999  
(Percentage and ratios)

Country (age limits)	Gross enrolment ratios				Gender equality index	
	1990-1994	1990-1994	1995-1999	1995-1999	1990-1994	1995-1999
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls/Boys	Girl/Boys
Algeria (6-11)	99	112	102	113	0.88	0.90
Bahrain (6-11)	112	109	106	105	1.03	1.01
Djibouti (6-11)	33	43	33	44	0.77	0.75
Egypt (6-10)	91	104	94	108	0.88	0.87
Iraq (6-11)	83	97	87	92	0.86	0.85
Jordan (6-15)	94	94	-	-	1.00	-
Kuwait (6-9)	67	65	77	78	1.03	0.99
Lebanon (6-11)	110	114	108	113	0.96	0.96
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (6-14)	111	110	-	-	1.01	-
Mauritania (6-11)	64	78	75	84	0.82	0.89
Morocco (6-12)	68	93	74	97	0.73	0.79
Oman (6-11)	79	83	74	78	0.95	0.95
Palestine (6-11)	-	-	97	97	-	1.00
Qatar (6-11)	84	88	86	87	0.95	0.99
Saudi Arabia (6-16)	74	79	76	79	0.94	0.96
Somalia (6-13)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sudan (6-13)	47	58	47	55	0.81	0.85
Syrian Arab Republic (6-11)	96	107	96	106	0.90	0.91

<sup>18</sup> Women and Men in the Arab Countries, Education. ESCWA, 2002, p. 5.

TABLE 7 (continued)

Country (age limits)	Gross enrolment ratios				Gender equality index	
	1990-1994	1990-1994	1995-1999	1995-1999	1990-1994	1995-1999
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls/Boys	Girl/Boys
Tunisia (6-11)	112	122	114	122	0.92	0.93
United Arab Emirates (6-11)	92	96	87	91	0.96	0.96
Yemen (6-14)	45	113	40	100	0.40	0.40

Source: UNESCO, Statistical Yearbook, 1999.

### 2.3. Secondary enrollment

Available data on secondary school enrolment for girls and boys in a number of Arab countries portrays a rather dim picture. Over 1990-1999, the level of enrolment for both gender groups, as well as the rate of change, remained poor. From the 16 countries on which data is available for 1990-1994, the regional average of girls' enrolment in secondary education stood at 51.7 per cent, while the regional average for boys stood at 57.2 per cent. Not only had girls' enrollment rates not improved at the end of the nineties, but in 1999 the regional average for 17 Arab countries stood at 50.8 per cent, falling by nearly one per cent between 1990-1999. The situation for boys is not much different, with a regional average in 1999 of 56 per cent, falling by 1.2 percentage points over a ten year span.

In terms of individual countries' performance, Djibouti, Iraq, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen - 7 out of 17 countries - all fall below the regional average for both sexes, with the lowest enrolment rate standing at 11 per cent for girls and at 17 per cent for boys, in 1999. Only 2 out of the 17 countries on which data is available had enrollment rates for girls and boys in 1995-1999 at or slightly higher than 80 per cent, with Lebanon showing an 84 per cent enrollment rate for girls and the United Arab Emirates showing 82 per cent, while boys' enrollment rate reached 83 per cent in Egypt and 80 per cent in Qatar.

TABLE 8. SECONDARY ENROLLMENT RATIOS FOR GIRLS AND BOYS  
AND GENDER EQUALITY INDEX, 1990-1994 AND 1995-1999  
(Percentage and ratios)

Country (age limits)	Gross enrolment ratios				Gender equality index	
	1990-1994	1990-1994	1995-1999	1995-1999	1990-1994	1995-1999
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls/Boys	Girl/Boys
Algeria (15-17)	58	66	62	65	0.88	0.95
Bahrain (15-17)	98	91	-	-	1.08	-
Djibouti (16-18)	10	15	12	17	0.67	0.71

TABLE 8 (continued)

Country (age limits)	Gross enrolment ratios				Gender equality index	
	1990-1994	1990-1994	1995-1999	1995-1999	1990-1994	1995-1999
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls/Boys	Girl/Boys
Egypt (14-16)	71	82	73	83	0.87	0.88
Iraq (15-17)	35	53	32	51	0.66	0.63
Jordan (16-17))	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kuwait (14-17)	62	62	66	64	1.00	1.03
Lebanon (16-18)	83	75	84	78	1.11	1.08
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (15-17)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Mauritania (15-17)	11	20	11	21	0.55	0.52
Morocco (16-18)	13	43	34	44	0.30	0.77
Oman (15-17)	62	68	66	68	0.91	0.97
Palestine (15-17)	-	-	68	68	-	1.00
Qatar (15-17)	82	82	79	80	1.00	0.99
Saudi Arabia (15-17)	51	59	57	65	0.86	0.88
Somalia (14-17)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sudan (14-16)	13	15	20	23	0.87	0.87
Syrian Arab Republic (15-17)	40	49	40	45	0.82	0.89
Tunisia (15-18)	54	59	63	66	0.92	0.95
United Arab Emirates (15-17)	84	76	82	77	1.11	1.06
Yemen (16-17)	-	-	14	53	-	0.26

Source: UNESCO, Statistical Yearbook, 1999.

Several countries show a regression in girls' enrollment rates over 1990-1999. Iraq, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates experienced a decrease in their girls' population enrollment rates at the secondary level between 1990-1994 and 1995-1999. While this may be readily explained in the case of Iraq given its economic situation under the 1990s embargo and the effects it had on regular access to education, such a decrease seems rather strange for countries like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates which have generally maintained higher levels of girls' education throughout the Arab region.

The gender equality index (GEI) exceeds 0.90 in 8 out of 17 Arab countries in 1999, while in 1990 this ratio was enjoyed by 7 out of 16 countries. Again, on a regional level, the GEI over the past decade does not show any substantial improvement. In terms of individual countries' performance, the gender gap in Morocco shows a considerable decrease over the last decade, moving from 0.30 in 1990-1994 to 0.77 in 1995-1999. While still low in absolute terms, Morocco's

enrollment rates for girls' in secondary level education have more than doubled over the nineties decade, moving from 13 per cent in 1990-1994 to 34 in 1995-1999. In general, given the equally poor enrollment rates for boys, the gender gap is not substantial in most Arab countries. Nevertheless, a few countries show staggeringly high gender gaps, with Yemen at the top of the gender disparity scale with 26 girls for every 100 boys enrolled in secondary schools (see table 8).

#### 2.4. Tertiary enrolment

As the case with secondary enrollments, the Arab region witnessed low gross enrolment ratios in tertiary and university education, compared to the world average ratios.<sup>19</sup> In 1990-1994, the mean average for girls' enrolments at the tertiary level in sixteen Arab countries where data is available stood at 14.1 per cent, compared to 13 per cent for boys, with the GEI in favor of girls in 5 Arab countries and at parity levels in 2 countries. In 1995-1999, available data for 13 Arab countries place the regional average for girls' enrolment at 15.2 per cent, while that of boys at 14.1 per cent. While substantially low, girls' enrolment ratios in tertiary education exceed that of boys by roughly 1 per cent, with both sexes witnessing an increase in enrollment ratios over the 1990s of roughly 1 per cent.

Regional disparities in the ratio of girls' enrolment at the tertiary level remain significant, with Djibouti at the lowest end with 0.2 per cent girls' enrolment ratio, Mauritania at 1 per cent and Sudan at 3 per cent. In total, 6 out of 13 countries where data is available had enrollment rates for girls bellow the regional average in 1995-1999, while 9 out of 16 countries scored bellow the regional average in 1990-1994 (see table 9).

TABLE 9. TERTIARY ENROLLMENT RATIOS FOR GIRLS AND BOYS  
AND GENDER EQUALITY INDEX, 1990-1994 AND 1995-1999  
(Percentages and ratios)

Country (age limits)	Gross enrolment ratios				Gender equality index	
	1990-1994		1995-1999		1990-1994	1995-1999
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women/Men	Women/Men
Algeria (18-20)	9	12	10	14	0.75	0.71
Bahrain (18-20)	24	16	-	-	1.50	-
Djibouti (19-20)	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3	1.00	0.67
Egypt (17-20)	14	22	16	24	0.64	0.67
Iraq (18-20)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Jordan (18-20)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kuwait (18-20)	23	14	24	15	1.53	1.60
Lebanon (19-20)	28	30	27	27	0.93	1.00

<sup>19</sup> UNESCO, Statistical Yearbook (UNESCO Publishing & Bernan Press, USA 1999).

TABLE 9 (*continued*)

Country (age limits)	Gross enrolment ratios				Gender equality index	
	1990-1994		1995-1999		1990-1994	1995-1999
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women/Men	Women/Men
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (18-20)	15	18	-	-	0.83	-
Mauritania (18-20)	1	6	1	6	0.17	0.17
Morocco (19-20)	9	13	-	-	0.69	-
Oman (18-20)	6	6	7	9	1.00	0.78
Palestine (19-20)	-	-	23	30	-	0.77
Qatar (18-20)	42	15	41	14	2.80	2.93
Saudi Arabia (18-20)	13	15	15	17	0.87	0.88
Somalia (18-20)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sudan (17-20)	3	3	-	-	1.00	-
Syrian Arab Republic (18-20)	13	18	-	-	0.72	-
Tunisia (19-20)	11	14	12	15	0.79	0.80
United Arab Emirates (18-20)	14	5	21	5	2.80	4.20
Yemen (18-20)	-	-	1	7	-	0.14

Source: UNESCO, Statistical Yearbook, 1999.

Figures for Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates show a considerable gender gap in favor of girls' in tertiary enrollments. This may be explained by the increasing number of males from these countries who are studying overseas for their university degrees. Excluding these phenomenally high disparity levels in favor of girls, which skew the regional average, only 4 out of 12 Arab countries had a score above 0.90 on the gender equality index in 1994-1995, with only Lebanon scoring parity levels in 1995-1999, and Saudi Arabia showing a GEI of 0.88 (again disregarding Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates).

### 2.5. Field of specialization

The available data for the distribution of university students by field of specialization and by gender, covers two main data sets. A 1995/1996 set of data mapping the distribution of the female and male university students by field of study for 11 Arab countries (see table 10), and a 2001 data set on the distribution of the female and male student population within the various fields of study at the university level for 12 Arab countries (see table 11). In addition, data from a previous study which the present author had compiled for the 22 Arab countries on potential scientists in the Arab region using data on female and male enrollments in the science fields in the late 1980s and early 1990s is also used in the following analysis.

TABLE 10. DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENT POPULATION  
BY FIELD OF STUDY, 1995/1996  
(Percentages)

Country	Education, arts, humanities		Business, law, social science		Science		Engineering		Health and welfare		Others	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Bahrain	23.0	12.0	30.5	17.1	8.6	4.4	12.1	48.4	18.4	7.9	7.4	10.3
Egypt	51.8	38.9	34.1	40.6	3.0	3.2	1.5	7.2	7.1	6.1	2.5	4.0
Jordan	45.4	26.8	24.0	35.9	11.7	11.5	4.9	13.4	11.4	10.1	2.6	2.3
Kuwait	41.7	16.4	40.7	65.9	8.9	3.5	5.3	9.9	3.3	4.4	0.0	0.0
Oman	83.1	45.0	0.0	0.0	10.2	8.8	2.8	20.5	3.0	10.4	0.9	15.3
Palestine	74.4	60.2	0.0	0.0	17.1	19.7	2.8	8.1	3.8	1.8	1.9	10.2
Qatar	63.2	26.5	12.3	19.4	12.1	23.1	6.3	23.8	0.0	0.0	6.3	7.1
Saudi Arabia	82.5	71.2	5.1	8.9	8.5	4.3	0.2	10.5	2.7	3.7	1.1	1.4
Syrian Arab Republic	41.0	19.1	16.9	38.2	10.2	8.8	15.9	35.6	12.3	23.6	3.7	10.2
United Arab Emirates	57.2	22.1	11.2	36.0	9.9	9.9	2.6	14.3	1.7	1.8	17.4	15.8
Yemen	64.6	55.8	41.8	32.4	1.3	1.8	1.9	4.0	7.9	3.8	0.5	2.3

Source: ESCWA, Statistical Abstract of ESCWA Region (2001).

TABLE 11. GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS BY FIELD OF STUDY, 2001  
(Percentages)

Country	Education		Arts & Humanities		Business, Law, social science		Science		Engineering		Health and welfare		Others (agriculture and unspecified )	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Bahrain	77	23	76	24	58	42	72	28	32	68	75	25	38	62
Egypt	54	46	52	48	37	63	39	61	30	70	45	55	33	67
Iraq	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Jordan	74	26	69	31	38	62	44	56	23	77	48	52	56	44
Kuwait	79	21	79	21	63	37	73	27	49	51	73	27	-	-
Lebanon	87	13	68	32	54	46	44	56	18	82	61	39	43	57
Palestine	69	31	68	32	31	69	46	54	29	71	45	55	46	54
Oman	-	-	62	38	46	54	51	49	9	91	51	49	55	45
Qatar	91	9	88	12	77	23	79	21	42	58	-	-	37	63
Saudi Arabia	75	25	34	66	31	69	44	56	1	99	39	61	24	76
Syrian Arab Republic	74	26	62	38	31	69	40	60	28	72	33	67	34	66
United Arab Emirates	95	5	86	14	57	43	82	18	44	56	65	35	83	17
Yemen	28	72	38	62	11	89	43	57	9	91	37	63	5	95

Source: ESCWA, Statistical Abstract of ESCWA Region (2001).



The available ESCWA data set for 11 Arab countries shows a distribution of students by field of study in 1995-1996. On average, 55.4 per cent of all women enrolled at the university level were in the fields of education, arts, and humanities, compared to 35.8 per cent of the male student population, indicating a gender gap of 19.6 per cent in favor of women in these fields. In the business, law and social sciences, women's rate of enrollment as a percentage from the total female student population in university reached 19.7 per cent, compared to an enrollment rate of 26.8 per cent for men, marking roughly 7 per cent increase over women's enrollment in these fields. In the sciences, women's enrollment rate stood at a 9.2 per cent, with 0.2 per cent above men's enrollment in this field which stood at 9 per cent. The engineering field claimed 5.1 per cent of women's university enrollment, and 17.8 per cent of men's enrollments. Women's enrollment rate in the health and welfare field stood at 6.5 per cent, compared to 6.7 per cent among men.

The 1990 data on potential scientists in the Arab world shows a general low enrollment pattern of women in the combined fields of engineering, medicine, computer sciences, natural sciences and mathematics. Compiled data for the 22 Arab countries places the regional mean for women's enrollment in these combined fields at 22.5 per cent, compared to 61 per cent for men, i.e. nearly triple the share of women. The gender gap in potential scientists reaches as low as 59 women to every 100 men, with some marked regional disparities. The United Arab Emirates shows a disparity rate in favor of women by 170 women to every 100 men, with Kuwait scoring near parity levels at 99 women for every 100 men, and Qatar scoring 96 women for every 100 men. Again, these figures, particularly in the case of the United Arab Emirates, may be affected by an increasing migration of male students to study overseas, thus raising the ratio of women to men at this educational level. 15 out of 21 countries show a gender disparity rate even wider than the regional mean, with the Comoros and Yemen showing the largest gender disparity rates in enrolments in the scientific fields, standing at 11 and 36 women to every 100 men, respectively.<sup>20</sup>

Examining the gender distribution within each field of specialization, available data indicates that women make up 67 per cent of the enrollments in education, 65.2 per cent of enrolments in arts and humanities, 44.5 per cent of enrolments in business, law and social sciences, 54.8 per cent of enrolments in sciences, 26.2 per cent of enrolments in engineering, and 47.7 per cent of enrolments in the health and welfare field. While these distributions indicate a general pattern, they may not necessarily be indicative of personal choices of students. Often times, students are enrolled according to the availability of places within the individual faculties rather than their own choices of study.

---

<sup>20</sup> Arab Women 1995, op. cit., p. 89.

The concentration of women in the Arab world in certain educational fields, such as education, humanities and arts, reflects to some degree the cultural biases in relation to the expected role of women in society. Far from possessing inferior learning capabilities that would disadvantage them in the scientific and technical fields, women have been generally encouraged and “socialized” to enter other fields that are perceived as more culturally attuned to their “gender”. For instance, working as a school teacher is generally perceived of in this part of the world as a female job. As mothers who have the predominant role of nurturing their off-springs, assuming the role of school teachers becomes a social extension of their cultural role. Such socio-cultural perceptions may explain the overwhelming representation of women in the teaching staff of most primary and secondary schools in the Arab region.

Prevailing norms of gender segregation in many Arab countries also give impetus to women’s concentration in certain educational fields which do not require gender proximity in the eventual work domain. In many Arab countries, schools, hospitals and even some civil service departments and transportation vehicles are gender-segregated, allowing for women’s work in domains that cater for their own sex. In such cultures of segregation, women engineers may have difficulty finding a job on a construction site, ending up as highly educated mothers and housewives.

The above data reveals a very telling story, not only in relation to gender disparities in the fields of education – and eventually in the market place – but in relation to the development levels of many Arab countries in general. Enrollment rates in the scientific fields in general provide a good indicator as to the current level and future prospects of societal development. The number of potential scientists which a country can project among its coming generation and within its labour force reflects the potential for progress in an age increasingly geared towards scientific and technological advancement. The advancement of nations is increasingly being measured by the added value which its scientific and technological progress could offer, representing its competitive advantage in the global economic setting. Human capital is among the most durable resources of any country, with an added multiplier effect. However, for it to be just that, labour must be qualitatively superior, otherwise it changes from a capital to a liability. Unfortunately, in most Arab countries, the bulk of graduates are not from the fields that count in today’s development and market needs.

Education is the single most important factor affecting the future development of any society. The Arab world is no exception. Throughout history, countries that today stand at the top of the development scale have enjoyed high educational standards and focus increasingly on investing in research and scientific development. While higher education may not be universal in many countries in the developed world, the quality of tertiary and university education provided in these countries ensures that a generation that possesses the necessary skills graduates to the market place. Granted, investment in science and technology whether at the university level

or beyond that through specialized research institutes is a very costly endeavor, which poorer countries may not easily tolerate. Nevertheless, one of the reasons behind the advancement of the “richer” countries is exactly such investments, made to propel specific specializations and skills. Planners and policy makers in the Arab world may have to make serious choices between universal free tertiary education and qualitatively changing their university education systems to ensure a place for their countries in the midst of a continually advancing world market.

## *2.6. Expenditure on education*

In 1990-1995, Arab governments allocated an average of 15.6 per cent of their total public expenditure to education, rising slightly to an average of 16.6 per cent by 1999. Eight of the 16 Arab countries on which data is available have expenditure rates on education above the regional average, with Yemen recording the highest allocation from public funds on education in 1990-1994 at 21.6 per cent, and Morocco and Saudi Arabia recording in 1995-1999 24.9 per cent and 22.8 per cent expenditure rates on education, respectively (see table 12).

It is interesting to note that within the boundaries of the available data on enrollment rates and expenditure levels, there seems to be no meaningful correlation between higher government expenditure and increasing enrolment rates or better school attainment records. For instance, Yemen shows the poorest enrollment records at all educational levels, while it stands among the highest investment allocations to education. The same applies to Morocco and Saudi Arabia.

Investments in female education are of particular interest and importance to development for three primary reasons. First, available estimates suggest that the rates of return on investments in female education – in terms of economic productivity – are at least as high as the rates of returns on investments in male education. Secondly, it is widely conjectured that there are important positive effects of women’s education on non-market factors related to human resource development (such as) health, nutrition, and children’s education. (...) Better educated women are more able to process information and to use goods and services effectively. They are then better prepared to provide health care, to educate their children and to reduce their fertility to desired levels. If the effects of female education are described in terms other than narrow economic productivity, then total returns to investments in female education are likely to exceed the returns on investments in male education.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Jere Behram, *Investing in Female Education and Development* (Pennsylvania University Press, 1991).

TABLE 12. EXPENDITURE ON EDUCATION

Country	To Government expenditure		To gross national product	
	1990-1994	1995-1999	1990-1994	1995-1999
Algeria	18.8	16.4	6.0	5.1
Bahrain	11.8	12.0	4.6	4.4
Djibouti	11.1	-	3.6	-
Egypt	13.8	14.9	4.7	4.8
Iraq	-	-	-	-
Jordan	19.6	19.8	7.7	7.9
Kuwait	10.9	14.0	5.5	5.0
Lebanon	7.5	8.2	2.0	2.5
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	-	-	-	-
Mauritania	16.2	16.2	5.2	5.1
Morocco	22.6	24.9	5.6	5.3
Oman	15.2	16.7	4.6	4.5
Palestine	-	-	-	-
Qatar	-	-	3.4	-
Saudi Arabia	18.0	22.8	6.2	7.5
Somalia	-	-	-	-
Sudan	-	-	-	1.4
Syrian Arab Republic	12.5	13.6	3.8	3.1
Tunisia	16.4	19.9	6.6	7.7
United Arab Emirates	17.3	16.7	1.8	1.8
Yemen	21.6	32.8	6.3	7.0

Source: ESCWA, Women and Men in the Arab World, 2002, ESCWA/STAT/2002/2.

It is revealing that most of the Arab countries that have the highest expenditures on education are among those countries that have the poorest record of female education. This suggests that the problem may not necessarily be one of money, but one of proper allocation and targeted policies. A recent World Bank study shows that in the MENA region, it would take less than 0.5 per cent of GDP to close the gender gap in education. Spending *well* may be much harder than spending *more*, since improving spending implies taking privileges away from advantaged groups who have benefited from the inefficient spending of the past decades.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Nemat Shafik, Big Spending Small Returns: The Paradox of Human Resource Development in the Middle East (Cairo, Economic Research Forum, December, 1994).

Investing well in education in general, and in women's education in particular, is crucial for the region's development. Investing in women's education has been widely ascertained to have enormous private, social and economic returns. The best correlate of both infant mortality, life expectancy, and fertility rates is female primary enrolment rates. Studies on 99 developing countries show that every additional year of education reduces female fertility by 5 to 10 per cent, with females with a primary education marrying two to three years later than those with no education. Economic returns to education are estimated at 12.4 per cent for women, compared to 11.1 per cent for men, with the returns on secondary education registering the highest rates.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

### III. WORK AND EMPLOYMENT

A number of strategic objectives to enhance women's economic participation and to ensure their equal access to remunerated employment and economic resources have been outlined in the Beijing Declaration, and have at least officially been adopted by most Arab countries. Among those objectives are promoting women's economic rights and equal access to employment, providing them with business training and access to markets, strengthening women's economic capacity and commercial networks, and eliminating occupational segregation and all forms of employment discrimination. The road towards the full realization of these objectives is still a long way ahead for women in many Arab countries.

The rate of female economic participation in the Arab world remains among the lowest in the world. Several factors are responsible for such poor participation records: low literacy and educational levels among the women population, high fertility rates, early age of female marriage, poor infrastructure facilities particularly in rural areas, as well as lingering cultural restrictions on certain types of female employment in some Arab countries. In addition, more general factors which affect the population's economic participation at large are prevalent in many countries of the Arab region. Poor economic growth rates, meager investments and savings, growing populations, deteriorating educational standards in a number of countries, poor productivity, high unemployment, a faltering private sector and a general global economic slowdown, all affect the region's economic performance and participation records.

Women's economic participation rate, their proportion in the labour force, and their employment pattern varies among the sub-regions of the Arab world. Interestingly enough, women's economic participation and labour force share are highest in the least developed economies of the region, such as the Comoros and Somalia, while they are the lowest in some of the more developed Gulf economies which have the highest female educational records. The participation record of women in the diversified economies of Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia tend to exhibit a rate close to the regional average.

In the least developed economies, women's relatively high participation rates are generally explained by their heavy involvement in agriculture and in informal economic activity. As such, while their proportion in the labour force is well above the regional average, their employment record in the formal sectors of the economy is substantially low. On the other hand, in countries like Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, while women enjoy reasonably good educational levels, women's share in the labour force is relatively low. This may be explained by the presence of a cultural and value system which places considerable restrictions on the work of women in certain domains, particularly in the value added sectors of industry. The overwhelmingly patriarchic structure in many of these countries has forced cultural limitations on women's economic participation and movement outside

their domestic setting. While such norms have eased somewhat over the past two decades – with the increase in women’s education – still the employment of women in many Gulf countries is restricted to jobs traditionally deemed appropriate for women, or in gender segregated services such as hospitals and girls’ schools.

While it has been established that fertility rates inversely affect female rates of economic participation, particularly in the more diversified economies, some studies suggest that the type of employment which women are involved in has an effect on their child-bearing patterns. The argument is that if the opportunity cost of inactivity is low, such as the case may be in jobs where entry and re-entry is lax (as in various forms of self-employment such as sewing, farm work, cottage industry, and work in the urban informal sector in general), the opportunity cost of having children and temporarily leaving their jobs is also low. Conversely, the opportunity cost of having children for women working in the formal sectors of the economy where entry and re-entry is restricted, is high. This might force women to space their child-bearing and reduce the number of children they chose to have.

### 3.1. *Women’s economic participation*

The economic activity rate is calculated as the percentage of the population that is economically active. Data on women’s economic participation is available for the thirteen Arab countries within the ESCWA region, showing a regional average of female economic participation of 20.5 per cent in 1999/2000. Compared to the regional average of female economic participation in 1990, which stood at 20 per cent, women’s economic activity rate has remained excessively low throughout the 1990s. With an average for women’s economic activity rate standing at above 50 per cent in the developed world, Arab women’s economic participation rates are rather dismal.

Regional variations among the countries for which data is available show that 4 out of the 13 countries surveyed have female activity rates above the regional average. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have female activity rates ranging from 29.2 per cent, 32.6 per cent, 35.2 per cent, and 32 per cent, respectively. All 4 countries also score among the highest in female educational levels.

TABLE 13. ECONOMIC ACTIVITY RATES AND UNEMPLOYMENT RATES  
(*Last available year*)

Country	Economic activity rate		Unemployment rate		Year
	Women	Men	Women	Men	
Bahrain	29.2	88.2	11.8	5.2	1991
Egypt	20.5	73.8	19.9	5.1	1998
Iraq	10.3	74.0	7.1	3.5	1987
Jordan	12.3	66.1	21.0	12.3	2000
Kuwait	32.6	68.4	0.7	0.8	1999
Lebanon	20.2	73.8	7.2	8.6	1997

TABLE 13 (*continued*)

Country	Economic activity rate		Unemployment rate		Year
	Women	Men	Women	Men	
Palestine	9.4	76.5	20.2	17.1	1997
Oman	10.0	64.2	37.0	14.2	1996
Qatar	35.2	91.0	5.2	1.8	1997
Saudi Arabia	14.5	80.0	-	-	1992
Syrian Arab Republic	19	82.9	10.5	8.6	1998
United Arab Emirates	32	92.2	2.4	1.7	1995
Yemen	21.8	69.9	8.2	12.5	1999

Source: Compiled from ESCWA Gender Statistics, 2003.

In six out of the 13 countries, female economic activity rates stood below the regional mean, with Palestine showing the lowest rate of 9.4 per cent, followed by Iraq, Jordan, Oman and Saudi Arabia, all scoring below 15 per cent. The gender disparity in economic activity rates is staggeringly high, reaching roughly 57 per cent, with males having more than double women's activity rates in the Arab world.

### 3.2. *Proportion of women in the labour force*

Available data on women's participation in the labour force over the last two decades, 1980-2000, indicates an increase in virtually all Arab countries of women's share in the labour force, moving from a regional average of 22.4 per cent in 1980 to 29.0 per cent in 2000. Comoros, Mauritania and Somalia show the highest rates of women participation in the labour force in the 22 countries surveyed. Given their relatively underdeveloped economies, women's high rates of participation in the labour force in these countries is probably explained by their high representation in the agriculture and farming sector.

The participation of women in the labour force in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has nearly doubled from 1980 to 2000, although still standing below the regional average. Except for Yemen, where women's labour force participation fell from 32.5 per cent in 1980 to 28 per cent in 2000, all other surveyed countries show an increase in the share of women in the labour force over the last two decades.

Throughout the Arab region, the gender gap in labour markets is remarkably wide, reaching on average a 70 per cent share for men, with some countries the male share in the labour market reaching above 90 per cent. Such wide gender disparities illustrate the lingering gaps in literacy rates in general, and educational attainment in particular, for women, especially in rural areas. Furthermore, because of overall economic shrinking in many Arab countries, women's chances of entering the labour market are greatly reduced compared to those of men, with many educated women staying out of the labour market due to lack of enough new job opportunities that would absorb both genders. Still, in situations of job scarcity, men in the Arab world



are advantaged over women. On the other hand, women who succeed in entering the labour force often do not reach higher administrative and managerial positions, remaining largely within the government civil service in educational and social related jobs.

TABLE 14. PROPORTION OF WOMEN IN THE LABOUR FORCE, 1980-2000

Country	1980	1994	2000
Algeria	21.4	10	28.0
Bahrain	10.9	12	21.0
Comoros	43.1	38	43.0
Egypt	26.5	23	30.0
Djibouti	...	40	...
Iraq	17.3	22	20.0
Jordan	14.7	11	24.0
Kuwait	13.1	23	23.0
Lebanon	22.6	27	30.0
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	18.6	10	23.0
Mauritania	45.0	23	43.0
Morocco	33.5	21	35.0
Oman	6.2	9	17.0
Palestine	...	...	...
Qatar	6.7	7	16.0
Saudi Arabia	7.6	7	18.0
Somalia	43.4	...	43.0
Sudan	26.9	...	30.0
Syrian Arab Republic	...	18	27.0
Tunisia	28.9	24	32.0
United Arab Emirates	5.1	9	13.0
Yemen	32.5	12	28.0
Arab Region			29.0

Source: International Labour Office, Bureau of Statistics, *Economically Active Population 1950-2010*, fourth edition (Geneva, 1996), and ESCWA, *Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region 1999-2000*, p. 136.

### 3.3. Women's unemployment rates

Data on selected Arab countries, indicates that women's unemployment rates are nearly double those of men in the Arab region (see table 13). While the regional mean for women's unemployment rate stands at 12.6 per cent, compared to 7.6 per cent for men, considerable regional variations exist. In Egypt for instance, women's unemployment rate is roughly fourfold that of men, standing at 19.9 per cent and 5.1 per cent, respectively. The highest female unemployment rates are recorded for Oman, standing at 37 per cent, compared to 14 per cent male unemployment, while

Kuwait records the lowest female unemployment rate, listed at 0.7 per cent, with a nearly equal male unemployment rate of 0.8 per cent.

The unemployment rates of both genders have not witnessed any considerable improvement from their rate in 1990, standing at nearly the same levels. In 1990, the regional mean for women's unemployment rate stood at 13 per cent, compared to a rate of 8 per cent among men.<sup>24</sup> Such persisting high rates reflect the poor economic performance of many Arab countries over the 1990s, with their economies unable to create new jobs and their labour markets demanding new skills which the educational system in many Arab countries does not provide.

Examining the profile of the unemployed female and male populations in the Arab world, in terms of their educational levels, age group, and entry patterns in the labour market, unemployment seems to be most prevalent among the youth population in general, and young women in particular. The rate of female labour force participation in the Arab world remains the lowest in the world, with the male-female gap in employment ratios exceptionally high. Recent experience in labour supply and the absorptive capacity of the labour market shows that the supply has exceeded the demand for working women in almost all countries of the region, creating the potential for under-utilization of the female labour force".<sup>25</sup>

A recent World Bank study on Arab workers shows that the majority of the unemployed in the Arab region are first-time job seekers with higher educational degrees, suggesting that there was no demand in the labour market for the supply of new graduates.<sup>26</sup> Available data indicates that the percentage of unemployed women between 15 and 24 years from the total unemployed women population reached as high as 78 per cent in Algeria in 1990, with young women representing 68.2 per cent and 66 per cent of unemployed women, respectively, in Bahrain and Egypt in the same year. By the end of the nineties, young women's unemployment record had not improved much, standing at 76.6 per cent, 63.1 per cent and 73.7 per cent in Bahrain, Egypt, and Syrian Arab Republic, respectively. Unemployment among the male youth population also exhibits the same high rates of unemployment as those of women, with relatively close gender gaps.<sup>27</sup>

As noted earlier in this chapter, more investment would be needed in education, health, technical skills, and high technology transfer to generate a labour force able to meet the demands of a labour market increasingly intertwined with a highly competitive global economy. Without such conscious policies to elevate the skill

---

<sup>24</sup> *Arab Women 1995*, op. cit. p.103.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>26</sup> *Will Arab Workers Prosper or Be Left Out in the Twenty-First Century*, Regional perspectives on World Development (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region, 2003, op. cit., p.60.

levels of the labour force, the potential value of the youth population in general, and women in particular, could turn into a soaring problem of unemployment and economic stagnation in the region.

### 3.4. *Women's employment by economic sector*

Arab women's employment share in the three sectors of the economy – agriculture, industry, and services – is extremely dismal, with gender gaps reaching phenomenal levels (see table 15). Gender distribution by economic sector shows that women's highest employment share is in the services sector, claiming 18.1 per cent of all those employed in this sector. Women's share of employment in agriculture scores a regional mean of 13.2 per cent of all those employed in agriculture, and a meager rate of 6.8 per cent of employment in industry.

TABLE 15. EMPLOYED POPULATION BY ECONOMIC SECTOR  
(Percentages)

Country	Agriculture		Industry		Services	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Bahrain (1991)	1.4	98.6	4.2	95.8	22.2	77.8
Egypt (2001)	-	-	8.6	91.4	21.0	79.0
Iraq (1987)	14.3	85.7	8.2	91.8	11.6	88.4
Jordan (2002)	7.8	92.2	8.1	91.9	15.9	84.1
Kuwait (1985)	0.9	99.1	1.5	98.5	27.6	72.4
Lebanon (1997)	12.1	87.9	10.5	89.5	27.6	72.4
Palestine (1997)	12.3	87.7	3.9	96.1	15.3	84.7
Oman (2000)	11.6	88.4	17.2	82.8	13.4	86.6
Qatar (2001)	0.0	100.0	1.1	98.9	23.1	76.9
Syrian Arab Republic (2001)	31.7	68.3	5.0	95.0	14.7	85.3
Yemen (1999)	40	60	6	94	7	93

Source: Compiled from ESCWA Gender Statistics, 2003.

Given the country's weak economic performance in general, and its poor female educational records in particular, understandably the highest share of women's agricultural employment is in Yemen, reaching 40 per cent of such employment, with that same country having the lowest share of women's employment in the services sector. On the other hand, in 5 out of the 11 Arab countries on which data is available, women's share in services exceeds the regional mean, with Kuwait and Lebanon equally showing a female participation rate of 27.6 per cent in this economic sector, followed by Qatar, Bahrain, and Egypt, with 23.1 per cent, 22.2 per cent, and 21 per cent, respectively, of women's employment share in the services sector.

Women's share of employment in the industrial sector stands at a regional average of 6.8 per cent of all employments in that sector. Only Oman and Lebanon exhibit female employment rates in this sector well above the regional mean, with

17.2 per cent and 10.5 per cent, respectively. While still very low in absolute terms, the relative advancement of women's employment share in the industrial sector in these two countries illustrates the absence of cultural norms working against women's participation in sectors traditionally perceived as male domains. Conversely, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar are among the lowest in the share of female employment in industry, falling as low as 1.1 per cent in Qatar and 1.5 per cent in Kuwait. Given that these three countries are among the highest achievers in female education, it seems that women's relative absence from employment in the industrial sector is more a product of cultural restrictions rather than lack of skill.

The same pattern of concentration of Arab women in the services sector is witnessed when analyzing the distribution of the female labour force across the three economic sectors (see table 16). The services sector claims on average 55.1 per cent of the women labour force, followed by agriculture which claims 29.3 per cent of the female labour force, with women's least representation in the industrial sector, standing at a regional average of 12.8 per cent.

TABLE 16. DISTRIBUTION OF THE LABOUR FORCE BY ECONOMIC SECTOR  
THE ARAB COUNTRIES, 1990-2001

Country	Women			Men		
	Agriculture	Industry	Services	Agriculture	Industry	Services
Algeria	7.2	7.2	35.6	17.8	37.7	44.5
Bahrain	0.2	32.4	66.7	0.9	56.6	40.7
Comoros	90.0	5.0	5.0	68.0	13.0	20.0
Djibouti <sup>a/</sup>	0.2	1.1	88.4	3.4	11.1	77.5
Egypt	35.3	9.1	55.6	28.5	25.2	46.2
Iraq	39.0	9.3	51.7	11.6	19.1	69.3
Jordan	3.0	13.2	83.8	4.2	23.3	72.5
Kuwait	0.1	2.7	97.2	2.8	29.9	67.3
Lebanon	5.0	12.4	82.3	10.1	29.5	60.2
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	28.0	5.0	67.0	7.0	27.0	66.0
Mauritania	63.0	4.0	34.0	49.0	16.0	35.0
Morocco	6.0	40.0	54.0	6.0	32.0	62.0
Oman	4.9	7.0	88.1	7.5	7.8	84.5
Palestine	31.8	13.7	54.5	9.3	41.8	48.9
Qatar	4.2	38.0	57.7	1.9	98.1	0.1
Saudi Arabia	12.0	6.1	81.9	20.0	21.3	58.7
Somalia	87.4	2.1	10.5	66.0	13.0	21.0
Sudan	64.1	9.6	26.3	84.1	5.3	10.7
Syrian Arab Republic	55.4	7.4	37.3	25.0	29.5	45.4
Tunisia	20.0	40.0	40.0	23.0	33.0	44.0
United Arab Emirates	0.1	13.8	86.2	9.0	36.1	54.9
Yemen	87.8	2.9	9.3	43.1	13.8	43.1

<sup>a/</sup> Total does not add up to 100 due to the distribution of some employees in unspecified sectors.

The distribution of the male labour force across the three economic sectors again indicates that the services sector claims most of the male labour force, followed by industry then agriculture. On average, 48.8 per cent of the male labour force are employed in the services sector, followed by 28.2 per cent in industry, and 22.6 per cent in agriculture.

The concentration of the labour force, both women and men, in the Arab world reflects to a considerable extent the degree of socio-economic development of the individual Arab countries. The relatively poor concentration of the labour force in the industrial sector reflects the economic weakness of most of the Arab countries. In today's world, the economic strength of nations is increasingly being measured by the added value which its industrial sector could offer, representing the country's competitive advantage in the global economic setting. Except for the United Arab Emirates whose economic progress is largely driven by being a financial and trade node in the region, Arab countries that have realized some degree of economic progress in the nineties, such as Bahrain, Morocco, Qatar and Tunisia, also have a relatively high concentration of their labour force in the industrial sector. The weakest economies in the region show excessively high concentration of labour in the agriculture and services sectors.

The 1980-1990 data on the distribution of economically active women by economic sector, largely indicates the same pattern of women's concentration in the three economic sectors as witnessed in 1999-2000. While accurate statistical correlations cannot be established between the available 1990 data and the current data for 2000, with the former showing the distribution of the economically active population and the latter examining the distribution of the labour force, nevertheless, the figures indicate a uniform pattern of distribution among the sectors, whether of the economically active female population or the women in the labour force. The 1980-1990 data records a regional average of 63 per cent of all economically active women in the tertiary (services) sector, followed by 23 per cent in the primary (agriculture) sector, and 12 per cent in the secondary (industrial) sector, with 2 per cent unclassified.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.5. *Wage Employment of women*

The Arab women's share of wage employment in the non-agricultural sectors of the economy is excessively low compared to that of men. According to the last available data on wage employment in 13 Arab countries, women's share of wage employment stands at an average of 17.2 per cent of all wage employments, with men claiming 82.8 per cent of all wage employment. The gender disparity is unequivocal. Seven of the 13 countries on which data is available score below the regional average for women's wage employment share, with Yemen showing only 7 per cent of the wage employment going to women and 93 per cent assumed by men. While such a

---

<sup>28</sup> Arab Women 1995. op. cit., p. 94.

discrepancy may be explained in Yemen because of the excessive concentration of women in the non-paid agricultural sector, the meager share of women from total wage employment in countries like Algeria, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, all standing below the already dismal regional average for women's share of wage employment, cannot be explained by women's predominant employment in the non-wage agricultural sector. In fact, in the best case scenarios for women's share of wage employment in the Arab world, their share does not exceed 27 per cent of such employment, as in Morocco. Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait and Oman, all of which indicate the highest share for women's wage employment, again stand at very low shares of 20 per cent, 21 per cent, 23 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively.

TABLE 17. SHARE OF WAGE EMPLOYMENT IN THE NON-AGRICULTURAL SECTOR BY GENDER, 2003

Country	Women	Men
Algeria	12	88
Bahrain	13	87
Egypt	20	80
Jordan	21	79
Kuwait	23	77
Morocco	27	73
Oman	25	75
Palestine	16	84
Qatar	15	85
Saudi Arabia	14	86
Syrian Arab Republic	17	83
United Arab Emirates	14	88
Yemen	7	93

Source: ESCWA Gender Statistics, 2003.

### 3.6. *Distribution of women by occupational group*

The latest available data on the distribution of women by occupational group covers 11 Arab countries. The gender representation is calculated as a portion of employment within each group. Women's share of employment in the various occupational groups is rather low, with their best representation in the professional occupational fields and their worst shares in the industrial jobs.

Women's highest occupational representation is recorded in the professionals group, claiming a regional average of 30 per cent of all employments within this group. Females least rates of representation is in the industrial occupations, claiming a mere 5.5 per cent on average of all positions in this occupational category. Women working in agriculture and fisheries make up on average 16.8 per cent of all workers in this group, followed by the services and sales occupations where women's share is 11.3 per cent.

In 4 out of the 11 Arab countries on which the relevant data is available, women's share of employment in the professional fields exceeds 40 per cent of total employment in this occupational group, reaching 46.6 per cent in Oman and 44.6 per cent in Lebanon. The lowest share of women in the professional fields is recorded in Kuwait, with women constituting a mere 3.7 per cent of total employment within this occupational group in 1985. However, it is unlikely that such a low percentage has persisted throughout the 1990s with the improvements in female educational records in Kuwait.

TABLE 18. GENDER DISTRIBUTION BY OCCUPATIONAL GROUP,  
LAST AVAILABLE DATA  
(Percentages)

Country	Legislators, senior officials and business managers		Professionals		Services workers and shop and market workers		Skilled agricultural and fishery workers		Crafts and related workers/supervisors, food industrial, chemical industry workers	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Bahrain (1991)	7.8	92.2	21.1	78.9	25.8	74.2	0.2	99.8	10.7	89.3
Egypt (1998)	9.3	90.7	28.5	71.5	14.0	86.0	20.3	79.7	6.1	93.9
Iraq (1987)	12.7	87.3	43.9	56.1	15.8	84.2	14.0	86.0	---	---
Jordan (2002)	5.0	95.0	28.2	71.8	8.9	91.1	3.0	97.0	7.0	93.0
Kuwait (1985)	33.3	66.7	3.7	96.3	2.7	97.3	38.0	62.0	0.4	99.6
Lebanon (1997)	9.3	90.7	44.6	55.4	29.1	70.9	9.5	90.5	4.9	95.1
Palestine (1997)	15.1	84.9	27.4	72.6	4.2	95.8	14.7	85.3	5.9	94.1
Oman (2000)	9.3	90.7	46.6	53.4	6.4	93.6	9.7	90.3	7.4	92.6
Qatar (2001)	4.7	95.3	30.6	69.4	9.5	90.5	0.0	100.0	0.3	99.7
Syrian Arab Repulic (2001)	14.6	85.4	40.0	60.0	4.4	95.6	32.1	67.9	3.2	96.8
Yemen (1999)	4	96	15	85	4	96	43	57	9	91

Source: Compiled from ESCWA Gender Statistics, 2003.

Compared to the 1980s occupational concentration patterns of Arab women, the available data indicates a near doubling of women's share in the professional occupational group. In 1975, Arab women's participation share in this occupational group stood at 11 per cent, and by 1985 her representation in professional occupations had reached 17 per cent.<sup>29</sup> Today, this figure stands at 30 per cent. Such improvements in women's participation rates in the professional fields indicates an improvement in their educational attainment levels over the past three decades. Nevertheless, while Arab women are well represented in such professional positions, unfortunately they tend to be largely concentrated in the lower and middle range occupational levels, with top managerial positions still widely filled by men.

Women's representation in the higher public, political and business positions shows a tremendous bias against women in these occupations. On average, women in the 11 countries surveyed enjoy a mere 11.4 per cent of all such positions in their respective countries, with Kuwait having the highest representation rate of women in such positions, recording 33.3 per cent, while Jordan, Qatar and Yemen show extremely low female representation, standing at 5 per cent, 4.7 per cent and 4 per cent, respectively of total employment within these occupations. The relatively high representation rates enjoyed by Kuwaiti women in this occupational group is probably a result of their growing participation in the business world, and not as a reflection of increasing representation in senior public and/or political office. By and large, Arab women remain excluded from leading managerial and public positions, with cultural and social barriers still working against their full participation in public life. Although data on higher educational enrolment indicates a gender gap in favor of women in a number of Arab countries, still, female educational attainment over the past two decades has not yet served to close the gap between the sexes in leading positions in most Arab countries.

---

<sup>29</sup> Arab Women 1995, op. cit., p.102.



#### IV. WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In April 2003, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, the governing body of ESCWA, adopted a resolution establishing a Committee on Women, as one of its main subsidiary bodies. The resolution also requested the Executive Secretary of ESCWA to establish within its organizational structure a Center for Women and Gender Mainstreaming.<sup>30</sup> While attesting to the importance placed on gender issues by decision-makers in the region, the Arab world in general, and Arab women in particular, are far from realizing their full political rights of participation and representation.

The constitutions of most Arab countries recognize women's equal civil and political rights to those of men. Nevertheless, the mere existence of constitutional guarantees ensuring the rights of women do not necessarily translate into women realizing their full civic, legal, and political rights. Women's staggeringly low representation in the decision-making circles in many Arab countries has rendered women's constitutional rights largely ineffective in ensuring her participation in political life.

The patriarchal structure of political and social life in most Arab countries has immediate relevance to our understanding of the socio-economic determinants of development in general, and to women's well-being and rights in particular. Unlike institutionalized systems of government, where the individual's rights are guaranteed as a citizen regardless of gender, in most developing countries among which the Arab world is no exception, the political, social, economic and legal realms of life are largely controlled through informal and personalized networks, ultimately controlled by men. The patriarchal organization of Arab societies makes the study of constitutional guarantees for women's rights, well-being, and political representation and participation all the more sensitive in many Arab countries. Women in the Arab world have been largely marginalized from the formal political arena. While their relatively poor educational level and high illiteracy rates worked against their political representation in the past, their educational advancement over the last two decades has not witnessed a simultaneous increase in their political representation and involvement in the formal realm of government. In fact, Arab countries that have the highest rates of female educational attainment in the region are among the countries with the poorest representation of women in public office.

---

<sup>30</sup> Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region, 2003, op. cit. p. 68.

TABLE 19. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF ARAB WOMEN, 1990-2003

Country	Women's Suffrage Rights	No. of women in Parliament	Total seats	Percentage of women in Parliament (1990)	Percentage of women in Parliament (2000)
Algeria	1962	24	389	6.7	6
Bahrain	1973	0	40	...	0
Comoros	1956	n.a.	...	2.4	0
Djibouti	1946	7	65	0	0
Egypt	1956	11	454	2.2	2.4
Iraq	1980	n.a.	n.a.	10.8	6.4
Jordan	1974	6	110	1.3	5
Kuwait	...	0	65	...	...
Lebanon	1951	3	128	2.3	2.3
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	1964	0	760	...	0
Mauritania	1961	3	181	0	2.2
Morocco	1963	35	325	0.6	5.9
Oman	2003	2	...	...	...
		(Consultative Council)			
Palestine	1996	5	88	...	5.6
Qatar	2003 (municipal)	...	...	...	...
Saudi Arabia	...	...	...	...	...
Somalia	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	...	n.a.
Sudan	1964	35	360	8.2	9.7
Syrian Arab Republic	1949-1953	30	250	8.4	10.4
Tunisia	1957-1959	21	182	6.8	11.5
United Arab Emirates	...	...	40	...	...
Yemen	1970 (1967 south Yemen)	1	301	0.7	0.3

Source: ESCWA Women and Men in the Arab Countries, ESCWA/SDD/2003/brochure/2 for the 1990 figures, see Arab Women 1995, pp. 116-7.

Today, in 2003, three Arab countries still deny their women the right to vote and run for public office. Since 1990, Oman, Palestine, and Qatar gave women the right to vote and representation, bringing the total number of Arab countries who have guaranteed women's suffrage rights to 19. Among the earliest countries to provide women their political rights were the Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Lebanon, Syrian Arab Republic, and Tunisia, with Djibouti the first Arab country to guarantee women's suffrage rights in 1946. By and large, most Arab countries had upheld such rights by the 1960s and early seventies.

#### *4.1. Women in parliament*

The relative longevity in realizing women's suffrage rights in most Arab countries has not been met with proper women representation in the respective parliaments of Arab states. Today, out of 16 Arab countries that have functioning parliaments and have given women the right to vote and run for public office, women's share of parliamentary seats does not exceed 4.1 per cent on average, with Yemen recording a female representation of 0.3 per cent, while Djibouti and Libyan Arab Jamahiriya have no women at all in their parliaments. Out of the 13 Arab countries that have women in their parliaments, 7 have a female representation below the regional average, recording roughly 2 per cent women representation in parliament. Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia show the best records of female representation in parliament, listing 9.7 per cent, 10.4 per cent, and 11.5 per cent, respectively.

In 1990-1994, women's share of parliamentary seats stood at an average of 3.9 per cent, with negligible differences from today's average female representation. While four Arab countries have witnessed an increase in the percentage of women in parliament from 1990 till 2003, namely Morocco, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, and Tunisia, women's representation diminished in Algeria, Comoros, Iraq, and Yemen over the past decade. Morocco, in particular, shows a substantial increase in women's representation in parliament, moving from 0.6 per cent in 1993 to 5.9 per cent in 2003, illustrating a remarkable development in women's place in public life in this country.

#### *4.2. Women ministers*

Arab women's representation in ministerial and executive positions is equally low. In 1990, eight Arab countries had women ministers, Algeria, Comoros, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia, ranging between one and two women ministers in each respective cabinet. In 2001, Yemen appointed a women minister to head the Ministry of State for Human Rights, and by 2003, Qatar named its first women minister for education and appointed a women as executive secretary of the Higher Council for Family Affairs. Oman also appointed its first women minister in 2003. While the trend is positive, women's representation in cabinet positions in the Arab world remains extremely minimal, with women typically appointed to positions mostly in social affairs and less frequently in cultural

ministries, but have remained excluded from what are known as core ministries such as, economy, foreign affairs, justice, the interior and trade. While one out the six presidential contenders in Mauritania's November 2003 presidential elections is a woman, most Arab countries are still a very long way away from seeing a woman prime minister or president instated.

#### 4.3. *Women judges*

In the judiciary, several Arab countries (Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, and Yemen) have women judges, albeit again at varying ratios to their male counterpart.<sup>31</sup> While Arab women judges, according to available data, on average represent less than 15 per cent of total judges in their respective countries, in Morocco the data shows that 50 per cent of all judges are women, again suggesting an excellent development trend as the case with women parliamentarians in this country. Egypt on the other hand has only recently appointed a woman to its Supreme Constitutional Court, however, women are still not represented in the regular juridical system.

#### 4.4. *Women's equal rights*

In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Discrimination in this instance has been defined as *"any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field"*.

Sixteen out of the 22 Arab countries are signatories to the Convention, with all but four of them (Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, and Syrian Arab Republic) stating reservations on a number of articles within the Convention. Egypt is among the first Arab countries to ratify the Convention in 1981, followed by Iraq, Tunisia and Yemen in the mid-1980s, and Libyan Arab Jamahiriya in 1989. Since the 1990s, 12 Arab countries have ratified CEDAW, with the most recent being Algeria (2002), Saudi Arabia (2000), Syrian Arab Republic (2003), and Morocco (2001).

To date, 2003, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates have not yet ratified CEDAW.

---

<sup>31</sup> Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region, 2003, op. cit. p. 70.