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**INDICES ON THE SITUATION OF ARAB WOMEN:  
A CRITICAL REVIEW**



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## ABBREVIATIONS AND EXPLANATORY NOTES

FEI	female education index
FPR	female participation rate
GDI	gender-related development index
GEM	gender empowerment measure
HPI	human poverty index
ILO	International Labour Organization
MMR	maternal mortality rate
NGO	non-governmental organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

The following symbols have been used in the tables throughout the study:

Two dots (..) indicate that data are not available or are not separately reported.

A dash (—) indicates that the amount is nil or negligible.

A hyphen (-) indicates that the item is not applicable.

A slash (/) indicates a school year or a financial year (e.g., 1981/82). References to “dollars” (\$) indicate United States dollars, unless otherwise stated. Totals may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Bibliographical and other references have, wherever possible, been verified.

## Introduction

The term “Arab women” is commonly used in social sciences literature to refer to the female half of the population of the country members of the League of Arab States. This population is distributed among 22 countries, the majority of which were part of the Islamic Ottoman Empire before the First World War, were colonized by various Western powers after the War, and gained their independence during the course of this century.

The countries of the region did not achieve independence at the same time or through similar processes. The emerging new States adopted different types of constitutions, political regimes and economic strategies. As a result, the current political, social and economic map of the region is a mosaic comprising countries at varying stages of social and economic development, characterized by highly uneven income and wealth distribution and different levels of economic growth, industrialization, literacy, educational attainments and health standards.

These differences notwithstanding, there are three historical, geographical and political realities which form the common denominators that have determined the shape and substance of the region’s current profile. The first is Islam, the religion of the majority of the population, which has given structure to the region’s identity and its social and cultural norms for the last 15 centuries. The second has to do with the location, resources and other geographical features of the area which have allowed it to become a major energy provider to the world during the course of this century and have influenced, in different ways and to varying degrees, the economic and social development of the region. The third reality relates to the regional wars that have taken place over the past four decades (in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, 1981 and 1991) and to the civil wars that have been fought in different Arab countries. Such events have tended to produce a ripple effect extending across the region; this was particularly true in connection with the 1973 war (which was followed by the oil boom) and the recent 1991 Gulf war.

The cultural, geopolitical and economic factors at play since the beginning of this century have transformed the lives of men and women in every Arab country. The cumulative outcome of this transformation process, as the century comes to a close, reflects a complex mixture of achievements and setbacks for the region.

The situation of women has been conventionally—and mistakenly—dealt with in much of the region’s development literature, and sometimes in development plans, as an “add-on” component which falls outside the realm of the macro political and economic context. The statement that women represent half the society, so often repeated in research or by the media, is not mere rhetoric; it is a demographic reality, and the situation of women in any society is therefore a strong indicator of the country’s human development priorities and the well-being of half of its population.

It is within the macro context that the present paper will endeavour to assess the profile of women in the region. In all their roles, whether as political, social or economic agents of change, as wives or mothers, or as community workers, the women of this region have both influenced and been influenced by the modern political and socio-economic history of the Arab world.

This study is composed of three parts. Part one includes (a) a general discussion of issues relating to typology *vis-à-vis* current statistics on women’s issues, highlighting some gaps in research and data, and (b) a bird’s-eye view of developments in the situation of women within the larger context of the region’s political economy from the beginning of the century until the 1990s. Part two includes (a) a review of packages of indicators which are currently used to describe women’s situation and (b) a statistical and qualitative review of their situation in the education, health and employment sectors. Part three proposes a list of indicators which could serve as inputs into indices constructed to describe different aspects of the situation of women. The paper also includes selected statistical tables from the most recent ESCWA publication on the situation of the region’s women.

## **PART ONE**

## I. SOME PROBLEMS OF TYPOLOGY AND STATISTICS RELATING TO WOMEN'S ISSUES: A CRITIQUE

This part of the paper is essentially aimed at creating a discourse on the regional appropriateness of the international state of the art in research and statistics on women to determine whether such research and statistics capture and communicate the realities associated with Arab women.

There is no Arab woman stereotype who represents the different categories of the region's female population. The situation of various social groups derives from their geographic location, history, age group, social class, ethnic and religious background, educational attainments, employment profile, and gender. It is necessary, when analysing the situation and status of a particular social group, to establish subcategories according to criteria based on a reasonable level of cultural and socio-economic commonality among the members of this group.

Within the Arab region, inter-country commonalities can be found among urban, upper- and middle-class, educated, and working women to a degree which allows for generalizations to be made with regard to population subgroups. The same degree of commonality may be found in other types of female subgroups including, for example, those living in the misery belts which have mushroomed around Arab cities or in rural areas characterized by traditional agricultural production.

There is a noticeable paucity of research and data dealing with such subgroups at both the country and regional levels. Much of the recent research assessing the situation and status of women in this part of the world, particularly research propelled by the International Conference on Population and Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women, has relied on country averages, subregional averages, or regional averages. With the high female illiteracy rates in most Arab countries and the large disparities in infrastructure facilities and social services between rural and urban areas and between different urban areas, it seems natural to conclude that country averages, whether relating to education, health or employment, are not representative of the conditions of the female population.

To approximate reality, at least two separate subcategories of Arab females need to be identified and individually addressed, whether through gender research and statistical work or through the implementation of policies focusing on the improvement of the situation of Arab women. The two main subcategories should include (a) urban women who have access to the facilities of a relatively modern infrastructure, education, employment, and health and social services and who have some link with the global time and information revolution and (b) women who still live in conditions of substandard development and deprivation, either in the misery belts surrounding Arab cities or in the vast rural or desert areas of the region.

There has been a strong tendency in regional research on women's situation and status, when classifying Arab countries according to subregion, to rely exclusively on criteria established by Northern economists and statisticians, including indicators such as per capita income. With the increased circulation of the *Human Development Report* issued by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the 1990s, education, health, and employment indicators have been added. In 1995 and 1997, two more indices were introduced in the international report, namely the gender-related development index (GDI), which is intended to reflect the situation of women, and the human poverty index (HPI), intended to highlight relative poverty conditions around the world. The statistical indicators that have appeared in the *Human Development Report* have acquired credibility in regional social science circles and have become the new yardsticks for the analysis of what is now referred to as "human development conditions" in Arab countries. Country-specific human development reports are currently being produced in a number of Arab States including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon.

Internationally standardized categories of socio-economic indicators were originally created to capture the socio-economic realities of Northern industrialized societies. The concepts and definitions on which these statistical categories are based are continuously refined parallel to the socio-economic evolution

of these countries. Not much has been done in the Arab region to examine the appropriateness of these concepts, definitions, and categories within the regional context or to refine them through an acculturation process in order to bring them in line with this region's socio-economic realities.

As early as the 1960s, Western development economists and statisticians who took a critical view of the conventional wisdom of Northern development thinking advised caution in following this trend. In his work on Asian poverty, Gunnar Myrdal discusses the inappropriateness of applying conceptual categories devised essentially in the industrialized West to the conditions in developing countries:

“When new data are assembled, the conceptual categories used are inappropriate to the conditions existing, as for example, when the under-utilization of the labour force in South Asian countries is analysed according to Western concepts of unemployment, disguised unemployment and underemployment. The resulting mountains of figures have either no meaning or a meaning other than that imputed to them. ... The very fact that the researcher gets figures to play with tends to confirm his original, biased approach. ... The continuing collection of data under biased notions only postpones the day when reality can effectively challenge inherited preconceptions” (Chambers, 1995, p. 10).

The last three decades have shown this to be an insightful observation; for example, the realities in developing countries led to the discovery that labour statistics based on Northern definitions of “economic work” could be deceptive when related to the labour force in developing countries, especially in countries with large agricultural and informal sectors. The results are even more misleading when standard labour statistics are used to measure women's work. The “United Nations technical report on methods of measuring women's economic activity” draws attention to this problem: “The situation in most developing countries is that the concepts, definitions and questionnaires employed tend to be relevant to activities in the formal and organized sectors but are less easy to apply to the informal sectors of the economy. The informal sector has proved to be a primary source of women's employment” (Haider, 1996, p. 62).

Development economists and statisticians, especially in South-East Asia and on the Indian subcontinent, have begun to pay more attention to the definitions of work which reflect the realities of the labour markets in their countries. Empirical studies of both the agriculture sector and the informal sector, where a great deal of work performed by men and women has been statistically veiled owing to the dependence on Northern (international) definitions, are now being extensively carried out. In the Arab region, however, these efforts are still very limited. Egypt has been experimenting with acculturating its labour statistics since the 1980s, and a number of sample surveys have been conducted to correct perceptions developed through the Northern formula for determining what qualifies as economic work. Data on women's employment in Egypt in 1990, for example, indicated that women accounted for 10.6 per cent of total employment in agriculture, yet sample surveys of rural households in Upper Egypt revealed that 55 to 75 per cent of women worked in agricultural production, compared with only 34 to 41 per cent in Lower Egypt (CAPMAS, 1993). It would perhaps be worthwhile to disseminate the results of these experiments within the region in order to encourage experimentation in developing region-sensitive labour statistics.

International statistics produced for purposes of international comparison multiply regional and country distortions and tend to put economic and socio-cultural phenomena through a sort of “plastic surgery”, creating statistical profiles which remove the data even further from their historical context. More often than not, they succeed in hiding many inter-country and inter-class discrepancies over time.

International comparisons inform us, for example, that Arab States have made the fastest progress in women's education by raising women's literacy nearly threefold during the period 1970-1990 and by doubling female combined primary and secondary enrolment rates between 1970 and 1992 (UNDP, 1995). These attractive “bottom lines” have often been quoted by social scientists in the region and elsewhere to highlight improvements in the situation of Arab women in the past two decades. Another facet of reality, however, is that female illiteracy rates in 1990 ranged from 10 to 86 per cent in the 20 Arab countries for which statistics were available (see table 1), and that in eight of these countries the majority of women were illiterate. Female illiteracy rates in Egypt—which has the largest population and the longest history of

women's education in the Arab region—are still higher than illiteracy rates in some of the low-income African countries including Malawi, Uganda and Zaire (UNDP, 1996).

Another problem is that some data collectors and data consumers in the region, whether from social science circles or the media, tend to quote data without examining the statistical definitions on which they are based. An example of this relates to the increasing use of the human development index (HDI) as a tool for ranking the human development performance of different countries within the region. Very often, the HDI is cited without any awareness on the part of the quoting parties that the changes in rankings over successive years for any specific country are not always the result of better or worse human development performance by that country; they may also be due to changes in statistical definitions or in the weight assigned to different components of the human development index (Imam, 1995).

A review of the current indigenous regional literature dealing with Arab women, especially the literature propelled by the International Conference on Population and Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women, reveals a preponderance of international criteria developed for the purpose of making international comparisons. Most of the literature produced to describe the situation of women at the country or regional level includes the same package of indicators used in international reports, focusing almost exclusively on health, literacy, education, and employment conditions, and sometimes adding indicators on women decision makers, women members of parliament, and/or some analysis of Arab constitutions and laws which shape and influence the status of women in Arab countries.

There is a noticeable need in the region to disentangle social science research in general and research on women in particular from Northern conventional wisdom on development. Wide acknowledgement of the “gap in gender-disaggregated indicators”, much focused upon in the current indigenous works on women's issues, reflects an implicit assumption that there exists a perfect statistical framework which provides a model point of reference for regional statistics, and that regional statistical reporting must aspire to fill the gaps defined in relation to that “perfect framework”. The questions of what the original functions of this framework were and whether the statistical data it produces constitute the most efficient tool for capturing the complex and diverse realities of the region's women are seldom posed. Given that more than 50 per cent of all women in almost half of the region's countries are illiterate, and that there are highly inadequate databases on women's work in agriculture and the informal sector and on the distribution of social services (including access to safe water, sewage facilities and electricity) among families in different income groups and different country locations, the high priority the region's statistical community attaches to the collection of data on women in decision-making positions or women parliamentarians seems insupportable.

Given the limited human and financial resources allocated for research and data relating to women, an important question facing the researcher is whether or not these resources are best used to fill the data gaps and thereby qualify regional statistics to appear in international comparisons. In other words, should the gaps in current gender-disaggregated statistics be addressed through the production of additional data which would allow the region's statistical community to fulfil the expectations of the international statistical community, or should the region's statistical community be more concerned with researching and observing indigenous problems specific to women within the region, regardless of whether the data produced are compatible with or contribute to the standardized international statistical “packages” typically used to characterize the situation of women?

The female population of the region is composed of different categories of girls and women. These categories need to be identified and statistically defined in population censuses, national surveys and empirical research by Arab social scientists and statisticians, not only to make possible the compilation of packages of data which capture (with more acculturated and therefore more precise tools) the heterogeneous realities and problems associated with these categories, but also to allow for the identification of more specific policy measures to address their needs.

The poverty of statistics on the agricultural sectors of the region, including gender-disaggregated socio-economic indicators on rural areas, is one problem which should be addressed. The development strategies of Arab countries with large agricultural sectors (including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, the



Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia) have thus far focused less on the development of agriculture than on the development of the industry and infrastructure sectors and have been strongly biased towards urban areas. The production of statistics in these countries runs parallel to development strategies, so agricultural and rural communities have received less statistical coverage than other areas. As a result, the women in rural and desert (*badia*) areas are somewhat neglected in the collection of national statistics in the region. Of the twelve Arab countries where illiteracy figures by age group and gender are available, only three (Egypt, Iraq and Yemen) provide urban-rural disaggregated data (ESCWA, 1997a).

The role of agriculture and the value added by the rural working population, of which women sometimes constitute more than half, need to be reconsidered and redefined. Development thinking recognizes that, "far from being a passive supporting sector in the process of economic development, the agricultural sector in particular and the rural economy in general need to be viewed as the dynamic and leading element in any overall strategy" (Todaro, 1982, p. 91). Efforts to affirm the essential role agriculture plays in sustainable development and the importance of food security to a country's strategic security should include the expansion and diversification of country-specific statistics on the human development conditions of rural populations, including gender-disaggregated statistics on illiteracy, education and health and on the availability of financial and technical resources for rural residents.

The current approach to studying poverty and its gender dimension represents another example of how external priorities are effectively widening the gaps in information on the women of the region. If poverty alleviation policies and mechanisms are to effectively address the feminization of poverty, they need to identify the different categories of poor women across the region according to country-specific criteria. Any researcher who has visited poor urban or rural areas in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan and Yemen can readily attest to the fact that the poverty profiles of the "poor" women in these countries are dissimilar and that the feminization of poverty has evolved differently in each of them. The realities of poverty in these countries are even less similar to those in India, Pakistan, or Sub-Saharan Africa. Poverty may be a global phenomenon, but its roots lie in country-specific economic histories, and recipes for addressing the problem need to be localized if they are to be effective. Despite all these easily observable facts, the region's social science community is presently busy not with attempts to identify country-specific features and define indices which capture poverty features but rather with efforts to produce literature on poverty in line with international comparisons.

The absence of the gender dimension in the large body of literature produced in the region since the late 1970s on rural-urban migration and labour migration to oil-exporting countries provides yet another example of the failure to examine the effects of the region's recent socio-economic history on its women. These two phenomena have had a deep impact on both the traditional role of women and the traditional family structure. The multiple roles of the extended family, characteristic of Arab societies for centuries, have been disrupted by these developments, and households headed by women have become an increasingly visible demographic phenomenon in Arab cities and rural areas. More than two decades have passed since the oil boom led to a large male exodus to the Gulf States, yet most censuses and national surveys in the region still define households and families in terms of marital units in which both partners are present and in which women are economically dependent on the male head of the family (United Nations, 1984).

Available data in the region on female-headed households vary considerably. Some estimates indicate that they account for as many as 30 per cent of rural households in Egypt, 10 per cent in both Jordan and Lebanon, 6 per cent in Iraq, and 5 per cent in Yemen (Jazairy and others, 1992). However, these figures may be on the low side, particularly for Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen, where lengthy wars led to an increase in female-headed households. Furthermore, research recently carried out in the region suggests that migration has had a devastating effect on this segment of the Arab female population. A study of Egyptian women whose husbands had migrated indicated that 22 per cent of them were not receiving money from their husbands at the time they were surveyed (CAPMAS, 1993).

It is not only the concepts and categorical definitions that are being adopted with little critical examination of their appropriateness *vis-à-vis* the realities of this part of the world; the trend sometimes extends as well to the acceptance of Northern explanations of regional socio-economic phenomena. For example, Northern research often reflects the explicit assumption that culture and religion in this region are

the most significant factors determining women's situation and status. A United Nations survey on women's employment states that "the level of women's work is consistently low in countries with a predominantly Moslem population, such as Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, and the Syrian Arab Republic, where cultural restrictions that discourage women from doing most types of work are common" (Blumberg, 1989, p. 91). Such generalizations are not limited exclusively to research produced outside the region; they also appear in indigenous works on women's issues. For example, Arab researchers often repeat the generalization that the concentration of females in the tertiary sector in the Arab region is to a great extent the product of cultural norms; "the increasing rates of women's participation in the tertiary sector is largely attributed to the general development of female educational status, together with an overriding cultural preference for female employment in the services sector" (ESCWA and CAWTAR, 1997, p. 4). Yet the concentration of female labour in the tertiary sector is a phenomenon seen in many regions of the world, since the public sector provides women with jobs and benefits that the private sector does not offer (Moghadam, 1995).

These types of explanations have been accepted, with little attempt made to explore whether other explanations of a "non-cultural" nature may also exist. The impact of development strategies on women's employment patterns, the correlation between the region's narrow industrial base and its dependence on oil income, and the limited sectoral options for women's employment owing to these factors are sometimes mentioned but are seldom explored as possible explanations for the low female participation rates or the concentration of female employment in agriculture and the tertiary sector.

It seems rather strange that efforts to explore the influence of non-cultural factors on cultural factors and the impact of the former on women's situation in Arab countries are difficult to find in the Arab social science library. Much has been written about non-cultural factors, but there has been a general failure to consider how they might have effected major changes at the most fundamental socio-cultural level. For example, a large number of researchers have identified 1967, when Egypt, Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic lost sizeable portions of their national territories to Israel during the Six Day War, as the year that witnessed the revival of Islamic fundamentalism in the region. The Islamic revolution in Iran, a neighbouring country which developed strong links with a number of political factions in the Arab region, has been identified as the other major influence behind this revival (Ahmed, 1993). Together with the Gulf war, yet another non-cultural event which had its roots in the geopolitics of the region, these political events started a process whereby the modernization projects the region had experimented with since the end of colonial rule—projects which included components aimed at improving the situation and status of women—were essentially questioned.

In sum, despite the fact that valuable efforts have been made to provide a deeper understanding of developments in the situation of women within the context of political and socio-economic developments,\* the gap is still huge in both quantitative and qualitative research in areas addressing the impact of both cultural and non-cultural factors on women's situation. The paucity of statistics, which constitute an essential input into such research, needs to be remedied through the development of country-specific and regional agendas for data collection which address those gaps identified by regional social scientists as "dark areas" in the body of knowledge on the situation of women. Such agendas may allow for the production of the data needed for international comparisons, but their priority should be to approximate the specific profiles and features of the women of this region.

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\* Including works by Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, Mirvet Hatem and Suhair Mursi.

## II. DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN: A HISTORICAL BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF THE SITUATION OF WOMEN

Within the Arab region the discourse on the situation of women started as early as the nineteenth century, when State-sponsored women's education became part of Mohammed Ali's and Khedive Ismail's efforts to modernize Egypt. A number of Egyptian male intellectuals, both religious and secular, began publishing literature recommending educational policies that included women. In 1873, the Egyptian Government established the first State-sponsored primary school for girls in Cairo, and in 1874, a secondary school was added. By 1875, girl students represented nearly 17 per cent of all students enrolled in State-managed primary schools in Egypt (Ahmed, 1993).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the writings of a number of educated women, mainly members of the upper and middle classes, began to appear in newspapers and journals in Egypt. Most of the articles published during this period dealt with the role of education in improving the situation of women.

The early decades of the twentieth century saw a rising demand for female education in the rest of the Arab region. Primary and secondary schools and teacher training institutes for girls were established in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia. By the 1940s, Arab women from the upper and middle classes in both urban and rural areas were enrolling in women's colleges, teacher training colleges, and universities both within the region and abroad.

The 1950s, 1960s and 1970s marked a period of fundamental socio-economic development in the region which had a direct impact on a large segment of the Arab female population. Improving the status of women became part of the political agenda and, to a lesser extent, of national development strategies in most of the newly independent States in the region. The new constitutions and national charters proclaimed men and women to be equal partners and citizens in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen. The right to vote was granted to women in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia (Toubia, 1994), and women ministers were appointed in Egypt, Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. In Arab North Africa, Tunisia took the lead in formulating a series of progressive laws and policies with the objective of improving the situation of Tunisian women.

Development policies tended to run parallel to political mandates. The new Governments embarked on development projects which made the expansion of the educational system for both sexes a top priority. The trend extended into the Gulf region in the 1960s and gained momentum during the 1970s, especially during the oil boom. Most Arab Governments provided funds for scholarships which allowed both men and women to pursue a higher education outside the region. Development strategies in the 1960s and 1970s and the respective development plans and policies adopted in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia identified the need to integrate women into the labour market through the implementation of employment policies which encouraged women's participation. Female employment outside the agricultural sector began to increase; the most significant growth occurred in the health and education sectors and to a lesser extent in the expanding manufacturing sectors, especially in the textile and new light industries in Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia.

This period also witnessed an expansion in the membership and activities of women's organizations working with women at the grass-roots level. In Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia, women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs), some of them "adopted" by the State, played an active role in sensitizing women's groups, decision makers and the media to issues such as the legal, educational and economic rights women were guaranteed under the new constitutions. Women's literacy campaigns, vocational training in traditional women's crafts, and social services were also provided by these NGOs.

The nature of political and socio-economic developments in the region during this period induced social science departments at Arab universities to take a greater interest in research dealing with different aspects of women's situation, which led to the expansion of the knowledge base with regard to Arab women. Parallel to this development, an active translation movement flourished in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and the

Syrian Arab Republic, allowing for the wide dissemination of all types of scientific and literary materials, including new literature on women's issues, among diverse groups of Arab citizens.

With the expansion of State-sponsored formal education for women and the growth in remunerated female employment, the voices of Arab women activists and writers became stronger. By the end of the 1970s, there were generations of Arab women from both urban and rural backgrounds with different levels of education in almost every field of the humanities and sciences. Education provided many of them with opportunities for paid employment and social mobility and gave them the opportunity to play an active role in public life. Literary writings produced by Arab female intellectuals in Egypt, Iraq, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip played an important part in the active intellectual movements which characterized the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s in the region. During the same period, the momentum of the political activities carried out by political parties in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia increased, providing fertile ground for the political coaching of women from the middle and lower-middle classes. Women joined political parties and began to participate in political activities; for the first time in many centuries, women were involved in shaping the "mainstream culture and its discourses" (Ahmed, 1993, p. 214).

The oil boom, which began in the mid-1970s, affected the social and economic structure of the region. Oil-producing countries embarked on massive investment programmes in the areas of infrastructure, petrochemical production, and educational and social services. The demand for every kind of labour, especially in the Gulf subregion, and the extreme wage differentials between the oil-producing and non-oil-producing countries led to a continuous flow of male labour into the latter. This trend affected the structure of the labour force, not only within the Gulf countries but throughout the region. The redistribution of some of the boom-related income and wealth through workers' remittances from oil-producing countries increased the dependence of the whole region on oil production and oil income.

The collapse of oil prices ended the era of economic optimism in the region and led to a huge decline in State revenues. Some of the middle- and low-income Arab countries began to experience negative rates of growth and high levels of external indebtedness. Austerity measures were introduced in almost all of the countries of the region, and different types of structural adjustment packages and privatization measures were implemented. Increased debt servicing obligations, the diminishing role of the State in the provision of public services and subsidies, the marginalization of distribution considerations, and the prevalence of efficiency considerations central to the structural adjustment programme packages led to increased unemployment, poverty and deprivation among large segments of the Arab population.

Parallel to these developments, the region suffered from civil wars in Lebanon, Sudan and Yemen, the *intifadah* in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the first and second Gulf wars in Iraq. These events, especially the 1991 Gulf war, had a ripple effect which is still being felt across the region today.

These developments served to delegitimize much of the region's modernization and development discourse and many of its development strategies, of which the full integration of women in social, economic and public life formed a part. The rise of fundamentalism, especially among the youth, and the conservative stand on women both within the Muslim communities and among other religious and ethnic groups living in the region constituted one of the more significant outcomes of these developments.

During the 1980s women's issues were pushed to the periphery in both development discourse and policies in the region. Although there was a general improvement in women's health and a considerable expansion in female access to education, a number of factors were at play which adversely affected their situation, summarized as follows:

(a) The poor segment of the population in the Arab region increased from 60 million in 1985 to 73 million in 1990 (World Bank, 1993), and there is qualitative evidence that poverty has since worsened owing to the effects of the 1991 Gulf war. Though women living in poverty or absolute poverty are still "invisible" in the current regional statistics, the economic, social and psychological burdens on mothers, housewives, and women workers within this segment have been reported in literary works and sometimes in films and documentaries produced in the region;

(b) Migration to oil-exporting countries effected a profound change in the structure of the families left behind; temporary and permanent female-headed households became increasingly visible in the rural and urban areas of the labour-exporting countries during the oil boom. The same phenomenon began to appear in countries and areas engaged in hostilities (Iraq during the first Gulf war; Lebanon, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen during their respective civil wars; and the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the *intifadah*). Evidence also suggests that the economic crisis and the restructuring of the economy have created a different kind of female-headed household—one where both spouses are present but where women have become the principal breadwinners. Increased unemployment among the male members of the family in the formal sector has led many women to seek domestic employment or work in home-based production or in small private concerns in the informal sector;

(c) Structural adjustment policies, the diminishing role of the State as the chief employer within the economy, and the reduced demand for labour in different Arab labour markets led to increased unemployment in many middle-income and lower-income countries. It reached a point where large numbers of qualified graduates were finding it difficult to secure employment; women from different segments of the middle class who had received a university education found that they had less access to employment opportunities than the women of their mothers' generation had had. The social value of women's education, which had been high in the 1950s and 1960s, began to weaken, especially among middle- and lower-middle-income groups;

(d) The 1991 Gulf war, which led to the return of thousands of Arab workers in the space of a few weeks, and the limited absorptive capacity of their home labour markets to provide them with remunerated employment pushed unemployment to levels unprecedented in the region. Working women had to compete with returnees, and the new female entrants into the labour market were finding it extremely difficult to obtain employment;

(e) The failure of most modernization and development projects in the region to create sustainable development, together with the expanding incidence of poverty and the widening gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in the region, led to the depopularization (and to a great extent the delegitimization) of the key components of modernization projects. Enhancing the status and situation of women was one of those components hardest hit by these emerging trends.

Arab women have been the guardians of family well-being and the managers of family budgets in a region with high dependency and unemployment rates; they have carried a considerable share of the economic and social burdens of the "lost decade" of the 1980s and the "hard decade" of the 1990s, dealing with the hardships imposed by civil or regional wars, widowhood, family dislocation, the unemployment of self or spouse, shortages of food and medical care, impoverishment, and the need to accept child labour. In each segment of society, Arab women have created survival strategies which allow them to cope the best they can with the resources they have available.

Country-specific subregional and regional indigenous research assessing and analysing the nature and magnitude of the impact of the last four decades on women's roles and their overall situation has yet to be carried out. Efforts must be made to understand the existing state of affairs relevant to the different subcategories of Arab women today and what the future may hold for them if specific policy interventions addressing their diverse needs do not take place. Basic statistical data on health and education are not anywhere near sufficient to allow for a thorough understanding of the complexities of women's situation in the region, as they reflect only a very limited part of reality; steps must be taken to produce a more complete picture which reflects the real conditions existing among distinct groups of women in the region.

## **PART TWO**



### III. REVIEW OF SELECTED INDICES ON THE SITUATION OF WOMEN

#### A. INDIGENOUS INDICATORS

Women's issues returned to the political and social agendas of Arab States during the preparatory phases of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women, when the production of literature on the situation and status of women increased. During this period, researchers typically relied on national averages to assess different types of gender gaps at the country level, or used these national averages for regional or international comparison purposes.

A package of indicators similar to that adopted for international comparisons was used in much of this literature, whether country-specific or regional. The primary aim was to collect education, health and employment data; the standard package generally used to assess the situation of women in the region consisted of population and per capita indicators, literacy and enrolment indicators, a number of health indicators, and female participation rates in the formal sectors of the economy.

An indigenous index assessing women's status was developed for and applied in selected ESCWA member countries (Jazairy and others, 1992) and included the following indicators:

- (a) Maternal mortality rates;
- (b) Female adult literacy rates;
- (c) Female primary and secondary school enrolment rates;
- (d) Rates of female labour participation in the labour force;
- (e) Male-female wage ratios.

This index attempted to create a balance between social and economic indicators, combining data on health and education with data on rates of participation in the economy and male-female wage differentials. However, it was characterized by weaknesses similar to those found in the *Human Development Report* indices. It should be noted that the unavailability of data on wages and salaries in the region's private and informal sectors rendered the accurate computation of its component indicator on male-female wage differentials highly difficult.

One possible reason behind the greater dependence on social indicators (data on health and education) than on economic indicators (generally limited to the measurement of rates of female participation in the labour force) to assess the situation of women relates to the scarcity of other basic social and economic statistics, including labour statistics on employment in the informal sector, wages and salaries, and the distribution of income and wealth, and statistics on the infrastructure facilities and social services provided for rural and urban areas and for different income groups. Another possible reason for such widespread reliance on this limited basket of indicators relates to the paucity of literature which explores the gender dimension of socio-economic developments within the region.

It is also possible that this trend derives from the perception, prevalent in much of the development literature in the region, that women's issues constitute a subcategory of social issues. An indicator of this perception is provided in development research which deals with women as it deals with the elderly, the dislocated and the disabled—as a “special social group”. The fact that women represent half the population and that their needs and problems might be different from the other half of the population owing to their productive and reproductive roles is seldom reflected in this type of literature. A recent study by ESCWA on poverty in Western Asia (E/ESCWA/SD/1995/8/Rev.1) devotes only 1 per cent, or one page, of its text to women's poverty and places its discourse on poor women after its examination of the elderly poor (ESCWA, 1996).

This trend reflects a pure women-in-development approach, which has been long recognized as harbouring the potential for ghettoizing women's issues. A gap in the region's development thinking has been created owing to the lack of research in which the gender and development perspective has been applied.



Gender-sensitive statistics will not improve the analysis of women's issues unless there is a parallel dissemination of gender concepts and analytical tools which allow these data to be read through a "gender lens", and unless all of these components are combined to form the basis of gender-sensitive research and policy recommendations.

## B. INTERNATIONAL INDICATORS

At the international level, what are now the most recognized indices for measuring women's situation and status were originally introduced in the UNDP *Human Development Report 1995*. The gender-related development index and a gender empowerment measure (GEM) were constructed to add gender dimensions to the "human development conditions" defined and measured in the *Human Development Report*.

The GDI uses the same variables as the HDI. "The difference is that the GDI adjusts the average achievement of each country in life expectancy, educational attainment and income in accordance with the disparity in achievement between women and men" (UNDP, 1997, p. 123). The GEM is a tool for measuring what the *Report* describes as "the relative empowerment of women and men in political and economic spheres of activity" (UNDP, 1997, p. 124). The latter index is based on a set of selected variables. The first two variables are chosen to reflect the differential economic participation and decision-making power of men and women and are represented by the differential percentage shares of each in administrative, managerial, professional and technical positions, defined in terms of broad occupational categories. The third variable relates to the male-female differential shares of parliamentary seats. An income variable is also added to reflect power over economic resources.

The central assumption on which both the GDI and the GEM were constructed needs to be explored within the region's cultural, political, institutional and socio-economic context. First, the concept of empowerment recently introduced in Northern development literature is value-laden and thus not neutral. Second, it does not necessarily have similar "content" or connotations for other cultures and societies. In fact, prior to the determination of what empowerment could mean to men and women living in this part of the world, it needs to be established whether this is a priority issue on the region's development agenda. In his excellent essay on poverty and livelihood, R. Chambers, critical of the recent trend towards the globalization of human wisdom under the umbrella of Northern wisdom, describes this kind of *problématique*. "There remain deep dilemmas over 'our' knowledge and values and 'theirs' ", he observes. "Our knowledge has an advantage with the physical universe and with whatever is microscopic, macroscopic, large-scale or distant from where poor people live. With these our linked communications, instruments and science empower us. But their knowledge has an advantage with the local, the social, whatever is continuously observed and experienced, and whatever is close to them and touches their lives and livelihoods; and they are the only experts on their life experiences and priorities" (Chambers, 1995, p. 16).

An in-depth discussion of empowerment as a human development concept which applies to both the male and female segments of the population, or of the criteria to be selected for measuring it in different cultural and political contexts, is beyond the scope of this study. However, it seems pertinent here to question the "universality" of the concept, which is what the *Human Development Report* implicitly assumes when it ranks members of the international community according to a "yardstick" which may not apply to all cultures, value systems, and political and institutional environments existing outside the western hemisphere. The empowerment of individuals in a country with a history of democratic representation, an independent judiciary system, strong pressure groups in civil society and the media, and a highly developed science and technology infrastructure has a different definition and requires different processes from the empowerment of individuals in another country which lacks part, or all, of this "social capital" (UNDP, 1994).

A child in the North is born with more power than a child in the South. "His or her share of the capital accumulated by earlier generations is worth a fortune. The higher wages and salaries in the North, compared with those of the South, largely reflect differences in endowments of the country rather than of the individual. The fact that, for example, a nurse in Germany earns thirty times more than one in Bangladesh

or Zambia has little or nothing to do with individual differences in training or skills; the high salaries in the North simply reflect the higher dividend on the capital bestowed from the past” (de Vylder, 1996, p. 13).

International comparisons which attempt to measure the realities of empowerment by the same yardstick ignore the huge inherent differences in the social, institutional, physical, scientific and informational forms of capital that have evolved in different groups of countries. To borrow statistical terminology, this leads to unevenness in the “base year” values for different countries, which makes comparisons between them statistically illegitimate.

Even if such problems are put aside and consensus is reached that these indices are acceptable in their present forms as useful tools of analysis, a great many technical problems have to be solved before they can be used for social analysis or policy formulation in this region. For example, the computation of the GEM requires data on differential non-agricultural wages for men and women (UNDP, 1995). Current practices in the area of regional statistics do not include the collection of these kinds of labour statistics for the formal sectors. As for the informal sector, where large segments of the region’s workforce—especially women—perform their economic activities, the lack of such data is even more acute.

Conceptual problems of a similar nature apply to the measurement of individuals’ status. Similar to the term “empowerment”, the term “status” is value-ridden and has different connotations and meanings in different cultures. However, unlike empowerment, status can be made more specific. The economic, constitutional and legal status of men and women can be assessed according to well-defined criteria. Within this context, defining the “power status” of half of the population on the basis of a few statistical indicators relating to shares of decision-making positions and parliamentary seats seems to be an exercise in reductionism.

Freedom from vulnerability and humiliation of any kind, whether physical, psychological, economic or political, may be the most universal component of status. However, “humiliation and self-respect do not lend themselves to measurement, are in practice not measured, and so, for normal professionals, barely exist and rarely count” (Chambers, 1995, p. 16).

The above discussion does not imply that there is no need for tools of analysis which measure the degree of control males and females, families and other social groups exercise over the political and socio-economic aspects of their lives. In fact, these observations emphasize the need to construct and apply such tools in the region.

Until Arab social scientists and statisticians develop region-specific criteria which describe what empowerment entails for males and females in this area through a process of observation, identification, and conceptualization, they must rely almost exclusively on the present *Human Development Report* indices, which will provide them—and policy makers in the region—with what may be a very biased and sometimes distorted representation of the situation of women in the countries of the region.

## IV. STATISTICAL PROFILES OF WOMEN IN THE AREAS OF LITERACY, EDUCATION, HEALTH AND EMPLOYMENT

### A. ILLITERACY PROFILE

The illiteracy data in table 1 show that 57.2 per cent of the female population and 33.4 per cent of the male population in the Arab region were illiterate in 1990, revealing a gender gap in illiteracy of 23.8 per cent. The indicators for both segments of the population are alarming, but the figures for females are particularly distressing. Urban-rural data on illiteracy are available for only three Arab countries and reflect huge disparities in illiteracy between rural and urban women. According to 1986 illiteracy data for Egypt, 70.6 and 83.6 per cent of rural females in the age groups 20-24 and 25-34 respectively were illiterate. Data for Yemen indicate that 84.8 and 91.3 per cent of rural females in the same age groups were illiterate in 1994 (ESCWA, 1997b).

Country disparities in illiteracy seem to correlate with the size of the population, per capita income and the size of the agricultural sector. In high-income petroleum-exporting countries with small populations, female illiteracy rates are low and the gender gap is less than 10 per cent. Among the medium-upper-income countries, female illiteracy has been highest in Oman (64 per cent in 1989) and Saudi Arabia (51.1 per cent in 1990). Bahrain has achieved both the lowest female illiteracy rate (10.5 per cent in 1991) and the smallest gender gap (7.9 per cent) in the region.

Among the medium-low-income countries, which are characterized by relatively large populations and large agricultural sectors, Algeria, Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia have had illiteracy rates ranging from 30.6 per cent (Syrian Arab Republic, 1993) to 68 per cent (Morocco, 1991). Female illiteracy rates have been highest in the low-income countries with large populations and large agricultural sectors, ranging from 59.2 per cent in Egypt to 83.3 per cent in Sudan (1990 figures).

### B. EDUCATION PROFILE

#### 1. *Data and indices*

The level of data disaggregation for formal education at all levels is more informative. However, available gender-disaggregated data on enrolment rates reflect only part of the reality of female education. Gender-disaggregated drop-out rates must be made available at all levels to refine female education profiles so that they might better approximate the situation of Arab girls within the educational systems of the region.

Another indicator of girls' status within the educational sector is the proportion of male and female teachers at different educational levels. This indicator is especially significant in countries where social norms do not allow male teachers to teach female students. At the tertiary level gender-disaggregated data are needed on enrolment by field of study.

In 1993, a female education index (FEI) was developed by Population Action International for 116 countries (Toubia, 1995). The components of the index include the following:

- (a) Average number of years of schooling for adult women;
- (b) Primary female-male enrolment ratio;
- (c) Secondary female-male enrolment ratio;
- (d) Gross primary enrolment rate for girls;
- (e) Gross secondary enrolment rate for girls.

This index is more representative than the UNDP educational attainment index, which enters into the measurement of both the HDI and the GDI. The UNDP educational attainment index uses as its indicators (a) gender-disaggregated adult literacy rates and (b) gender-disaggregated enrolment rates at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Literacy and enrolment rates alone do not reflect the educational

attainments of a country's population. Similar to the UNDP index, the FEI uses enrolment rates, but it differs in its attempt to measure the historically cumulative effects of education by considering the average number of years of schooling for all adult women in the country.

For country human development reports or regional reports on human development, the FEI could be examined, discussed, and considered as a possible refinement of, or replacement for, the UNDP educational attainment index.

TABLE 1. ILLITERACY INDICATORS  
(Percentage)

Country/area	ILLITERACY RATES BY SEX						
	Males		Females		Illiteracy gap between males and females	Illiteracy among those aged 15-24 (1990)	
	1985	1990	1985	1990		1990	Males
<b>High-income</b>							
United Arab Emirates	26	20.5	27.5	22.7	2.2	15.2	9.4
Kuwait	13.2	6.7 (1993)	30.6	21 (1993)	14.3	1 (1993)	2.2 (1993)
Qatar	15.4 (1986)	..	29.1 (1986)	..	..	5.9 (1987)	8.6 (1987)
<b>Medium-upper-income</b>							
Saudi Arabia	31	26.9	57	51.9	22	a/	a/
Bahrain	9.1 (1981)	2.6 (1991)	29.8 (1981)	10.5 (1991)	7.9	1 (1991)	3.2 (1991)
Oman	..	31.5 (1989)	..	64 (1989)	32.5	5.8 (1989)	33.4 (1989)
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	19	24.6	50	49.6	25	..	..
<b>Medium-low-income</b>							
Algeria	37	30.2	65	54.5	24.3	b/	b/
Tunisia	34.6 (1984)	25.8	58.1 (1984)	43.7	17.9	c/	c/
Djibouti	82	..	87	..	..	..	..
Syrian Arab Republic	22.1 (1981)	11.2 (1993)	55.2 (1981)	30.6 (1993)	19.4	4 (1993)	12.4 (1993)
Jordan	13 (1987)	10.7 (1991)	33.4 (1987)	25 (1991)	14.3	1.9 (1991)	3.5 (1991)
Morocco	15 (1982)	40 (1991)	78 (1982)	68 (1991)	28	..	..
Lebanon	12 (1987)	12.2	23 (1987)	26.9	14.7	3 (1987)	5.7 (1987)
West Bank and Gaza Strip	11.5	12.7 (1992)	39.2	31.3 (1992)	18.6	..	..
<b>Low-income</b>							
Egypt	37.9 (1986)	35.5	62 (1986)	59.2	23.7	28 (1986)	45.6 (1986)
Iraq	15.3 <sup>d/</sup>	13 (1987)	32.6 <sup>d/</sup>	25.2 (1987)	12.2	11.5 (1987)	19.6 (1987)
Yemen	59.3 (1986)	32 (1991)	94.3 (1986)	77.8 (1991)	45.8	38.3 (1986)	65 (1992)

TABLE 1. (continued)

Country/area	ILLITERACY RATES BY SEX						
	Males		Females		Illiteracy gap between males and females	Illiteracy among those aged 15-24 (1990)	
	1985	1990	1985	1990		1990	Males
<b>Low-income (continued)</b>							
Mauritania	60	15.3	84	70	54.7	..	..
Sudan	61	57.3	90	83.3	26	..	..
Somalia	73	63.9	91	86	22.1	..	..
Comoros	44	..	73.7	77.3	..	e/	e/
Total	39.9	33.4	65.3	57.2	23.8	..	..

Source: ESCWA, "Studies on Arab women in development", Series No. 24 (E/ESCWA/SD-WOM/1996/2). In Arabic only: استعراض وتقييم ما تم تنفيذه للنهوض بالمرأة العربية في ضوء أهداف استراتيجيات نيروبي التطوعية، سلسلة دراسات عن المرأة العربية في التنمية.

- a/ The average was 43.8 per cent for males and 72.9 per cent for females in 1974.  
b/ The average for males and females was 40 per cent during the period 1980-1989.  
c/ The average for males and females was 37 per cent during the period 1980-1989.  
d/ Estimates.  
e/ The average for males and females was 45 per cent during the period 1980-1989.

## 2. Women's education

The growing access of Arab females to education since the beginning of this century has been the major factor responsible for the transformation in the roles they play and in their overall situation. The last hundred years have produced generations of Arab women scholars, writers and professionals in almost every field of knowledge. For the first time in the history of the region, women have had the opportunity to use their capabilities to achieve economic independence and social and job mobility and to shape the region's mainstream culture and its discourses.

Government policies aimed at expanding State-sponsored education (especially higher education) in most countries of the region were instrumental in this transformation process. However, research dealing with the various types of educational policies that have been implemented by these countries at different phases of their development and with the differential impact they have had on generations of women have been limited.

Table 2 indicates that for almost all of the countries in the region female primary enrolment rates increased during the period 1980-1990; exceptions included Iraq (where the rate dropped from 94 per cent, the highest in the region, to 89.9 per cent), Jordan (where female enrolment dropped from 89.8 to 81.7 per cent), and Morocco (which experienced a slight decline from 47 to 46 per cent). Female secondary enrolment rates are unavailable for most countries in the region during this period. The proportion of females in total university enrolment rose in almost every country within this group between 1980 and 1990; the United Arab Emirates fared the best, with a 23.6 per cent increase. Between 1985 and 1990, however, Bahrain and Iraq experienced sharp declines of 21 and 23.3 per cent respectively in the female share at universities.

One interesting development in the region's educational sectors during the period 1980-1990 was the noticeable increase in the percentage of female teachers at all levels (see table 3). Of the eight Arab countries providing data for both 1980 and 1990, six showed an increase in university female teachers as a proportion of total teaching staff.

TABLE 2. ENROLMENT INDICATORS

Country/area	Primary school enrolment (percentage)				Secondary school enrolment (percentage)			Females as a percentage of all university students			Females as a percentage of all students at vocational institutes					
	Males		Females		Females			1980			1985			1990		
	1980	1990	1980	1990	1985	1990	1990	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990
<b>High-income</b>																
United Arab Emirates	73	98.8	74	94.4	9 (1986)	..	..	50	55	73.6	..	..	..	..	..	..
Kuwait	88	..	80	..	7.7	..	..	58	55	70 (1991)	15 (1975)	8	27 (1991)			
Qatar	82	94	85	91	67.1	62	74.2	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
<b>Medium-upper-income</b>																
Saudi Arabia	62	68	37	56	..	..	..	29	39	46 (1991)	6 (1975)	..	17			
Bahrain	84	91	76	92	..	..	..	82	75	54	35	35	26			
Oman	61	84	36	79	..	..	..	..	..	53	..	9	8			
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	25	..	46 (1991)	25	21	64 (1991)			
<b>Medium-low-income</b>																
Algeria	91	89.4	71	73.4	..	..	..	26	31	42 (1993)	21	30	38.9			
Tunisia	77	91.3 (1992)	57	83.1 (1992)	..	..	..	30	36	41 (1991)	30	36	37			
Djibouti	..	43	..	31	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	54	66 (1992)			
Syrian Arab Republic	99	100	80	94	..	..	..	26.1	33.4	39.1 (1993)	30	24	42 (1993)			
Jordan	90	82 <sup>B</sup>	89.8	81.7 (1991)	..	..	..	41	35.9	49.5 (1991)	30	39	35.2 (1992)			
Morocco	75	66	47	46 (1993)	..	..	..	25	33	37 (1991)	23	51	37 (1991)			

TABLE 2. (continued)

Country/area	Primary school enrolment (percentage)			Secondary school enrolment (percentage)		Females as a percentage of all university students			Females as a percentage of all students at vocational institutes					
	Males		Females	Females		1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990
	1980	1990	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990
<b>Medium-low-income (continued)</b>														
Lebanon	116 <sup>b</sup>	116 <sup>b</sup>	109 <sup>b</sup>	110 <sup>b</sup>	37.2 (1992)	47.3 (1981)	..	50.2 (1992)	67 (1981)	40 (1986)	41.7 (1992)	..	..	..
West Bank and Gaza Strip	..	..	..	..	47.7 <sup>c</sup>	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
<b>Low-income Countries</b>														
Egypt	77.8	100	57.5	86.2	31.8	32	30	35	39.2	41.7	43.3	..	..	..
Iraq	100	100	94	89.9	39	32	65.5	42.2	29	21.3	29.6	..	..	..
Yemen	..	85 (1991)	..	32 (1991)	43	11	5.4	14 (1991)	7	7	9	..	..	..
Mauritania	..	63.4 (1993)	32 (1982)	54.5 (1993)	..	..	..	14 (1991)	7	..	14 (1991)	..	..	..
Sudan	59 <sup>b</sup>	56 <sup>b</sup>	41 <sup>b</sup>	43 <sup>b</sup>	..	27	39	41 (1989)	21	24	22	..	..	..
Somalia	18	..	10 <sup>d</sup> (1981)	..	..	10	20 (1986)	..	20	23	26 <sup>e</sup>	..	..	..

Source: ESCWA. "Studies on Arab women in development". Series No. 24 (EESCWA/SD-WOM/1996/2). In Arabic only: أهداف استعراض وتقييم ما تم تنفيذه للنهوض بالمرأة العربية في ضوء أهداف استراتيجيات بيروني التعليمية، سلسلة دراسات عن المرأة العربية في التنمية.

a Jordan added level 10 to the primary education cycle.

b Percentage of total enrolment

c West Bank only.

d The Somalia national educational report has a different figure (36 percent).

e Estimate

TABLE 3. EDUCATION INDICATORS  
(Percentage)

Country/area	Female primary school teachers		Female secondary school teachers		Female university instructors	
	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990
<b>High-income</b>						
United Arab Emirates	54.4	55	47.5	56.2	5	9
Kuwait	56	64	50	52	10	(1991)
Qatar	57	72	50	56	31	25
<b>Medium-upper-income</b>						
Saudi Arabia	39	48	34	41	20	27
Bahrain	48	54	65	54	26	20
Oman	34	47	27	43	..	..
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	47	67	24	34	..	..
<b>Medium-low-income</b>						
Algeria	37	39	..	39	..	..
Tunisia	29	45	29	32	31.9	36.3
Djibouti	..	36	..	..	..	(1992)
Syrian Arab Republic	54	64 (1993)	32	45 (1993)	..	15 (1993)
Jordan	59	62	43	47	..	12 (1991)
Morocco	32	36.7 (1993)	26	27.6 (1993)	18	32.7 (1993)
Lebanon	..	..	..	..	..	24 (1991)
West Bank and Gaza Strip	..	41	..	39 <sup>a/</sup>	..	17 <sup>b/</sup> (1991)
<b>Low-income</b>						
Egypt	48.8	52.9	31	39	..	29
Iraq	48.5	68.5 (1993)	41.8	54.1 (1993)	18.2	23.8 (1993)
Yemen <sup>c/</sup>	29	32	17	33	4	..
Mauritania	9	18	8	10	..	..
Sudan	31	51	26	35	4	12 (1989)
Somalia	29	35 (1984)	7	..	..	10

Source: ESCWA, "Studies on Arab women in development", Series No. 24 (E/ESCWA/SD-WOM/1996/2). In Arabic only:  
استعراض وتقييم ما تم تنفيذه للنهوض بالمرأة العربية في ضوء أهداف استراتيجيات نيروبي التطوعية، سلسلة دراسات عن المرأة العربية في التنمية.

a/ West Bank.

b/ Gaza Strip.

c/ Estimate.



The regional gender gaps in literacy and education shown in tables 1 and 2 are the product not only of the gender biases of State literacy and educational policies and of social norms which discourage or prevent female students from entering the educational system or remaining in it, but also of the biases in State distribution policies. Literacy and education policies in the region have not been neutral in terms of their treatment and/or coverage of different locations, social classes and genders. "The educational system [has] continued in some degree to perpetuate class bias by favouring the better-off as against the poorest classes, both urban and rural" (Ahmed, 1993, p. 211). This observation, made in reference to the Egyptian educational system, applies (to varying extents) to the educational systems in other countries in the region as well.

Closing the gender gap in education is fundamentally an issue of ensuring equity in the distribution of society's educational resources. Research and data on the distribution priorities of educational budgets in the region are very limited. Available indicators on investment in education are confined to measurements of the proportional relationship between educational budgets and national budgets. This is undoubtedly a key indicator of the priorities of the human development strategies implemented in the countries of the region, but without the further disaggregation of this indicator it is not possible to draw conclusions or to develop measures to eliminate the deficit in female education which still exists in the majority of Arab countries. If progress is to be made in closing the long-standing gap between rural and urban and between male and female shares reflecting literacy and educational achievements, it is necessary first to examine the "distribution premises" of budgetary allocations to the different levels of education, urban and rural areas, and each gender.

The current economic developments in the region provide evidence that female access to literacy and education may not continue to grow at rates similar to those which prevailed in the 1980s. This is due to a number of factors, the most important of which are the following:

(a) On average, Arab Governments allocate approximately 5.9 per cent of their budgets to education. This compares favourably with the 4 per cent reported for middle-income countries as a group (UNDP, 1996). However, with the high rates of population growth and the young age structure in the region, this level of expenditure may not ensure access to education for all income groups, particularly those living in rural and poor urban areas;

(b) Due to the economic problems of the 1980s and the ripple effects of the Gulf war, many countries in the region have adopted stricter austerity measures in the 1990s. Regional unemployment has increased to unprecedented levels during this decade, which has led to a loss of income for large segments of the Arab population, especially the middle class (ESCWA, 1996). Parallel to these developments, the shrinking role of the State in the provision of social services, including education, has further aggravated the problems the medium-low-income and poor segments of the region's population are facing as they struggle to provide their children with an education. In a number of case-studies of one of the poorest urban quarters of Cairo, some of the women surveyed made the observation that times had changed for the poor since the 1960s, and that education had become a luxury only the rich could afford. Poor families, they concluded, could no longer cover the books, clothes, transport and other expenses associated with school attendance (Fergany and others, 1994). The World Bank also recognizes that "[s]chooling is never free and is seldom inexpensive, even when Governments pay much of it. In most countries parents bear the direct costs for school fees, books and clothing. Parents also incur opportunity costs because they lose their children's availability for chores and wage earnings. The poorer the family, the more difficult it is to bear these direct costs and the opportunity costs of education" (World Bank, 1994, p. 29);

(c) Research carried out by the International Labour Organization (ILO) on a number of countries which adopted structural adjustment programmes indicate that women are accepting non-regular, unstable, insecure and sometimes exploitative employment in the informal sector or are working two and sometimes three shifts a day to supplement the shrinking family income (Lim, 1994). Girls at school age are the first to bear the consequence when they are forced to leave school either to help their mothers in the informal sector or to take over their domestic duties at home;

(d) Economic developments in the region are negatively affecting access to education for both males and females in the short run; in the long run, current trends could prove proportionately more detrimental to female education for a number of reasons. The benefits of investing in girls' education are still less obvious to large segments of the population than are the corresponding benefits for boys. When families are experiencing hardship or have only limited resources to educate their children, it is likely that preference will be given to males. Another factor which may indirectly affect social attitudes towards female education is the high unemployment rates prevalent among both male and female university graduates in much of the region and their unpromising employment prospects in the near future;

(e) From the beginning of the century until the 1970s, the social value of education remained high in the Arab region, as education constituted the key to social mobility and employability. This trend began to wane during the oil boom, when social mobility and employability were no longer determined exclusively by educational qualifications but could be achieved as well through migration, open-door trading practices, and business dealings inside and outside the region. The phenomenon of graduate unemployment first appeared in the mid-1980s and still exists in several Arab labour markets. This has led to a loss of faith in the role of education as a prerequisite for income earning, particularly among lower-income groups. Further, the impoverishment of the middle classes, which traditionally had the highest demand for education, has led to a reduction in female access to education.

As the end of the century approaches, the challenges facing the female population of the region—in terms of access to literacy, to education at all levels, and to a high-quality education for those who are enrolled—are still great.

### C. HEALTH PROFILE

Health indicators in the region for the period 1980-1990 show increased life expectancy, declining fertility, lower mortality rates among newborns, and a doubling of the number of deliveries by trained health personnel (ESCWA, 1997b) (see table 4).

The maternal mortality rate (MMR) fell in some countries of the region and rose in others during selected periods between 1971 and 1992. There was dramatic improvement in the high-income countries and most of the low-income countries in this group (Somalia constituted the only exception). Among the medium-low and medium-upper-income countries and areas, the news is mixed: the Syrian MMR dropped from 280 to 143 and Jordan's MMR declined from 60 to 40, but Saudi Arabia witnessed an increase from 29 to 48, and Tunisia's MMR rose from 39 to 70.

The number of deliveries attended by trained medical personnel is one of the more important indicators reflecting the concern State health policy attaches to the well-being of both delivering mothers and newborns. The proportion of deliveries performed by trained health personnel more than doubled in the region (from 23.9 to 54.3 per cent) during selected periods between 1986 and 1993. Figures for individual countries ranged from 2 per cent in Somalia and 16 per cent in Yemen to 98 per cent in Oman, 99 per cent in the United Arab Emirates, and 100 per cent in Qatar.

Female life expectancy also improved in most of the countries of the region during the period under study. The most dramatic increases occurred in Egypt, followed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. By 1990, female life expectancy at birth ranged from 62.5 to 73.5 years in the first three income categories in table 4; in the low-income countries figures ranged from 47.6 years in Mauritania to 65 years in Iraq.

TABLE 4. NATIONAL AND HEALTH INDICATORS

Country/area	Population (in millions)	Females as a percentage of males	Per capita GNP (U.S. dollars)	Female life expectancy at birth	Maternal mortality rate (per 100,000)		Births attended by trained health personnel (percentage)		Total fertility rate		Contraceptive prevalence rate (any method) (percentage)		Age at first marriage
					1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990	
<b>High-income</b>													
United Arab Emirates	1.7	48	22 470	73.5 (1988)	13 (1985)	2 (1988)	84.3 (1991)	99 (1991)	5.4 (1993)	4.5 (1993)	..	..	23
Kuwait	1.9	76	23 350	72.1	3.7	..	91.6 (1992)	96 (1992)	6.7 (1993)	3.7 (1993)	34.6 (1987)	35 (1985-1992)	23
Qatar	0.5	60	..	69.8	19 (1977-1989)	9 (1992)	90 (1985-1990)	100 (1985-1990)	5.8 (1985)	5.6 (1992)	32.3 (1987)	52	23
<b>Medium-upper-income</b>													
Saudi Arabia	16	84	6 510	69	29 (1984-1986)	48 (1992)	..	82 (1985-1990)	7.3 (1993)	6.3 (1993)	..	..	22
Bahrain	0.5	73	..	70.7	0.2 (1981)	0.3 (1991)	95 (1981)	97 (1991)	4.4 (1981)	3.8 (1991)	..	54 (1989)	24
Oman	1.6	91	5 600	69.8	..	20	60 (1983)	98 (1992)	7.2 (1993)	6.7 (1993)	8.6 (1988-1989)	9 (1985-1992)	19
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	4.9	91	5 310	62.5	80 (1978)	60 (1992)	..	76 (1985-1990)	7.3 (1992)	6.3 (1992)	..	..	19
<b>Medium-low-income</b>													
Algeria	26.4	100	1 650	67.8	136 (1978)	130 (1980-1988)	40 (1979)	76 (1992)	6.9 (1979)	4.4 (1992)	11 (1979)	50.8 (1992)	24
Tunisia	8.4	98	1 780	70.2	39 (1982)	70 (1992)	56 (1985)	76 (1992)	5.6 (1991)	3.5 (1991)	30 (1978)	52 (1992)	22
Djibouti	0.5	98	..	45.4	..	740 (1992)	73 (1984)	79 (1985-1990)	..	6.6	..	..	..
Syrian Arab Republic	13.3	98	1 160	69.2	280	143 (1992)	35 (1979)	83 (1993)	7.3 (1978)	4.2 (1993)	20 (1978)	39.6 (1993)	22
Jordan	3.8	95	1 190	68 (1992)	60 (1979)	40	75 (1985)	89 (1992)	7.3 (1979)	5.6 (1992)	24 (1979)	34.9	23

TABLE 4. (continued)

Country/area	Population (in millions) 1992	Females as a percentage of males 1990	Per capita GNP (US dollars) 1993	Female life expectancy at birth 1990	Maternal mortality rate (per 100,000)		Births attended by trained health personnel (percentage)		Total fertility rate		Contraceptive prevalence rate (any method) (percentage)		Age at first marriage 1990
					1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990	
<b>Medium-low-income (continued)</b>													
Morocco	26.3	100	1 030	62.5	270 (1989)	332	20	31 (1992)	5.9	4.2 (1992)	25.5 (1983)	41.5 (1992)	21
Lebanon	2.9	106	2 150	69	128 (1971-1982)	..	45 (1976)	45 (1985-1990)	4.0	3.1	60 (1984)	53 (1985-1992)	25
West Bank and Gaza Strip	2.6	105	..	68 (1985-1990)	..	..	..	40	..	7.0 (1993)	..	20 (1993)	21
<b>Low-income</b>													
Egypt	54.9	97	660	64.4	90	40	9.4	33.5 (1992)	5.3	3.9 (1992)	24	47 (1992)	23
Iraq	19.3	96	1 500	65 (1985)	250 (1988)	117 (1992)	60 (1985)	85	6.9	5.7 (1993)	..	18 (1989)	21
Yemen	12.6	108	520	50.2	1 000	300	11 (1982)	16 (1983-1993)	7.1	8.0	..	11.2 (1991)	18
Mauritania	2.1	102	510	47.6	800 (1988)	554 (1992)	..	30	6.5	6.8 (1993)	1 (1980-1987)	4	20
Sudan	26.7	99	420	57.1	650 (1983)	552 (1989)	20 (1984)	61.6 (1993)	5.3	4.6 (1993)	5.6	9.9 (1993)	21
Somalia	9.3	110	150	48	1 100 (1981)	2 600	..	2 (1983-1993)	6.6	7.0	..	1 (1985-1992)	20
Comoros	0.6	102	..	55.9 (1989)	460 (1981)	190	..	24	7.1	6.6	0.3	3.4 (1992)	20
Total	236.8	98	1 805	63.3	295.6	278.4	23.9	54.3	6.1	4.9	20.7	33.8	21.7

Source: ESCWA, "Studies on Arab women in development", Series No. 24 (E/ESCWA/SD-WOM/1996/2). In Arabic only: استعراض وتقييم ما تم تنفيذه للجهود بالمرأة العربية في ضوء أهداف استراتيجيات... نيروبي

Note: GNP is in 1991 US dollars.

## D. EMPLOYMENT PROFILE

### 1. *Data*

The data on employment statistics in the region are characterized by wide gaps; even some of the most basic indicators required for any meaningful analysis of the situation of labour markets, including the situation of working women and their economic earnings within these markets, are incomplete, unavailable, or non-existent.

Detailed country-specific data describing the current occupational, educational and skill profiles of the human capital within the region's labour markets are unavailable in the majority of countries, while data on sectoral productivity levels and the differential structure of wages do not exist at all. In the absence of such data for both male and female segments of the active labour force, conclusions regarding the transformation in the situation of women through remunerated employment and on the impact this process has had on their economic empowerment are highly questionable.

The country or subregional gender-disaggregated economic participation rates and data on the sectoral distribution of the labour force quoted in most of the literature dealing with women's situation in the region provide an incomplete and static description of the size of the female working population and its sectoral distribution. They make visible only those categories of employed women that have been defined by standard classifications applicable to highly developed labour markets. The numerous paid and unpaid activities women perform in the agricultural and informal sectors and in family-run businesses and home-based production need to be statistically addressed in order to capture the realities of female employment in the countries of the region.

Explaining the behavioural patterns associated with female employment requires detailed data on the following: (a) economic development strategies and their impact on the behaviour of employment; (b) region-specific definitions of "work" in the formal and informal sectors of the economy; (c) the sectoral distribution of the female labour force, including female employment in agriculture and the informal sector; (d) changes in the occupational, educational, and skill profiles of female employment over selected periods of time; and (e) the development of the female wage and salary structure over time.

Because this type of data package is unavailable, part three of the present study offers observations on the relationship between the recent economic history of the region and female employment patterns. These observations also challenge certain aspects of what appears to have become conventional wisdom in some of the research work relating to the situation of women in the region.

### 2. *Women's access to employment*

State-sponsored female education, first introduced in the middle of this century in a number of Arab States, created a demand for female teachers and other types of female educational staff, with the result that early non-agricultural female employment in the region was concentrated in the educational sector.

During this same period, the establishment of an increasing number of national universities, particularly in those countries where education was a long-standing tradition, led to an immense increase in women's access to higher education, and generations of urban and rural women from the middle and lower-middle classes became part of the scientific, professional, technical and clerical labour force in their countries.

In spite of their academic achievements, the economic participation rates of Arab women remained historically low. Data show that the female economic participation rate reached 21.1 per cent in this region in 1990, in comparison with 35 and 29 per cent in South-East Asia and Latin America respectively (ESCWA, 1997b). The country-specific participation rates shown in table 5 reflect large discrepancies among the countries of the region. In Algeria, Iraq, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the female participation rates for 1990 (ranging between 4 and 9.5 per cent) were much lower than the regional average, while in Egypt, Kuwait, Somalia and Sudan (where rates ranged

TABLE 5. ECONOMIC INDICATORS  
(Percentage)

Country/area	Economic participation rate											
	Males					Females						
	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990
<b>High-income</b>												
United Arab Emirates	94	92.2	..	15.8	42.2	..	5.3	9.5	16.3			
Kuwait	62.1	56.2	60.1 (1993)	12.8	20	25.3 (1993)	17	25.7	31			
Qatar	..	93 (1986)	..	7 (1982)	11 (1986)	..	..	..	7 (1990-1992)			
<b>Medium-upper-income</b>												
Saudi Arabia	..	78.8 (1986)	..	..	6.7 (1986)	..	..	..	7 (1990-1992)			
Bahrain	73.8 (1981)	73.5 (1986)	76.4 (1991)	13.3 (1981)	17.2 (1986)	18.4 (1991)	18.8 (1981)	19.3 (1986)	19.5 (1991)			
Oman	..	75 (1986)	..	..	11 (1986)	..	6.3	8.4	18.7			
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	9 (1990-1992)			
<b>Medium-low-income</b>												
Algeria	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	4 (1990-1992)			
Tunisia	..	..	..	..	21.3 (1984)	20.9 (1989)	..	..	19.5 (1989)			
Djibouti	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..			
Syrian Arab Republic	79.1 (1981)	..	..	7.1 (1981)	6.7 (1984)	10.3 (1991)	10.7 (1991)	13.9 (1984)	16.6 (1991)			
Jordan	43.5 (1979)	69.4 (1987)	68.3 (1991)	8	12.5	15 (1994)	7.7 (1979)	..	13.8			
Morocco	..	..	53.1	..	..	25.5	..	..	26 (1990-1992)			

TABLE 5. (continued)

Country/area	Economic participation rate								Females in the Labour Force				
	Males				Females								
	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990	
<b>Medium-low-income (continued)</b>													
Lebanon	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
West Bank and Gaza Strip	..	..	7.9 <sup>a</sup> (1988)	15 <sup>a</sup>	10.7 <sup>a</sup>	13 (1988)	10.6 <sup>a</sup>	9.7	..	..	..	..	..
<b>Low-income</b>													
Egypt	68.5	70.5 (1986)	68.3 (1988)	6.8	9.6 (1986)	38.2 (1988)	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Iraq	80.2 (1977)	75.3 (1987)	..	9.3 (1977)	5.8 (1987)	3.7 (1992)	17.4 (1977)	11.6 (1987)	..	..	..	..	..
Yemen	..	53.3 (1986)	..	..	27.3 (1986)	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Mauritania	..	..	69	..	..	25.2	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Sudan	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Somalia	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..

Source: ESCWA. "Studies on Arab women in development". Series No. 24 (E/ESCWA/SD-WOM/1996/2). In Arabic only: استعراض وتقييم ما تم تنفيذه للنهوض بالمرأة العربية في ضوء أهداف استراتيجيات نيروبي للتنمية. سلسلة دراسات عن المرأة العربية في التنمية.

<sup>a</sup> Estimates.

from 29 to 39 per cent), female economic participation was comparable to that in South-East Asia. Interestingly, the female economic participation rate has been highest in countries characterized by large agricultural sectors, such as Egypt, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen, which belong to the low-income group, and in Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia, which belong to the medium-low income group. Among the oil-producing Gulf countries, only Kuwait has achieved a higher female participation rate than the regional average.

The sectoral distribution of employment shown in table 6 reflects the concentration of women in the tertiary (services) sector in most countries of the region. Except in Oman, more than 90 per cent of working women are employed in the tertiary sector in the high-income and medium-upper-income countries. Female employment in Tunisia and Oman follows a different pattern, whereby the highest proportion of women (44.1 and 35 per cent respectively) work in the industrial sector; in fact, female participation in this sector is higher than male participation (31.4 and 21.2 per cent respectively). The rest of the region's countries show low female participation rates in industry. Data for Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen reflect the concentration of female employment in agriculture.

More often than not, the low female participation rates in the region and the large female shares in the so-called feminized professions are explained as being fundamentally the product of socio-cultural impediments to women's employment in "technical" fields and of gender biases in educational policies, both of which propel women towards the humanities and medical and teaching disciplines.

The limited participation in manufacturing in comparison with tertiary sector employment is not restricted to women. In the Arab region, males have also been historically less active in manufacturing than in services (see table 6). Development strategies and the high regional dependence on oil income for financing development have contributed significantly to this phenomenon.

In spite of the differences in the size and composition of the region's economies, most of them have passed through the phases described below; each of these phases has had a direct and indirect impact on women's access to employment.

*The post-independence phase (the first decade after independence).* Investment programmes in the newly independent States focused on building the foundations of the new government sector, establishing basic infrastructure facilities, and developing the education and health sectors. The demand for labour (all types of occupations) exceeded the output of the newly established educational systems. Governments constituted the chief employer of the emerging male and female professional and technical class, which was composed of graduates from local and foreign universities and training institutes. Teaching and health-related occupations, and to a lesser extent civil service occupations, provided entry points for women into the labour markets.

*Import substitution manufacturing and oil refining (from the mid-1960s until the beginning of the oil boom).* The expansion of the educational and vocational training base in the 1960s and 1970s increased the supply of labour in the region. During this period, a number of Arab countries began to experiment with import substitution manufacturing, mostly through companies under public sector ownership and control (this was particularly the case in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic). In Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia the private sector manufacturing base was expanded, offering employment opportunities to women, especially in food processing, textiles and light industries. Regional female employment in manufacturing began to increase during this period, but it remained much lower than female employment in the "older" services segments of the public sector.

The Gulf countries continued to develop their infrastructure and oil refining sectors, both of which were (and still are) male-dominated worldwide. Opportunities for female employment were concentrated in the expanding education, health, and civil service sectors.



TABLE 6. SECTORAL ECONOMIC INDICATORS  
(Percentage)

Country/area	Agricultural sector		Industrial sector		Services sector		Other sectors		Female share in each sector			
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Agriculture	Industry	Services	
<b>High-income</b>												
United Arab Emirates	8.4	0.1	30.8	3.3	60.7	96.5	0.1	0.1	0.1	1.1	14.3	
Kuwait	0.1	0.03	11.3	1.2	84.6	97.5	4	1.3	15.8	3.1	30.5	
Qatar	0.7	0.1	19.5	1.1	79.1	98.7	0.7	0.1	1.6	0.9	17.2	
<b>Medium-upper-income</b>												
Saudi Arabia	10.5	3.3	12.6	2.4	76.3	91.2	0.6	3.1	2.3	1.4	8.3	
Bahrain	3.1	0.4	18.4	5.6	78.3	93.9	0.2	0.1	2.4	6	20	
Oman	51.9	20	21.2	35	26.9	45	..	..	2.9	11.5	11.3	
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya <sup>b</sup>	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	
<b>Medium-low-income</b>												
Algeria	19	2.3	33.2	13.5	43.9	64.6	4	19.6	1.3	4.4	14.5	
Tunisia	27.2 (1984)	22.5 (1989)	31.4 (1984)	44.1 (1989)	35.9 (1984)	32.1 (1989)	5.5 (1984)	..	20.1	27.6	15.6	
Djibouti	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	
Syrian Arab Republic	22.7	54.1	28.5	8.3	48.8	38.1	..	..	31.8	5.2	13.5	
Jordan	6.3	4	19.4	9	72.1	38.9	2.2	3.1	7	5.2	12.1	
Morocco	43.8	70.8	18.7	12.7	36.6	16.5	0.9	..	15.4	23.6	18.8	
Lebanon <sup>b</sup>	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	
West Bank and Gaza Strip	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	



*The oil boom phase.* This phase was characterized by economic developments in the region which gave investment priority to those sectors that were dominated by males or required labour mobility. The Gulf economies embarked on massive investment projects and programmes, creating an unprecedented demand for professional, technical and skilled males who were willing and able to migrate to the Gulf subregion.

The redistribution of part of the oil income within the region through workers' remittances led to a boom in the construction sector in most labour-exporting countries, especially in the area of residential construction. Employment opportunities in this sector did not affect the size or structure of female employment owing to the nature of the work required in this sector.

The impact of this phase on the lives of large segments of the Arab female population has yet to be explored, but there is evidence that some increase in female employment took place in the labour-exporting countries to fill part of the vacuum left by migrant male labour, particularly in the health, education and civil service sectors. In agriculture, women and children played a crucial role in filling the employment gap created by male migration, particularly in Egypt and Yemen.

This phase also witnessed expansion in the demand for professionals in the banking, finance and insurance sectors—which female employment partially addressed.

*The rescheduling and restructuring phase (from the beginning of the 1980s to the present).* Imbalances in the Arab labour market began to appear after the end of the oil boom, when the recession set in, debt crises occurred, and debt rescheduling programmes were adopted. A number of countries began to implement restructuring and privatization policies. In both the public and private sectors, labour demand decreased considerably, while the educational systems continued to churn out new graduates seeking jobs. The Gulf war and the return of large numbers of migrants to their home countries further aggravated the situation in labour markets already suffering from shrinking investments and a reduced demand for workers. Female employment, which had already been marginalized during the oil boom owing to the dominance of sectors characterized by very limited demand for female labour, was pushed further towards the periphery on the development agendas of the region.

Though accurate data on unemployment rates are unavailable, there is ample evidence of joblessness in the growing incidence of poverty, crime, social unrest and divorce and the mushrooming of fundamentalist movements in the region. Data on female unemployment are particularly scanty. However, data for 1990 (which do not take into account the effects of the Gulf war) indicate that female unemployment rates increased in all Arab countries for which figures were available (with the exception of Iraq, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates), reaching 25.8 per cent in Egypt, 34.4 per cent in Jordan, and 35.9 per cent in Mauritania (see table 7).

There is a need to redefine the priorities relating to women's employment in the region and to include, in addition to the much-quoted objective of increasing female participation rates, the objective of rehabilitating and re-employing the growing numbers of unemployed females in the labour force, especially those living in the densely populated non-petroleum-exporting countries of the region.

TABLE 7. UNEMPLOYMENT INDICATORS  
(Percentage)

Country/area	Males		Females	
	1985	1990	1985	1990
<b>High-income</b>				
United Arab Emirates	1.1	1.4 (1992)	2	1.1 (1992)
Kuwait	1.7	2.3 (1993)	1.3	0.8 (1993)
Qatar	..	..	..	..
<b>Medium-upper-income</b>				
Saudi Arabia	..	..	..	..
Bahrain	6.6 (1981)	14.8 (1991)	5.1 (1981)	12.4 (1991)
Oman	..	..	1 (1986)	..
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	..	..	..	..
<b>Medium-low-income</b>				
Algeria	..	11.7 (1991)	..	6.1 (1991)
Tunisia	17 (1984)	21.9 (1991)	15 (1984)	16.2 (1991)
Djibouti	..	..	..	..
Syrian Arab Republic	..	22 (1991)	..	16 (1991)
Jordan	12.3 (1987)	14.5 (1991)	27 (1987)	34.4 (1991)
Morocco	..	12.1 (1991)	..	13 (1991)
Lebanon	..	..	..	..
West Bank and Gaza Strip	a/	a/	a/	a/
<b>Low-income</b>				
Egypt	6.2 (1984)	8.7 (1988)	17.7 (1984)	25.8 (1988)
Iraq	..	..	19 (1987)	11
Yemen	..	b/	14.6 (1986)	b/
Mauritania	..	21.9	..	35.9
Sudan	..	..	..	..
Somalia	..	..	..	..

Source: ESCWA, "Studies on Arab women in development", Series No. 24 (E/ESCWA/SD-WOM/1996/2). In Arabic only: استعراض وتقييم ما تم تنفيذه للنهوض بالمرأة العربية في ضوء أهداف استراتيجيات نيروبي التطوعية، سلسلة دراسات عن المرأة العربية في التنمية.

a/ For males and females, the unemployment rate was about 3 per cent in 1985, and 32.2 per cent in 1990.

b/ For males and females, the unemployment rate was about 23 per cent in 1990.



## **PART THREE**

## V. A REGION-SPECIFIC INDEX FOR ASSESSING THE SITUATION OF WOMEN

Some of the questions below were addressed in parts one and two. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore them in detail, but the most basic considerations are listed here to serve as a guide for those decision makers responsible for allocating resources for the development of the proposed index:

- (a) What would the functions of the index be?
- (b) In the light of the political, legal and socio-economic disparities existing in the region, would a region-specific gender index reflect the true situation of Arab women?
- (c) Would country-specific gender indices provide better approximations of the realities of women in each Arab country?
- (d) Who would the potential direct and indirect beneficiaries of this index be?
- (e) Would the types of statistics presently collected be sufficient to allow for the computation of the index, or would new data need to be compiled?
- (f) Would it be technically possible to produce a reasonable approximation of the phenomena being measured?
- (g) What costs would be involved in the process of developing the index?
- (h) Given the existing financial and technical constraints, what kind of priority would this index be given on the agendas of the parties concerned?

## VI. A GENDER INDEX, OR A SET OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC INDICES GIVING A MORE BALANCED APPROXIMATION OF THE SITUATION OF ARAB WOMEN

Social and economic indices are tools for measurement which hide multiple realities; at times they distort the facts, and at their worst they can promulgate blatant untruths. In parts one and two of the present study the function, utility, and accuracy of international and regional indices in reflecting socio-economic phenomena were examined. Examples of inaccurately drawn profiles are abundant. The *Human Development Report's* 1995 GDI value for Sri Lanka, for instance, was higher than that for Saudi Arabia. One important facet of reality here is that Sri Lanka is a major exporter of female domestic servants (a large proportion of whom are mothers who leave their young children behind) to Saudi Arabia and other countries within the region. The same index ranked Saudi Arabia higher than Egypt; in this case, the ranking was strongly affected by the huge differential in per capita income in the two countries (per capita income is a component of the GDI), rather than by the differences in the overall situation of women in them.

A regional index can produce similar problems. As an alternative to the regional gender index, a standard package of indices which could be used by all Arab countries might be developed to approximate different aspects of women's realities. The standardization of indices across the Arab world would allow for interregional comparisons of the situations of women.

A proposed package of indicators is introduced below. If a regional gender index were found to be necessary, this package could serve as a "crude basket" from which selected indicators could be chosen.

### A. ECONOMIC INDICATORS

Economic indicators include the following:

- (a) Participation rates based on a definition of work which covers female employment in the formal sector as well as in the informal sector, family businesses, home production and the agricultural sector—all areas which are currently unrepresented in employment statistics owing to the narrowness of the definitions of work;
- (b) Differential male and female wages for each of the above-mentioned categories;
- (c) The male-female ratio of ownership of dwellings. Data for this indicator are available in all Arab countries, since national laws require the registration of such ownership. This indicator reflects the level of economic independence and personal security among women;
- (d) The ratio of female-headed households to male-headed households (urban-rural disaggregated data);
- (e) The average income of female-headed households (urban-rural disaggregated data). This indicator reflects the degree of economic vulnerability of female-headed households.

### B. ILLITERACY AND EDUCATION INDICATORS

Illiteracy indicators include the following:

- (a) The percentage of illiterate women in the total female population. This is the most important indicator of the situation of women. For the region, it is imperative to provide profiles of female illiteracy in both rural and urban areas;
- (b) Male and female illiteracy rates (an indicator of the gender gap in literacy);
- (c) Budgets for eradicating female illiteracy (urban-rural disaggregated data) as a proportion of total national budgets in the region. This is an indicator of the State's commitment to combating illiteracy;



(d) The ratio of illiteracy teaching/training staff to the illiterate female population. This is another indicator of the State's commitment to the eradication of illiteracy.

The components of the female education index developed by Population Action International and applied in 112 countries could be used to assess women's educational attainments. The index components include the following:

- (a) The average number of years of schooling for adult women;
- (b) The primary female-male enrolment ratio. This indicator reflects the gender gap in primary education;
- (c) The secondary female-male enrolment ratio. This indicator reflects the gender gap in secondary education;
- (d) The gross primary enrolment rate for girls;
- (e) The gross secondary enrolment rate for girls;
- (f) Drop-out rates at the primary and secondary levels (most Arab countries suffer from high female drop-out rates);
- (g) The ratio of girls' schools to boys' schools;
- (h) The ratio of female teachers at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels to the total number of female students (urban-rural disaggregated figures). This indicator also reflects, to a considerable extent, the degree of access females have to education, particularly in countries where social norms prevent girls from being taught by male teachers;
- (i) The male-female ratio of students enrolled at vocational training institutes. This indicator reflects gender gaps in access to vocational training;
- (j) The percentage of female students in vocational training by field of specialization. This is an indicator of female access to technical education;
- (k) The percentage of females at the tertiary level by field of specialization.

#### C. HEALTH INDICATORS

Health indicators include the following:

- (a) Maternal mortality rate;
- (b) The percentage of deliveries attended by trained health providers;
- (c) Total fertility rate;
- (d) Contraceptive prevalence rate;
- (e) Female age at first marriage.

#### D. INDICATORS OF FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC LIFE

This group of indicators includes the following:

- (a) The percentage of female university instructors;
- (b) The percentage of females in professional occupations (disaggregated data on humanities and science disciplines);

- (c) The percentage of women in the total membership of political parties;
- (d) Female NGO members (as a percentage of the total);
- (e) Women parliamentarians (as a percentage of the total);
- (f) Women in judiciary positions (as a percentage of the total);
- (g) Women members of trade unions (as a percentage of total membership);
- (h) The percentages of women heads of divisions, directors, and board of director chairs (disaggregated data for the public, private and mixed sectors). These indicators reflect the access of women to decision-making positions in the three sectors.

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