Gender in the Middle East and North Africa

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has made significant progress in reducing gender gaps in human development. The ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary education is 0.96, which compares favorably to that in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMIs) worldwide.

Women in the MENA region are more likely than men to attend university, maternal mortality is around 200 deaths per 100,000 live births (compared to a world average of 400 deaths), and fertility rates have decreased in the past decade. However, as Figure 1 reveals, this progress has not translated into improvements in economic and political inclusion. The region’s female labor force participation rate of 26 percent is well below the 39 percent rate in Low and Middle Income countries. Women are severely underrepresented in politics, holding only 9 percent of the seats in parliament.

Among those participating in the labor force, women face greater challenges than men in accessing employment opportunities. In most MENA countries, women experience significantly higher unemployment rates than men (Figure 2). Also, the World Bank’s Enterprise Surveys reveal that women’s entrepreneurship in MENA remains low compared to other regions. While there are no significant differences in the types of firms owned by women and men, women face a more hostile business environment. In one finding, for example, female-owned firms in Egypt report needing 86 weeks on average to resolve a conflict through the legal system, compared to 54 weeks for male-owned firms.

Young women are especially vulnerable, as shown in figure 3, while unemployment rates among young males in Egypt and Jordan are already worryingly high, above 10 percent, those among young women are even higher. Significantly, this comes at a time when the MENA region is undergoing a demographic transition characterized by a rising share of the young in the population.

The data suggest that even highly educated young women are increasingly vulnerable. To give an illustration, between 1998 and 2006, the percentage of young Egyptian women possessing a university degree rose from 6 to 12. Strikingly, the female labor force participation rate in this age group remained near-stagnant, while their rate of unemployment increased from 19 to 27 percent. In West Bank and Gaza, women with tertiary education account for 82% of unemployed women compared to only 12% for men in 2007. In Jordan, 26.5 percent of women versus 9.1 percent of men with a bachelor’s degree or above are unemployed.

Women’s participation in the economy is believed to provide a tremendous impetus to their enhanced participation in public affairs. That is perhaps why the low levels of female labor force participation and employment in the MENA region raise some concern. A mixture of arguments – economic, institutional and cultural in nature – have been put forth to unpack the reasons behind this phenomenon.

To the extent that gender gaps in labor force participation and work revolve around social and cultural norms that restrict mobility, international evidence suggests that they limit access to key services and life opportunities for women including opportunities for paid work, voting and other forms of community and political participation. Therefore, improved understanding of the constraints to women’s economic participation is a key element of the World Bank’s strategy for the MENA region.
At the core of the World Bank's poverty reduction strategy is improving gender equality. The emphasis on gender issues increased with the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. But more recently in 2007, the Bank launched a Gender Action Plan (GAP), “Gender Equality as Smart Economics,” a four-year action plan to improve women’s economic opportunity through increasing women’s labor force participation and entrepreneurship. The MENA strategy on gender is consistent with this overall objective, but many challenges remain that invoke the need for a solid analytical work to elevate debate and dialogue with our partner countries on this important topic.

Our ongoing work suggests that social and cultural factors remain pertinent to understanding female participation in the labor force. But given such barriers, decisive reforms to create job opportunities through an improved policy environment—especially to propel private sector employment—have the potential to make a big difference. Moreover, cultural norms are slow to change, but change they do.

A compelling case in point is the US (figure 4), where views about women’s work outside the home were fairly conservative even as late as the 1940s, but were transformed as women’s economic participation rose (from about 20 percent in 1940 to 60 percent in 1980) due to a combination of factors such as rising education levels, campaigns to attract women to the workplace during World War II, new work opportunities for women and the introduction of scheduling flexibility at the workplace.

Deep analytic work and policy experimentation is therefore called for to identify the scope for policy reforms that would positively contribute to such shifts in MENA. The World Bank program on gender and inclusion focuses on building evidence on such complex questions, so as to make more informed and effective policy recommendations to enhance women’s labor force participation.

The Middle East and North Africa Economic Development Department (MNSED) concerted program on gender and economic inclusion:

**Jordan:** In Jordan, as part of the Arab World Initiative, a policy experiment on employment of young female graduates has recently been designed, with the overarching objective of addressing the critical constraints that young female entrants face in the labor market. The proposed pilots will facilitate such school-to-work transition by supporting young female graduates in acquiring on-the-job experience and skills. Through careful impact evaluation, the pilot will contribute towards improved designs of similar interventions on a large scale, and most importantly, provide policy lessons for going forward in Jordan and across the MENA region.

**Egypt:** As an update to the Egypt Gender Assessment Report of 2003, the Bank is producing a policy note on constraints to female labor force participation in Egypt that will be completed in 2010. This note analyzes rich household survey data to build evidence, which can inform policy and selected pilot interventions to improve the participation and retention of women in the labor force. Preliminary analysis provides new evidence suggesting that compatibility between post-marriage life and work is one of the key determinants of women’s decision to work in a particular sector. Findings such as these will be useful to policy discussions and Bank operations in not only Egypt, but in other MENA countries as well. The Bank is also supporting the Gender Equity Model Egypt (GEME), a pilot program that promotes gender equity in private firms.

**West Bank and Gaza:** Data collected by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) suggest that in this conflict-affected area, women are a particularly vulnerable group. Gender will be an integral component of the West Bank and Gaza Programmatic Poverty and Inclusion Assessment Program that will be completed in 2011. This work is being developed in close collaboration with key counterparts and also involves substantial capacity building. The analysis will be based on a long, high frequency series of household and labor force survey data, including years before and after the latest protracted period of conflict in this area. Going beyond the measurement of poverty, this report will comprehensively examine the impact of the conflict on welfare, looking at health, education, and the functioning of labor markets.
Morocco: Although the gender parity index has considerably improved in primary education, the dropout rates are very high, especially for girls and in rural areas. Moreover, Morocco is one of the few countries where the difference in illiteracy rates between men and women has increased since 1970. A pilot Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program in education is currently underway to improve dropout rates from primary school. Also in Morocco, the Household and Youth Survey that is currently being implemented will provide a unique opportunity to initiate analytical work on gender issues. The survey - a representative sample of households in Morocco - is designed to better understand constraints to employment and support a broader assessment of the determinants of vulnerability for various subgroups, specifically youth and women.

All dollar figures are in US dollar equivalents. Updated April 2010

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