

BIGMUN 2018  
ECOSOC 3 – Commission on the Status of Women

# Research Report

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Topic 3: The question of opportunities for women to attain tertiary education in the Middle East



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## Introduction:

The question of opportunities for tertiary education for Women in the Middle East is an arising issue in the modern society we have evolved to. Middle Eastern culture presents a significant barrier to women's higher education due to gender bias and traditional gender roles.

Women only represent  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the labour force in the Middle East and they are of low social status and not considered an essential part of the work force of Middle Eastern countries, therefore many do not pursue a future in higher education and drop out of school before completing university.<sup>1</sup> This stagnates economic development, since on average in the Middle East only 20% of women who are aged 15 and above are part of the labour force.<sup>2</sup> This is the lowest region value worldwide, and the uneven distribution of working population amounts to a net waste of human labour resources.

A major factor which limits women's access to attend tertiary education is poverty and gender bias within the country, and when parents face a choice where they can only afford to send one kid to college, studies show 39% of mothers vote in favour of son going and only 8% vote in favour of daughter going.<sup>3</sup>

As many of the Middle Eastern countries are LEDCs, overcoming the challenge of women's access to higher education could improve a lot of factors determining country status and living standard. Where women are more educated child mortality rates, fertility rates, and population growth rates generally decrease, due to women's enhanced knowledge on career choices, family planning and contraceptives; altogether this can boost overpopulated and low income countries' status and help them develop over time.

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<sup>1</sup> AlOlaimy, L. (2013 October). Visited on 04/01/18. Available at: <https://www.wamda.com/2013/10/initiatives-working-empower-women-middle-east>

<sup>2</sup> Roudi-Fahmi, F. (2003 January). Visited on 06/01/18. Available at: <http://www.eldis.org/document/A14732>

<sup>3</sup> Moghadam, V. (nd). Visited on 04/01/18. Available at: <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Reports/2003/EmpoweringWomenDevelopingSocietyFemaleEducationintheMiddleEastandNorthAfrica.aspx>

## Key Terms

**Middle East** – the countries which are considered to be in the Middle East by the UN are Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates and Yemen

**Tertiary Education** – higher education which is the third stage/level of education, post-secondary education including colleges and universities.

**Literacy** – the ability to read and write

**MENA** – Middle East and North Africa

**LEDCs** – Less Economically Developed Countries



Figure 1 Map of the Middle Eastern countries

## Background information

The Middle East has a cultural background of assumed gender roles, which generally dismiss women's education as an extra. The traditional gender roles assume the son of a family will grow up to provide for the family whereas daughters are considered unnecessary expenses and given away at young age, to be taken care of by their husband; their duty is to maintain the household. This patriarchal system affects the educational system as data shows women's literacy rates fall behind men's and only 44% of girls fulfil primary and secondary education, before dropping out.<sup>4</sup> You can further study the percent of women attaining tertiary education per country in *Figure 3*.

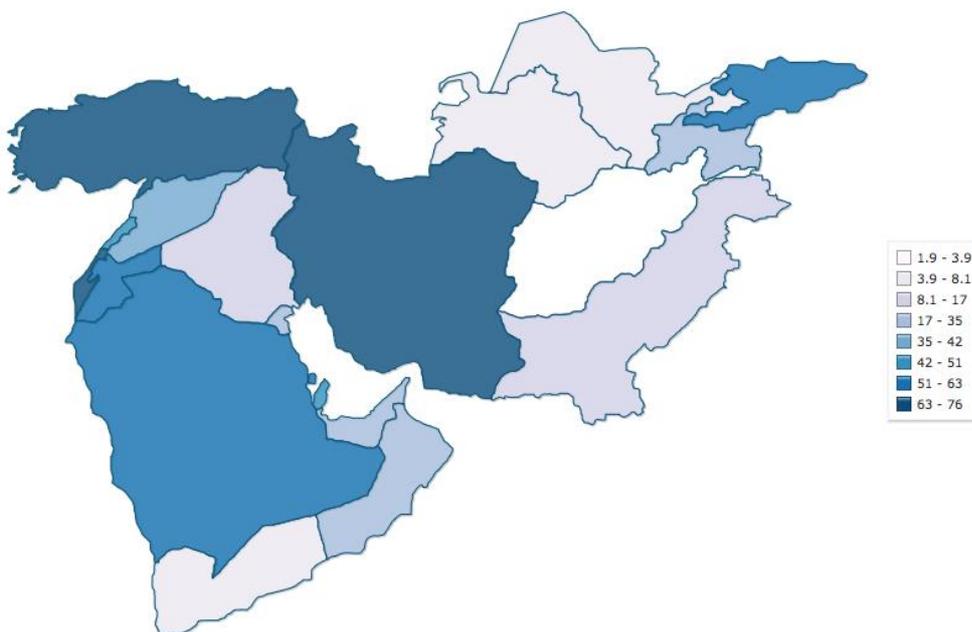


Figure 2 School enrolment, tertiary, female (% gross) - Middle East<sup>5</sup>

That is why many are discouraged from pursuing higher levels of education, and even if they do they success rate into finding jobs which fulfil their criteria is very low. In fact, as of 2003-2010 less than 1/7 of all 5887 firms in MENA were owned by women.<sup>6</sup> This may also be the result of the low quality of education provided in Arab states, which we can derive from the fact that there are no Arab

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<sup>4</sup> Akkam, A. (2017 November). Visited on 05/01/18. Available at: <https://women-s.net/womens-education-in-the-middle-east/>

<sup>5</sup> Barrientos, M. (2017, 01 01). Visited on 04/01/18. Available at: <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/indicators/SE.TER.ENRR.FE/map/middle-east>

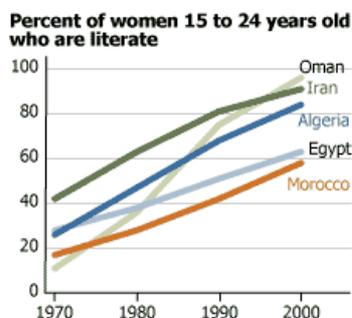
<sup>6</sup> AlOlaimy, L. (2013 October). Visited on 04/01/18. Available at: <https://www.wamda.com/2013/10/initiatives-working-empower-women-middle-east>

universities ranked in the top 200 worldwide. The lack of high quality tertiary education may be the cause of low numbers of competent job candidates.

Female's access to higher education is limited by illiteracy, which is also a result of lack of education. The delegate can study the female literacy rates to gain a further understanding on women's opportunities in different countries and in the future. Female literacy rates, age 15+ in the Arab world today range from 24 (Iraq) to 85.9 percent (Jordan). Between 1990 and 2000- 2004, six Arab countries ranked above the world average of 76.5%. However, despite such a great stride in female literacy in these countries, women today account for two thirds of the region's illiterates and according to the *Arab Human Development Report 2002*, this rate is not expected to disappear "not until 2040". Several factors seem to account for such a deficit, chief among them are the low base in primary enrolment from which such countries started, the slowdown in the enrolment during the 1990s compared with the 1980s, with an apparent bias against female, the decline in public expenditure on education since 1995.<sup>7</sup>

(Moghadam, nd)

#### Literacy Rates Among Young Women in Selected Countries, 1970-2000



Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics, "Literacy Statistics" ([www.uis.unesco.org](http://www.uis.unesco.org), accessed March 11, 2003).

Figure 3 Literacy Rates Among Young Women in Selected Countries, 1970-2000

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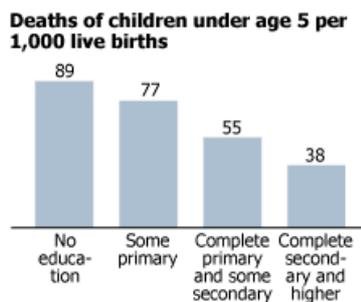
<sup>7</sup> UNESCO (nd). Visited on 10/01/18. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001462/146282e.pdf>

Other barrier's to women's enrolment in universities throughout the Middle East are safety issues during the commute to school. Many families will refuse to send their daughters to school if the commute is long and dangerous, hence building new tertiary education facilities in remote areas will increase net enrolment as more will have direct access to them.

Conflict in a country also plays a significant role and influences neighbouring countries as well. During times of civil unrest and mass refugee movements consequently forces the emigrants to live in great poverty and be unable to attend universities, so amount of young women attending higher education drastically falls. This change however, takes a really long time to be restored within a country.

Furthermore, studies show that the mother's education also has an impact on whether young girls will attend school through all three levels.<sup>8</sup> In families where the mothers are educated, they are twice more likely to send their daughter to school. Integrating women's education also has a direct effect on the child mortality rate. *Figure 5* presents this data for Egypt, from which we can deduce an approximately 50% drop in child mortality rates between non-educated and fully-educated mothers.

### Child Mortality Rate in Egypt, by Mother's Level of Education



Source: ORC Macro, Egypt DHS, 2000.

Figure 4 Child Mortality Rate in Egypt, by Mother's Level of Education<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Care (nd). Visited on 11/01/18. Available at: <http://www.care.org/work/education/girls-education>

<sup>9</sup> Moghamad V. (2003 November). Visited on (04/01/18). Available at: <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Reports/2003/EmpoweringWomenDevelopingSocietyFemaleEducationintheMiddleEastandNorthAfrica.aspx>

## Major countries and organisations involved

**Egypt** – The U.S.-Egypt Higher Education Initiative, launched in 2014, provides hundreds of undergraduate scholarships to premier Egyptian universities for talented, underprivileged students in fields critical to Egypt’s sustained economic growth. The initiative also supports scholarships for women to attend U.S. universities for undergraduate degrees in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) as well as graduate MBA (Master of Business Administration) degrees in business.<sup>10</sup>

**Jordan** – JEI (Jordan Education Initiative) launches 2003 under patronage of King Abdullah II to support Jordan’s effort in improving the level of education in the country.<sup>11</sup>

**Iraq** - Higher Education is one of the sectors that sustained serious destruction of infrastructure in 2003. Instability and lack of security have undermined the normal academic activity in Iraqi universities and triggered an unexpected brain drain that has further undermined the educational opportunities of Iraqi students.

In February 2005, Paris, UNESCO and participating representatives of Iraqi Higher Education, the international academic community, International Organizations, NGOs and donors chose Women: leadership and employment as one of the eight main actions needed to revitalize higher education in Iraq.<sup>12</sup>

**Syria** - According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the number of refugees exceeds 65 million worldwide, and almost 5 million of those refugees are from Syria.<sup>13</sup> They have fled the violence in their home country, seeking safety in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and other countries. More than 6 million people inside Syria are internally displaced, and another 13 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian aid.

Today, more than 200,000 Syrians outside their home country don’t have access to higher education,

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<sup>10</sup> USAID (2017 November). Visited 10/01/18. Available at: <https://www.usaid.gov/egypt/higher-education>

<sup>11</sup> JEI (2017 August). Visited 06/01/18. Available at: <http://jei.org.jo/en-us/>

<sup>12</sup> UNESCO (nd). Visited on 06/01/18. Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/iraq-office/education/higher-education/>

<sup>13</sup> Feldmann, N. (2017, March). Visited on 04/01/18. Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/we-are-danger-losing-entire-generation-syrian-students>

while many institutions in Syria have shut down or are only partially functioning. We are in danger of losing an entire generation of Syrian students desperately needed to one day rebuild their country.

**Care** – Women are a vital part of CARE’s community-based efforts to improve basic education, increase access to quality health care and expand economic opportunity for all.<sup>14</sup>

**UNGEI** – The United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative is committed to accelerating action on girls’ education. By 2030, the UNGEI partnership aims to support:

- Countries to achieve measurable change in girls’ education and gender equality
- Global and national development agendas to reflect emerging concerns on girls’ education and gender equality, especially for the most marginalized.<sup>15</sup>

**UNESCO Malala’s Fund For Girls Right to Education** - Fund supports the implementation of holistic programmes which aim to:

- Expand access to education for girls and women, especially those hardest to reach and affected by conflict and disaster
- Improve the quality and relevance of education, ensuring that content, teaching practices, learning processes and environments are gender-sensitive
- Strengthen policy and capacity to ensure safe learning environments

Involvement in Egypt:

UNESCO is enhancing the literacy skills of 600 women and girls and building their life skills for health, livelihoods and citizenship engagement through 12 Community Learning Centres (CLCs). A Training of Trainers programme has been piloted and finalized with 124 literacy facilitators from six governorates.<sup>16</sup>

**British Council** - Supports sustainable change and improving people’s lives in the Middle East and North Africa. Across the region key problems include inequitable growth, on-going fiscal vulnerability, political uncertainty and high unemployment, particularly among women and young

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<sup>14</sup> Care (nd). Visited on 04/01/18. Available at: <http://www.care.org/our-work>

<sup>15</sup> UNGEI (nd). Visited on 04/01/18. Available at: <http://www.ungei.org/index.php>

<sup>16</sup> UNESCO (nd). Visited on 04/01/18. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-and-gender-equality/malala-fund>

people. One of the goals is to improve the availability and quality of primary, secondary and higher education.

- Support to Improving the Quality of Education in Iraq - project to improve pedagogic skills, set up supported self-evaluation and development planning and develop leadership within schools.
- The Development Partnerships in Higher Education - helped to strengthen capacity within the Iraqi higher education sector, by designing and facilitating knowledge sharing and professional development in teaching and research.<sup>17</sup>

## Relevant UN resolutions

A/RES/41/

Resolution adopted by the Commission on the Status of Women in April 1997 during the forty-first session, on “*Education and training of women*”<sup>18</sup>

- This resolution recognizes how women’s education impacts country positively and aims to provide access and completion to basic education to up to 80% people and encourages efforts from governments and organizations to for strategies to promote training and adult education programmes with gender sensitive staff and facilities, for women (mainly minorities)

A/RES/45/

Resolution adopted by the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2001 during the forty-fifth session, on “*Gender and all forms of discrimination, in particular racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related*”<sup>19</sup>

- This resolution recognizes women and girl child rights as a part of universal human rights and strives to eliminate discrimination against them, especially one motivated by race, language, ethnicity, culture, religion, disability, socio-economic class. It then addresses racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia and recognizes their exaggerated effect on women, announcing its striving to eliminate them.

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<sup>17</sup> British Council (nd). Visited on 04/01/18. Available at: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/partner/international-development/approach/regions/middle-east-north-africa>

<sup>18</sup> Commission on the Status of Women (1997). Visited on 27/12/17. Available at: [http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/41/4\\_e\\_final.pdf?la=en&vs=1642](http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/41/4_e_final.pdf?la=en&vs=1642)

<sup>19</sup> Commission on the Status of Women (2001). Visited on 27/12/17. Available at: [http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/45/csw45b\\_e\\_final.pdf?la=en&vs=3305](http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/45/csw45b_e_final.pdf?la=en&vs=3305)

A/RES/55/

Resolution adopted by the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2011 during the fifty-fifth session, on “*Access and participation of women and girls in education, training and science and technology, including for the promotion of women’s equal access to full employment and decent work*”<sup>20</sup>

- This resolution’s purpose is to promote gender equality in education and employment by empowering women. It recognizes equal education access as a basic human rights and focuses on women’s participation in underrepresented science and technology fields as they hinder economic development. Expresses concerns about barriers that prevent girls access to education, such as global crises, poverty, conflict, unequal share of daily responsibilities, discrimination (gender stereotype) and violence (sexual harassment) which result in high women illiteracy and drop-out rates.

## Possible solutions

In terms of resolving this issue, the delegation may look into making education more accessible to those who can’t afford it, e.g. granting university scholarships or loans with reduced tax/compound interest. Improving opportunity of education may also involve making it more accessible all throughout the country, including rural areas, by building new universities so more people can easily attend. This would engage a bigger part of the country’s population and attract students who would otherwise not consider attending university but follow in the ancestors’ footsteps e.g. continue family agriculture.

Another approach to resolving the issue is looking into the quality of education offered and investigating ways in which to improve it. This may decrease rates of early dropouts (primary/secondary school) and contribute to a more well educated nation. This may additionally boost the industrial sector to more of the tertiary and quaternary, improving country’s economy.

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<sup>20</sup> Commission on the Status of Women (2011). Visited on 27/12/17. Available at: [http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/55/csw55\\_e\\_final.pdf?la=en&vs=708](http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/55/csw55_e_final.pdf?la=en&vs=708)

Finally, the delegate may invest thought into improving social status of women in Middle Eastern countries and reducing gender biased within the society. Abolishing old-fashioned traditions and empowering women into seeking their rights is a long-term process yet the outcome will positively affect the country's development.

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