

**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION  
FOR WESTERN ASIA**

**WHERE DO ARAB WOMEN STAND IN THE  
DEVELOPMENT PROCESS?  
A GENDER-BASED STATISTICAL ANALYSIS**

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## **Acknowledgements**

This publication was produced under the overall supervision of Mr. Ahmed Hussein, Team Leader of Social Statistics and Indicators.

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## Foreword

The importance of gender equality to human development and the need to monitor progress towards its realization are underscored by a number of international conferences, conventions and declarations, as well as the establishment of special commissions and bodies within the international system. The International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 5-13 September 1994), the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 4-15 September 1995) and the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 6-12 March 1995) stressed the importance of gender equality. The adoption of the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952) and of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) bind signatory countries to uphold and promote women's rights and freedoms. More recently, in 2000, 189 countries adopted the Millennium Development Goals, thereby pledging to focus on improving the status of women and men alike.

Arab women have made considerable gains in the past decade, particularly in the areas of health and education. However, they remain less economically and politically empowered than women in other regions of the world. The low visibility and representation of Arab women in the labour force and political structure is unfortunate given that the skills and knowledge they have acquired through improved educational achievements are not being utilized.

Achieving gender equality is central to the human development process since it involves meeting the needs of women and men alike and, consequently, implies guaranteeing the rights of all citizens. In this sense, women and men are partners and their own agents of change.

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) is dedicated to assisting countries in the region in achieving gender equality and empowerment of women. This booklet is designed to shed light on the milestones in the pursuit of gender equality and, more importantly, on the challenges facing the region as well as the strategies for tackling them.

I would like to thank the ESCWA Social Statistics and Indicators Team for preparing this booklet in a timely fashion and hope it is beneficial for all those interested in achieving gender equality.



Mervat Tallawy  
Executive Secretary



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## Introduction

Various indicators have been developed to assess progress towards gender equality. These indicators provide a factual basis that assist in formulating policies and programmes, and that serve as valuable tools to raise awareness on gender issues and to measure results. This booklet covers the Arab region and highlights the current status of Arab women in relation to men in the following areas: health, education, employment and political participation.<sup>1</sup> Other areas of concern, including women's access to credit and information technology, were excluded given the lack of data. This publication sheds light on achievements, addresses current obstacles and suggests future strategies for promoting effective gender equality and empowering women. Where possible, comparisons with other regions are provided.

The statistics set forth in this publication provide the latest years for which there are reliable data and are derived from a number of sources. Specifically, data for ESCWA member States are drawn from the secretariat's Social Statistics Datasets for 2003, which are largely based on national reports, censuses and surveys; data for non-ESCWA Arab countries come from other agencies within the United Nations system.<sup>2</sup>

The booklet is one among several gender-related publications produced by the Social Statistics and Indicators Team at ESCWA, under the umbrella of its ongoing regional project, entitled *Development of National Gender Statistics Programmes in the Arab Countries*. The project has been underway in 12 Arab countries since 1997 and is dedicated to producing and disseminating data on women and men to serve as the basis for more effective policies promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Arab region comprises 22 countries and territories, namely: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Comoros, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

<sup>2</sup> These include the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for data on human development; the UNESCO Institute for Statistics for data on education; the International Labour Organization (ILO) for economic data; and the Inter-parliamentary Union for statistics on political participation.

<sup>3</sup> More information on the Gender Statistics Programmes (GSP) is available at: [www.escwa.org.lb/gsp](http://www.escwa.org.lb/gsp).

## 1. Women and population

In 2003, the total population in the Arab region was estimated at 307 million, of which approximately 50 per cent were women.<sup>4</sup> The proportion of the working-age population aged 15-64 years constituted 59 per cent of the total population compared to 37 per cent who were aged 14 years and younger, 21 per cent aged 15-24 years, and almost 6 per cent who were aged 60 years and older (see figure 1.1).

The Arab region is currently going through a demographic transition from high to low mortality and fertility rates, referred to as “demographic bonus” whereby the working-age population increases relative to the dependent population (those aged 14 years and younger and 65 years and older), thereby lowering the dependency ratio and creating a unique opportunity for economic growth. However, countries can only capitalize on this opportunity by creating new employment opportunities to reduce unemployment and accommodate first-time job seekers.<sup>5</sup>

### *Life expectancy*

Women formed the majority of the population aged 60 years and older. This can be attributed to the higher life expectancy at birth of women compared to men, which averaged 68.5 years and 65.1 years, respectively, for the period 2000-2005. However, within the context of life expectancy, significant intraregional disparities were recorded whereby women and men in ESCWA countries are generally expected to outlive their counterparts in non-ESCWA countries by approximately ten years.<sup>6</sup>

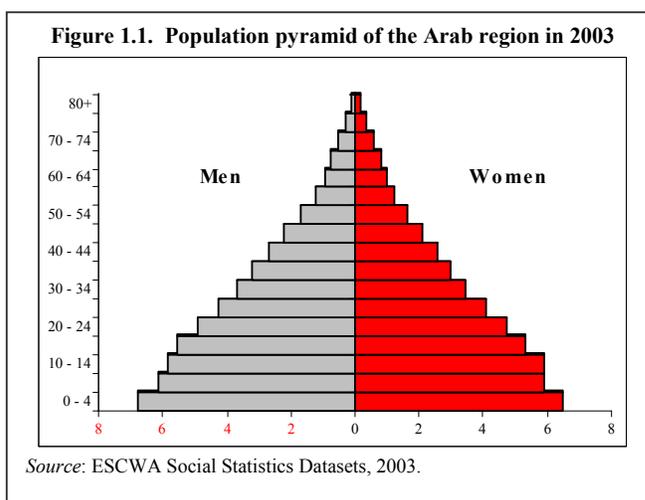
### *Population growth and total fertility rates*

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<sup>4</sup> However, in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), namely, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, men constituted a little over half the population, which can be attributed to the comparatively higher number of male migrant workers in those countries.

<sup>5</sup> Yousef, T.M., “*Macroeconomic aspects of the new demography in the Middle East and North Africa*”, which was presented at the Annual World Bank Conference on Development Economics Paris, 26-28 June 2001). This study is available at: [www.worldbank.org/research/abcde/eu\\_2000/pdffiles/yousef.pdf](http://www.worldbank.org/research/abcde/eu_2000/pdffiles/yousef.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> These non-ESCWA countries include Algeria, Comoros, Djibouti, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia.

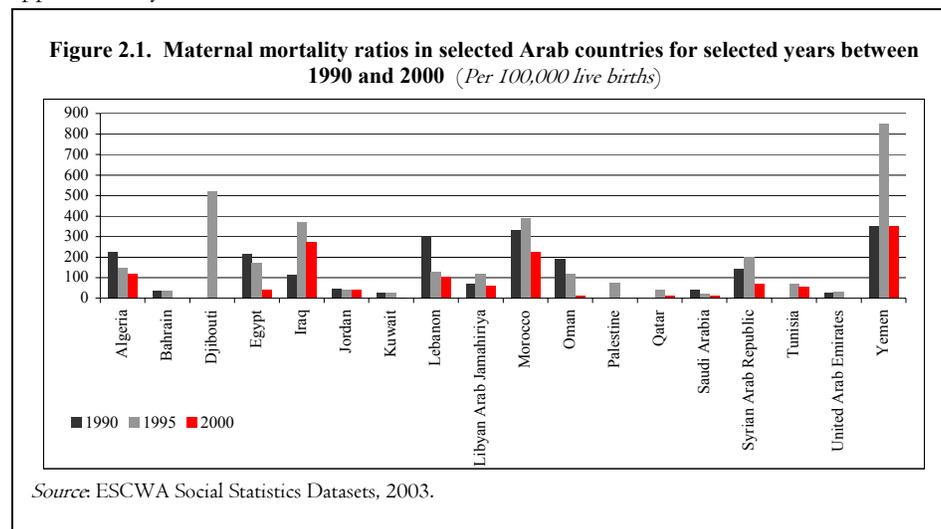


At a regional level, the population is currently growing at an estimated 2.4 per cent a year and is set to double in 29 years.<sup>7</sup> While this rate is expected to drop to 2.1 per cent for the period 2000-2015, it remains substantially higher than the corresponding projections for other developing regions, specifically East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and South Asia with projected population growth rates of 0.8, 1.3 and 1.6, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

This population growth rate is largely attributed to high total fertility rates that prevail in a number of Arab countries, particularly Yemen. While average fertility has been declining in the region and was estimated at 3.81 births per woman in the period 2000-2005, down from 4.13 births per woman in the period 1995-2000,<sup>9</sup> it remains significantly above the average for developing countries of 2.9 births per woman.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Women and health

Between 1990 and 2000 maternal mortality ratios (MMR) decreased dramatically in most countries (see figure 2.1). Notable decreases in MMR occurred in the following countries: Lebanon (104 in 2000), with a drop to one-third of cases in 1990; Algeria (120 in 2000), with approximately half the number of cases in 1990; Egypt (44 in 2000), with a drop to almost one-fifth of cases in 1990; and Oman, which experienced the most dramatic decline from 190 to 14 deaths per 100,000, representing a drop by a factor of approximately 13.6.



By contrast, the ratio increased in Iraq from 117 to 274 between 1990 and 2000. During this period, MMR remained comparatively high in Yemen, increasing from 351 in 1990

<sup>7</sup> Mathematically, a population that grows annually by x per cent doubles in size every n years, where  $(1+x)^n = 2$ .

<sup>8</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report 2003* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 253.

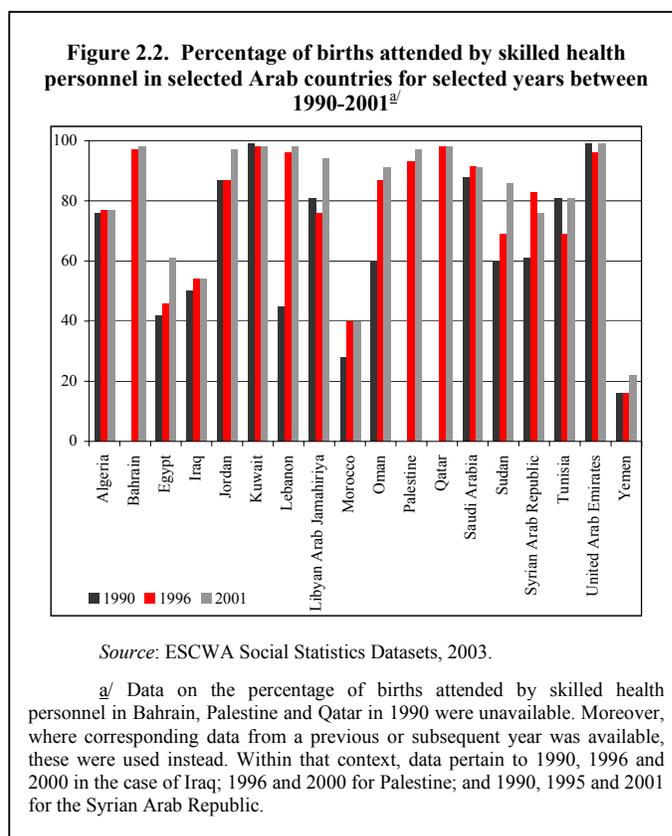
<sup>9</sup> ESCWA Social Statistics Datasets, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report 2003* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 253.

to 850 in 1995, and subsequently decreasing to 350 in 2000. During the period 1990-2000, the highest MMR was observed in Sudan in 1995 where a prodigious 1,500 maternal deaths resulted for every 100,000 live births.

*Births attended by skilled health personnel*

Between 1990 and 2001, there was an upward trend in the percentage of births attended by skilled health personnel (see figure 2.2). The most significant increases occurred in three countries, namely: Lebanon, where the percentage more than doubled to reach 98; Oman, where skilled health personnel attended 91 per cent of births in 2001 compared to 60 per cent in 1990; and Sudan, where the corresponding proportion increased from 60 to 86. The highest percentage of births attended by skilled health personnel in 2001 was observed in Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar and United Arab Emirates, which were all in the range of 97-99 per cent that compares favourably with the average rate of 99 per cent in the high-income countries of OECD. However, the situation was less encouraging in other Arab countries, particularly Yemen and Morocco, where skilled health personnel attended a modest 22 per cent and 40 per cent of births, respectively. Similarly, data from Iraq for 2000 reveal that skilled health personnel attended barely half the births.

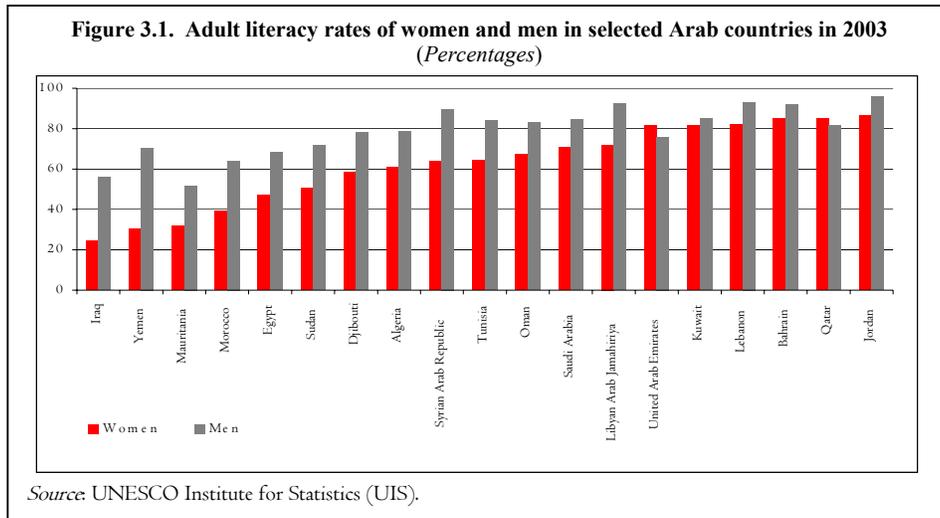


Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar and United Arab Emirates, which were all in the range of 97-99 per cent that compares favourably with the average rate of 99 per cent in the high-income countries of OECD. However, the situation was less encouraging in other Arab countries, particularly Yemen and Morocco, where skilled health personnel attended a modest 22 per cent and 40 per cent of births, respectively. Similarly, data from Iraq for 2000 reveal that skilled health personnel attended barely half the births.

### 3. Women and education

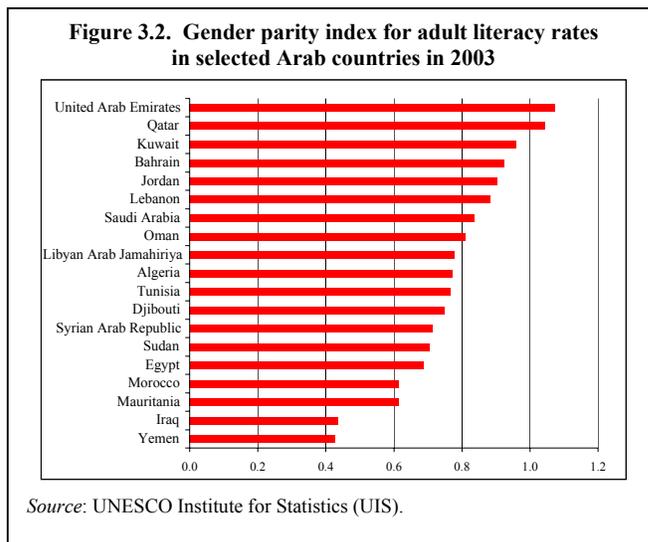
#### *Adult literacy*

Between 1990 and 2000, the adult literacy rate in the Arab region increased from 50 per cent to 60 per cent and is expected to exceed 70 per cent by 2015.<sup>11</sup> During this period, the adult literacy rate of Arab women rose from 35 per cent to 47.5 per cent, while the corresponding rate for Arab men increased from 63.5 per cent to 71 per cent.



#### *Gender gap in adult literacy*

In 2003, the adult literacy rate of Arab women was found to be significantly lower than that of men at 51 per cent and 73 per cent, respectively. This regional average masks wider gender gaps in adult literacy that were recorded in a number of countries, particularly Yemen, where 30.1 per cent of women were found to be literate compared to 70.5 per cent of men; and Iraq,



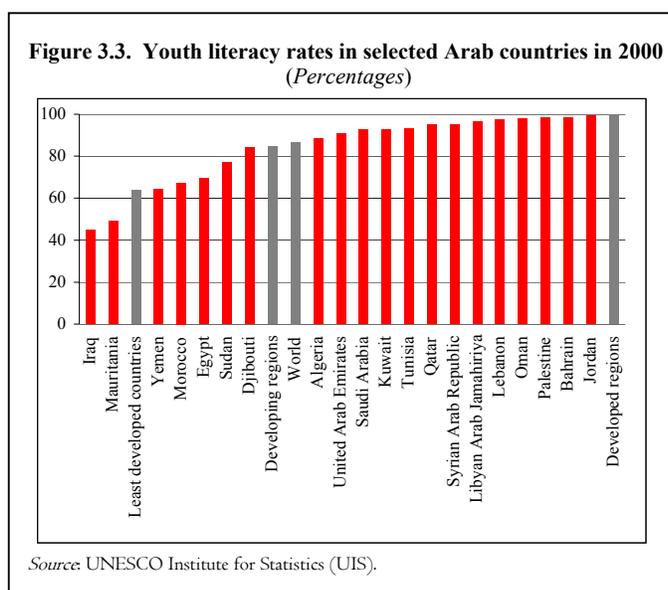
<sup>11</sup> This regional average for the adult literacy rate does not include Palestine.

with literacy rates of 24.4 per cent and 55.9 per cent for women and men, respectively. Women tended to be marginally more literate than men in Qatar, with corresponding rates of 85 per cent and 81.4 per cent for women and men, respectively, and in the United Arab Emirates, with 81.5 per cent compared to 76 per cent. The highest adult literacy rate of Arab women was observed in Jordan at 86.6 per cent, with the corresponding rate for men estimated at 95.8 per cent (see figure 3.1).

In most Arab countries, the gender parity index (GPI) for adult literacy ranged between 0.70 and 0.80 (see figure 3.2).<sup>12</sup> GPI in adult literacy rates exceeded 1 in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, indicating that women in those countries were marginally more literate than adult men. Moreover, Bahrain, Jordan and Kuwait were the closest to achieving gender equality in adult literacy with GPI in the range of 0.90-0.96. However, the widest gender gaps in adult literacy were observed in Iraq and Yemen, where GPI was less than 0.44 in both those countries.

### Youth literacy

Literacy rates for the Arab youth aged 15-24 years followed the same upward trend as adult literacy, increasing during the past decade from 65 per cent in 1990 to 76 per cent in 2000. Moreover, youth literacy is projected to rise to 85 per cent by 2015.<sup>13</sup> Between 1990 and 2000, the youth literacy rate of Arab women rose from 53 per cent to 68 per cent, while the corresponding rate for Arab men increased from 76 per cent to 83 per cent.



At a national level, youth literacy rates in 2000 ranged from 50 per cent or less in Iraq and Mauritania to 95 per cent or more in Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Oman, which are comparable to levels attained in the developed world (see figure 3.3).

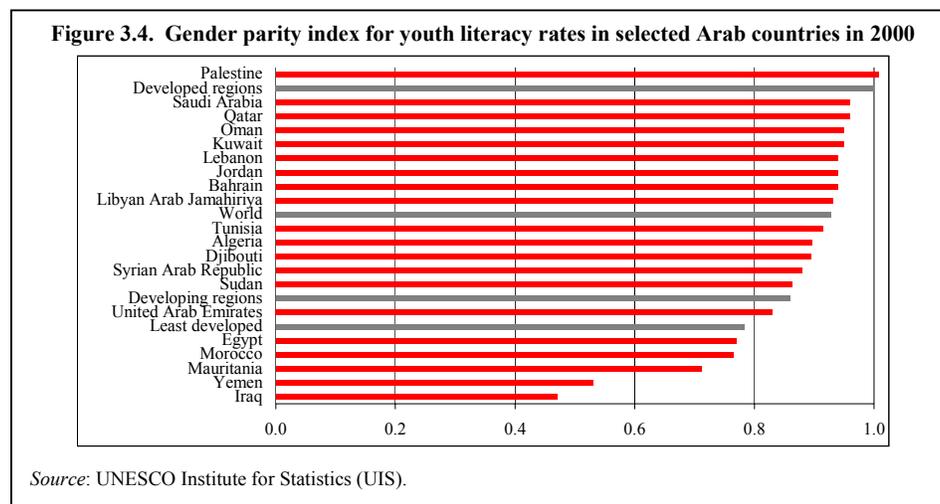
<sup>12</sup> When the literacy GPI shows a value equal to 1, women and men's literacy rates are equal. A value less than 1 indicates that proportionately fewer women than men are literate and, conversely, a value exceeding 1 indicates that proportionately fewer men are literate.

<sup>13</sup> This regional average for the youth literacy rate does not include Palestine.

Additionally, the youth literacy rates in the majority of Arab countries were higher than the world average.

#### *Gender gap in youth literacy*

In most Arab countries, GPI for youth literacy rates in the year 2000 ranged between 0.86 and 1.0 (see figure 3.4). In Palestine, GPI for the youth literacy rate was 1.01, indicating that the female youth were marginally more literate than their male counterparts. The widest gender gaps in favour of men in youth literacy rates were observed in Iraq and Yemen at 0.53 and 0.47, respectively. Moreover, GPI for youth literacy rates was lower than the average of least developed countries in five Arab countries, namely, Egypt, Iraq, Mauritania, Morocco and Yemen.

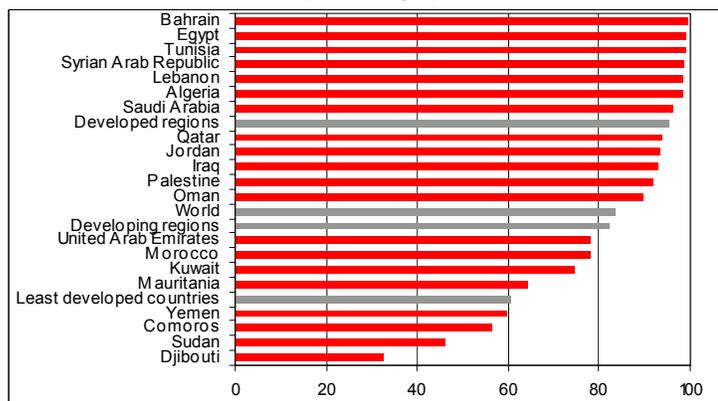


#### *Primary education*

Despite significant increases in enrolment ratios in primary education during the past decade, large discrepancies were observed between the Arab countries. In 2000/01, net enrolment ratios in primary education in the range of 96-99 per cent were found in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia. In those countries net enrolment ratios in primary education exceeded the average for developed countries (see figure 3.5). However, the corresponding ratios in Comoros, Djibouti, Sudan and Yemen were lower than the average of least developed countries, varying between 33-60 per cent. Cumulatively, these low ratios weighed down the regional net enrolment ratio in primary education to 80.9 per cent, implying that 7.4 million Arab children were out of school in 2000/01, or one in every five children, of which 4.4 million were girls.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).

**Figure 3.5. Net enrolment ratios in primary education in selected Arab countries in 2000-2001<sup>a/</sup>**  
(Percentages)



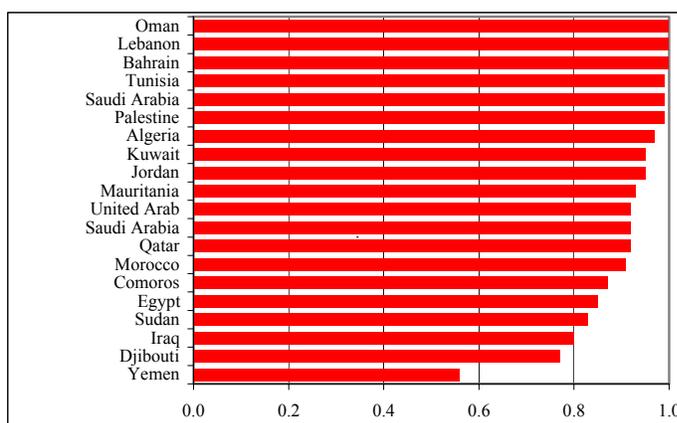
Source: ESCWA Social Statistics Datasets 2003 and UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).

a/ Data for Iraq, Kuwait, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates pertain to the academic year 1999/2000. Data for Qatar pertain to 1998/1999.

*Gender gap in primary education*

In addition to the intraregional gap in net enrolment ratios in primary education, a gap between girls and boys with regard to access to primary education is strongly evident (see figure 3.6). GPI for primary education enrolment ratios in 2000/01 ranged between 0.95 and 0.99 in Algeria, Jordan, Kuwait, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia, indicating almost equal access to primary education for girls and boys. Moreover, equal access was achieved in Bahrain, Lebanon and Oman. Conversely, GPI was estimated at a poor 0.77 and 0.56 in Djibouti and Yemen, respectively.

**Figure 3.6. Gender parity index for net enrolment ratios in primary education in selected Arab countries in 2000/01<sup>a/</sup>**



Sources: ESCWA Social Statistics Datasets, 2003; and UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

a/ Data for Iraq, Jordan and Kuwait pertain to 1998/99. Data for Saudi Arabia and Sudan pertain to 1999/2000.

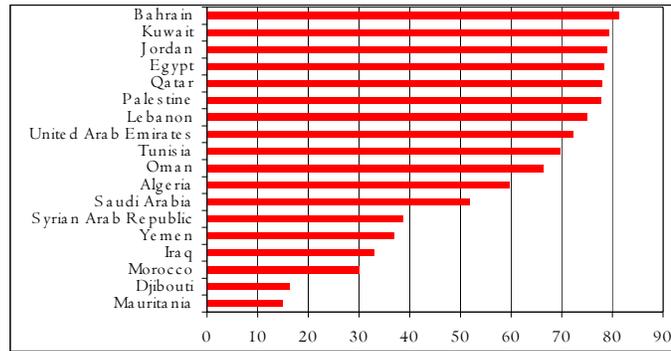
*Secondary education*

In 2000/01, the net enrolment ratio in secondary education in the Arab countries was 54.1 per cent.<sup>15</sup> Net enrolment ratios in secondary education exceeded 77 per cent in Egypt, Kuwait and Palestine, with the highest ratio observed in Bahrain at 81.3 per cent.

By contrast, the lowest ratios were found in Djibouti and Mauritania at 16.3 and 14.9 per cent, respectively (see figure 3.7).

The highest net enrolment ratios of girls in secondary education in 2000/01 were observed in Bahrain at 86.5

**Figure 3.7. Net enrolment ratios in secondary education in selected Arab countries in 2000/01<sup>a/</sup>**



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).

<sup>a/</sup> Country data pertain to the following years: Iraq, 1999/2000; Jordan, 1998/99; Lebanon, 1998/99; Morocco, 1999/2000; Qatar, 1998/99; and Yemen, 1998/99.

per cent, compared to the corresponding ratio among boys at 76.4 per cent; in Kuwait, with 81.2 per cent compared to 77.5 per cent of boys; and in Palestine, with 80.9 per cent net enrolment ratio of girls compared to 74.7 per cent of boys. Girls in Djibouti and Mauritania had the lowest net enrolment ratios at 12.7 and 13.1 per cent, respectively, compared to the marginally more favourable ratios of boys at 19.9 and 16.8 per cent, respectively.<sup>16</sup>

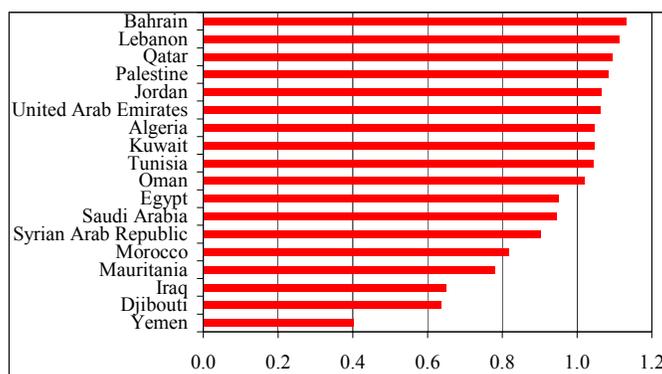
*Gender gap in secondary education*

Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Syrian Arab Republic were on their way to achieving gender equality in secondary enrolment in 2000/01 with GPI in the range of 0.90-0.96 in those three countries (see figure 3.8). Girls had greater access to secondary education than their male counterparts in Algeria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Palestine, Tunisia and United Arab Emirates, where GPI ranged between 1.02 and 1.13. The deepest gender gap in favour of men in secondary education in the Arab region in 2000/01 existed in Djibouti where GPI was a poor 0.64.

<sup>15</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) database.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

**Figure 3.8. Gender parity index for net enrolment ratios in secondary education in selected Arab countries in 2000/01<sup>a/</sup>**



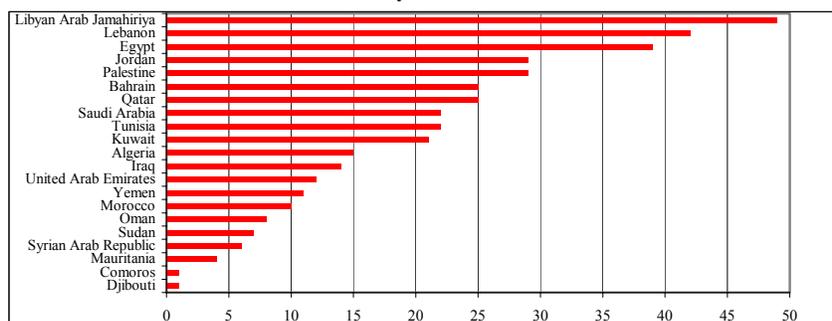
Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).

<sup>a/</sup> Country data pertain to the following years: Iraq, 1999/2000; Jordan, 1998/99; Lebanon, 1998/99; Morocco, 1999/2000; Qatar, 1998/99; and Yemen, 1998/99.

### Tertiary education

In 2000/01, the gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education in Arab countries averaged 19.7 per cent. The highest ratios were observed in Lebanon and the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya at 42 and 49 per cent, respectively. Conversely, the poorest ratios were found in Djibouti and in Mauritania at 1 and 4 per cent (see figure 3.9).

**Figure 3.9. Gross enrolment ratios in tertiary education in selected Arab countries in 2000/01<sup>a/</sup>**



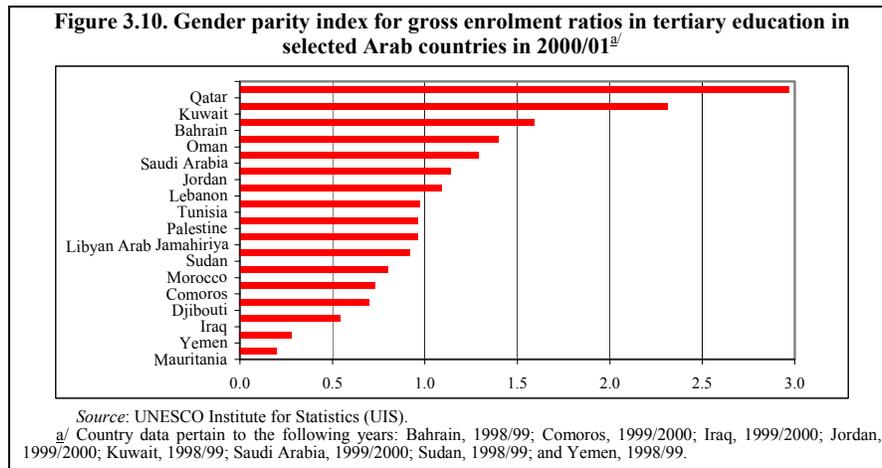
Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).

<sup>a/</sup> Country data pertain to the following years: Algeria, 1998/99; Bahrain, 1998/99; Comoros, 1999/00; Egypt, 1998/99; Iraq, 1999/00; Jordan, 1999/00; Kuwait, 1998/99; Saudi Arabia, 1999/00; Sudan, 1998/99; Syrian Arab Republic, 1998/99; United Arab Emirates 1998/99; and Yemen, 1998/99.

### Gender gap in tertiary education

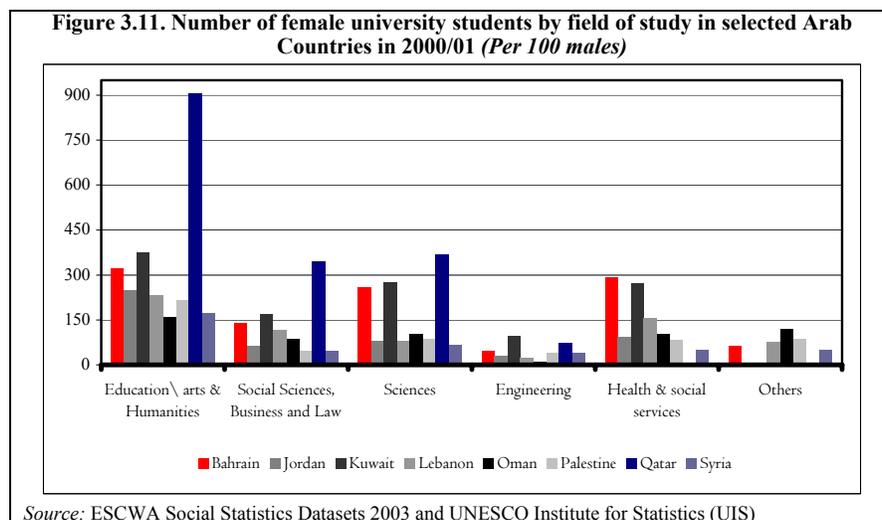
In 2000/01, women's enrolment in tertiary education exceeded that of men in three countries, namely: Lebanon, with 44 per cent compared to 40 per cent of men; Oman at 10 per cent, compared to 7 per cent of men; and Qatar with 38 per cent compared to 13 per cent of men. Within that context, GPI in gross enrolment ratios in

tertiary education exceeded 1.0 in Lebanon and Oman, and reached 2.97 in Qatar (see figure 3.10). The comparatively higher enrolment rate of women in tertiary education in those countries could be partially attributed to the common practice of keeping daughters in situ while sending sons abroad to pursue higher education. GPI in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya and Palestine stood at 0.96, indicating nearly equal gross enrolment ratios in tertiary education of women and men. Moreover, equal access was achieved in Tunisia where GPI was 1. Conversely, GPI was estimated at a poor 0.20 in Mauritania, implying deep inequality in favour of men.



*Field of study*

At the tertiary level, women and men tend to enrol in different fields of study. In 2000/01, the majority of female university students were enrolled in the fields of education, arts and humanities; and comparatively fewer women studied engineering and other scientific courses (see figure 3.11).

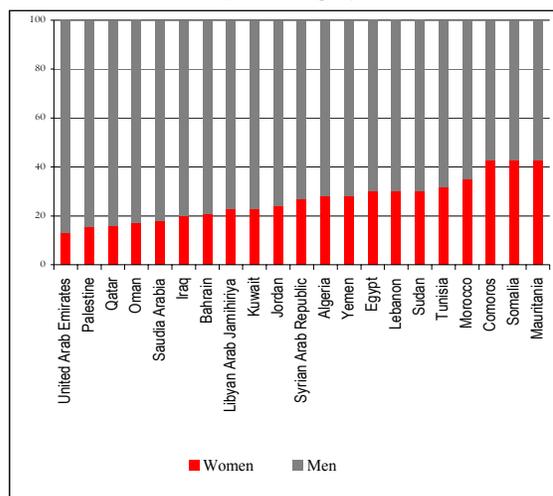


#### 4. Women and economic activity

In 2001, the participation of women in the global economy was estimated at 55.2 per cent, with corresponding rates in East Asia and the Pacific at 70 per cent, South Asia at 43.6 per cent, and Latin America and the Caribbean at 42 per cent.<sup>17</sup> By stark contrast, a very modest 29 per cent of Arab women participated in the national economies of the Arab region.

Figure 4.1 clearly illustrates that in 2000, the lowest share of women in the labour force largely prevailed in the higher-income countries of the Arab region, namely, Bahrain at 21 per cent; Kuwait at 23 per cent; Oman at 17 per cent; Qatar at 16 per cent; Saudi Arabia at 18 per cent; and United Arab Emirates at 13 per cent. Conversely, women constituted 43 per cent of the labour force in each of the less developed Arab countries of Comoros, Mauritania and Somalia.

**Figure 4.1. Shares of women and men in the labour force in selected Arab countries in 2000 (Percentages)**

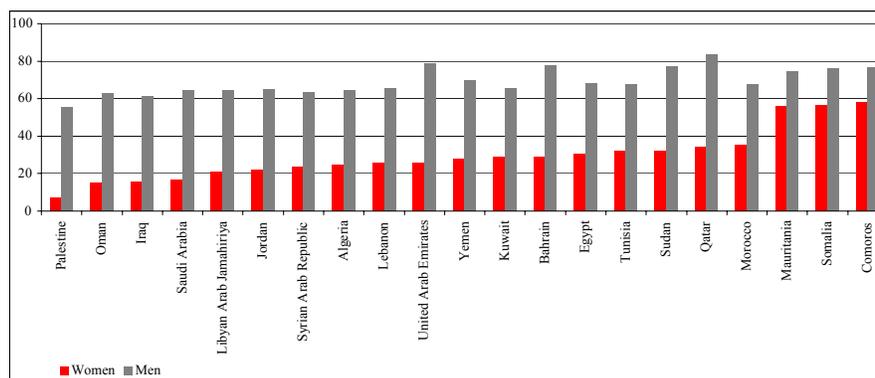


Source: ILO, Labour statistics database (LABORSTA), available at: [laborsta.ilo.org/cgi-bin/brokerv8.exe](http://laborsta.ilo.org/cgi-bin/brokerv8.exe).

Figure 4.2 illustrates the economic activity rates of women and men in 2000. In the countries of the GCC, the economic activity rate of women is more accurately a reflection of the proportion of foreign and migrant female workers in the Gulf region, rather than a measure of the economically active female nationals of those countries. By contrast, the higher economic activity of women in service-oriented or agricultural-based economies outside of the GCC could be attributed to a number of factors, including a comparatively higher cost of living in those countries, thereby necessitating two incomes per household and providing an added incentive for women to join the labour force; and a common perception that women are suited to work in the service and agricultural sectors.

<sup>17</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report 2003* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 325.

**Figure 4.2. Economic activity rates of women and men in selected Arab countries in 2000**  
(Percentage of the working population aged 15 years and older)

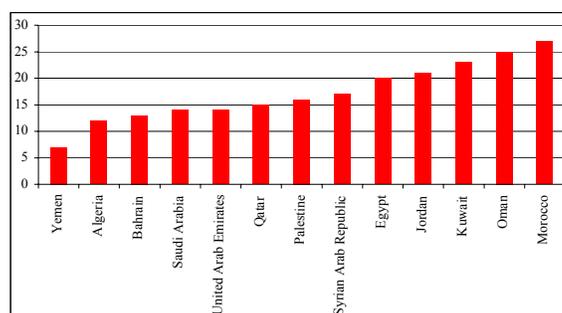


Source: ILO, Labour statistics database (LABORSTA), available at: [laborsta.ilo.org/cgi-bin/brokerv8.exe](http://laborsta.ilo.org/cgi-bin/brokerv8.exe).

### *Women's paid employment in non-agricultural sectors*

In 2001, women in Yemen had the lowest share of non-agricultural wage employment in the Arab region at an estimated 7 per cent compared to the range of 20-27 per cent in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco and Oman (see figure 4.3).<sup>18</sup> These rates were significantly lower than the corresponding proportions in other developing countries, including Namibia at 49 per cent, Brazil at 46 per cent, and China at 39 per cent.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 4.3. Women's share in non-agricultural wage employment in selected Arab countries in 2001** (Percentages)



Source: UNDP, *Human Development Report 2003* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

### *Economic sector and occupational group*

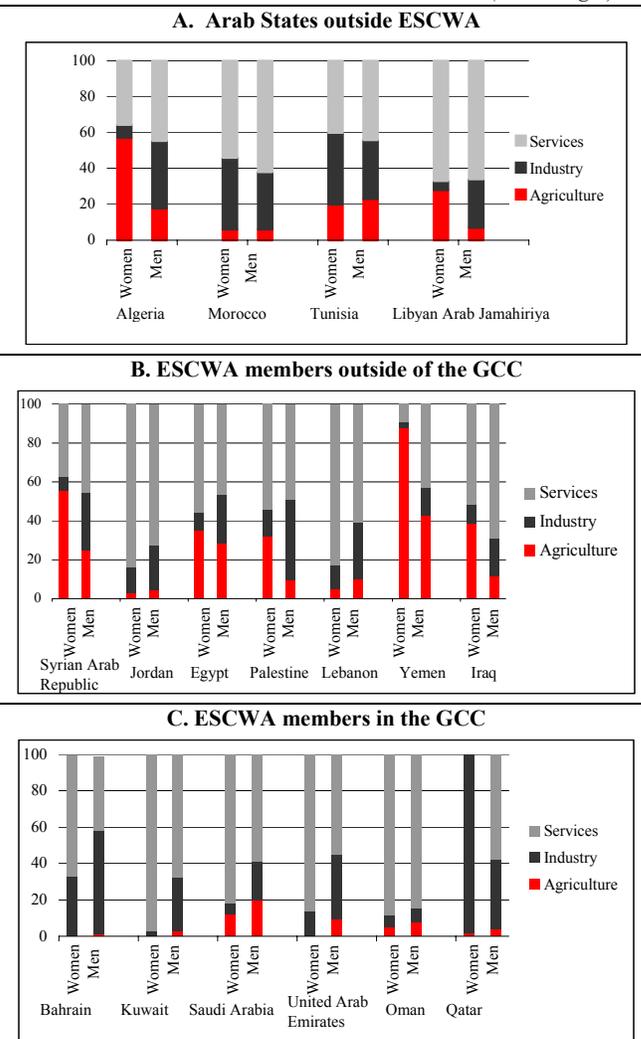
Figure 4.4 illustrates the distribution of women and men working in the agricultural, services and industrial sectors in selected Arab countries for the latest year available during the period 1990-2001.

<sup>18</sup> Data for this indicator were unavailable for the following countries: Comoros, Djibouti, Iraq, Lebanon, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia. Data for all other Arab countries are based on UNDP, *Human Development Report 2003* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 203.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 203-206.

At a regional level, most Arab women worked in the services sector, particularly in the countries of the GCC given the absence of an agricultural sector in the Gulf region. Exceptions to this were found in Algeria, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen where the majority of women in those countries—at 57.2, 55.4 and 87.8 per cent, respectively—worked in agriculture, compared to 17.8, 25 and 43.1 per cent of men, respectively. Moreover, in Qatar, 98.1 per cent of working women were employed in the industrial sector, compared to 38 per cent of men. In addition to Qatar, the percentage of women working in industry reached double-digit figures in Bahrain at 32.4 per cent, compared to 57 per cent of men; Jordan at 13.2 per cent, compared to 23.3 per cent of men; Lebanon, at 12.4 per cent, compared to 29.5 per cent of men; Palestine at 13.7 per cent, compared to 41.8 per cent of men; and United Arab Emirates at 13.8 per cent, compared to 36.1 per cent of men.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 4.4. Distribution of female and male workers by economic sector in selected Arab countries in 1990-2001<sup>a</sup> (Percentages)**



Source: ILO, Labour statistics database (LABORSTA), available at: [www.laborsta.ilo.org/cgi-bin/brokerv8.exe](http://www.laborsta.ilo.org/cgi-bin/brokerv8.exe).

<sup>a</sup> Country data pertain to the following years: Algeria, 1990; Bahrain, 1994; Egypt, 1998; Iraq, 1990; Jordan, 2001; Kuwait, 1995; Lebanon, 1997; Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, 1990; Oman, 1996; Palestine, 1999; Qatar, 1997; Morocco, 1999; Saudi Arabia 1990; Syrian Arab Republic 2001; Tunisia, 1994; United Arab Emirates, 1995; and Yemen, 1999.

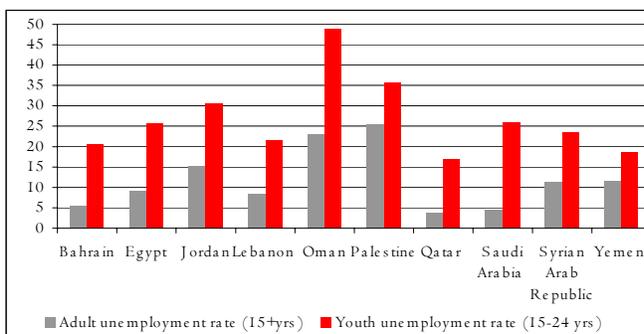
<sup>20</sup> Country data pertain to the latest available year as follows: Algeria, 1990; Bahrain, 1994; Jordan, 2001; Lebanon, 1997; Palestine, 1999; Syrian Arab Republic, 2001; Qatar, 1997; United Arab Emirates, 1995; and Yemen, 1999.

In the agricultural-based economies of the Arab region, the proportion of male workers in agriculture as a percentage of the total male labour force was smaller than the corresponding ratio of women in that sector over total working women. This was particularly evident in Yemen where approximately 88 per cent of economically active women worked in agriculture compared to some 44 per cent of men; and in the Syrian Arab Republic, where the respective ratios were 55 per cent, compared to a modest 25 per cent of men.

#### *Adult and youth unemployment*

The adult unemployment rate is among the indicators most often used to assess the general condition of the economy.<sup>21</sup> On average, 17.1 per cent of Arab women and 10.6 per cent of Arab men were unemployed in 2001 (see figure 4.5).<sup>22</sup> These figures are significantly high

**Figure 4.5. Adult and youth unemployment rates in selected Arab countries in 2001<sup>a/</sup>**



Source: ILO, Labour statistics database (LABORSTA), available at: [laborsta.ilo.org/cgi-bin/brokerv8.exe](http://laborsta.ilo.org/cgi-bin/brokerv8.exe).

a/ Unemployment data for Lebanon and Yemen pertain to 1997 and 1999, respectively.

compared to the global averages of unemployment rates in 1995, which were estimated at 5.9 per cent and 4.7 per cent for women and men, respectively.<sup>23</sup>

In general, the unemployment rate tends to be comparatively higher for women than for men. This could partly be attributed to higher entry and exit rates of women into the labour force, which in turn is caused by two principal factors, namely: family-related reasons that compel women to seek temporary or intermittent work; and restricted employment opportunities due to a lower level of education or lack of training needed for specific jobs.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> The unemployment rates in various Arab countries are not perfectly correlative given intraregional differences in terms of measuring tools, sources, conceptual frames and coverage.

<sup>22</sup> This average was calculated for countries with available unemployment data for the period 1996-2001, namely Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. Country data pertain to 2001 with the exception of Lebanon and Yemen, for which corresponding unemployment data pertain to 1997 and 1999, respectively.

<sup>23</sup> Mehran, F. "Estimation of world and regional unemployment" (Bureau of Statistics, ILO, 1999), p. 8. Available at: [www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/download/articles/1999-4.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/download/articles/1999-4.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> ILO, "Unemployment, underemployment and inactivity indicators", *Key Indicators of the Labour Market* (ILO, Geneva, 2003).

Similarly, the youth unemployment rate is another important indicator that measures the general economic condition of the population aged 15-24 years. In 2001, 35.3 per cent of Arab women in that age bracket were unemployed compared to 24.5 per cent of Arab men in the same bracket.<sup>25</sup> These rates were greater than those prevailing in other regions, including sub-Saharan Africa where the total youth unemployment rate was estimated at 11.9 per cent in 1999.<sup>28</sup> Figure 4.5 clearly illustrates that youth unemployment in the Arab region was higher than adult unemployment, rising to more than double the adult rate in some countries, thereby implying that youth unemployment is not specific to youth, but rather a factor of prevailing economic conditions.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Low economic activity rate and unemployment of Arab women*

While Arab women have made significant gains in the area of education, which have resulted in net improvements in the skills and knowledge required to compete in the labour market, their economic activity rate remains among the lowest in the world. In addition, they are more prone to unemployment than men. This can be attributed to various socio-economic factors, including, inter alia, the following: (a) a downturn in economic growth in the Arab region since the 1980s, which has resulted in more sluggish labour markets with fewer employment opportunities;<sup>28</sup> (b) changes in global markets that have rendered import-substitution and State-interventionist models of growth obsolete; (c) prevalent social and traditionalist perceptions of men as the sole breadwinners or as the most suited for specific jobs, which significantly disadvantage female job applicants; and (d) a reluctance by employers to recruit women on account of such extra benefits and entitlements as maternity leave. In addition to their traditional roles as caretakers of the household, which are typically reinforced in Arab society, these obstacles have persuaded many women to leave the workforce. However, the participation of women in the labour force has paradoxically been facilitated by the economic downturn since many conservative families and spouses have been compelled to accept the notion of working women, thereby meeting the needs of the household with two incomes.

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<sup>25</sup> This average was calculated for countries with available unemployment data for the period 1996-2001, namely Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. Country data pertain to 2001 with the exception of Lebanon and Yemen, for which corresponding unemployment data pertain to 1997 and 1999, respectively.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Statistics Division Millennium Indicators Database. World and Regional Trends, available at: [http://milleniumindicators.un.org/unsd/mi/mi\\_worldregn.asp](http://milleniumindicators.un.org/unsd/mi/mi_worldregn.asp).

<sup>27</sup> According to ILO, when there is parity in the ratio of both unemployment rates, the problem of unemployment is not specific to youth and is entirely a function of the prevailing economy. ILO, "Unemployment, underemployment and inactivity indicators", *Key Indicators of the Labour Market* (ILO, Geneva, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> The World Bank Group, "Overview: Creating 100 Million Jobs for a Fast-Growing Work Force", *Unlocking the Employment Potential of the Middle East and North Africa: Toward a New Social Contract* (The World Bank Group, September 2003). The overview is available at: [http://web18.worldbank.org/mna/mena.nsf/Attachments/EmploymentOverview/\\$File/Employment-overview.pdf](http://web18.worldbank.org/mna/mena.nsf/Attachments/EmploymentOverview/$File/Employment-overview.pdf).

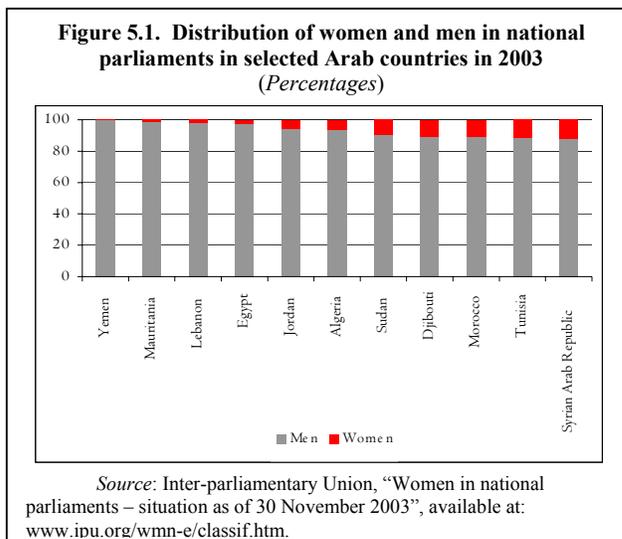
## 5. Women and political participation

The political participation of women in the Arab region is still low. The majority of Arab countries have granted women the right to vote and stand for elections, with the notable exception of Kuwait.<sup>29</sup>

### *Women in parliaments*

In November 2003, the proportion of seats held by Arab women in national parliaments was 5.8 per cent, which is lower than corresponding proportions found in Asia (14.5) and sub-Saharan Africa (15.1) per cent, and in the Pacific at 10.9 per cent.<sup>30</sup>

At a national level, the highest representation of women in parliament was observed in the Syrian Arab Republic, at 12 per cent, followed by Tunisia, at 11.5 per cent (see figure 5.1). By contrast, the lowest levels were found in Mauritania, at 1.7 per cent, Yemen, at 0.3 per cent, and in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, whose national parliaments are composed entirely of men.



## 6. Conclusions

There have been considerable gains in the areas of health and education as measured by various indicators, including life expectancy, maternal health, fertility rates, literacy and educational attainment. However, despite these gains, Arab women continue to lag behind both Arab men and women in other developing countries, particularly in terms of economic and political empowerment.

### *Population*

The current annual growth rate of the population is estimated at 2.4 per cent, which translates as a population that is increasing by some 7 million people every year. Consequently, there is an urgent need to formulate sound strategies in order to accommodate this increasing population and provide adequate health services, appropriate education programmes and decent work opportunities.

<sup>29</sup> Previous efforts to grant women the right to vote and stand for public office in Kuwait were thwarted by two votes in 1999. In 2003, an amendment was drafted to grant Kuwaiti women these rights. The bill is still pending parliamentary approval.

<sup>30</sup> Inter-parliamentary Union, "Women in national parliaments – situation as of 30 November 2003", which is available at: [www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm](http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm).

### *Health*

On average, Arab women are leading healthier lives and enjoy a higher life expectancy at birth, estimated at 68.5 years for the region. However, there are significant intraregional disparities, particularly in terms of the percentage of births attended by skilled health personnel. In 2001, this percentage was approaching 100 per cent in Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar and United Arab Emirates, while it was less than 50 per cent in Morocco and Yemen.

### *Education*

Adult and youth literacy rates have increased for both women and men. However, in 2003, an estimated 44 million adult Arab women were illiterate. Similarly, out of the 13 million illiterate youth, or 22 per cent of the youth population, 8.5 million were women.

Gender disparities were found to exist at all educational levels. Within the context of primary education, net enrolment rates approaching 100 per cent were observed in a very modest number of countries in 2000/01, namely, Bahrain, Egypt and Tunisia. More disturbingly, at a regional level, an estimated 7.4 million children were out of school in 2000, of whom 4.4 million were girls. At the secondary level, the net enrolment ratio for women in 2000/01 was 51.7 per cent, compared to 56.4 per cent for men. In the same academic year, 17.8 per cent of women and 21.6 per cent of men were enrolled in tertiary education. In some countries, comparatively more women were enrolled in tertiary education than their male counterparts, which was found to be partly attributed to the common practice of keeping daughters in situ while sending sons abroad to pursue higher education outside the Arab region.<sup>31</sup>

### *Economic activity*

The economic activity rate of Arab women remains lower than that of women in other regions of the world. In 2000, Arab women constituted a meager 29 per cent of the regional labour force and were more prone to unemployment than men. Moreover, in 2001, the unemployment rate of women was estimated at 17.1 per cent compared to that of men, at 10.6 per cent.

### *Political participation*

At a regional level, women occupied a very modest 5.8 per cent of parliamentary seats in 2003. This poor representation within the political structure of the region cannot be reconciled with the high educational attainments of women or their capabilities to serve as leaders of society.

## **7. Future strategies for advancing gender equality**

While the situation of Arab women is generally improving, there remain a number of critical gaps. Specifically, governments need to focus their efforts towards promoting gender equality and empowering women with the firm understanding that these issues are principal elements of the developmental process. Within that context, there must be

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<sup>31</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) database.

a concerted drive to advance gender equality through various relevant strategies, which are outlined below.

#### *Garnering political support*

Policymakers and decision-makers play a central role in reshaping the legal and institutional structures that can either facilitate or hinder gender equality. Consequently, the twin pursuit of gender equality and empowering women cannot succeed without a strong political will, which can be enhanced through lobbying and programmes to raise awareness on these critical issues.

#### *Raising awareness through the media*

The media in the Arab region can play a vital role in promoting gender equality by depicting positive and empowering images of women, and by portraying women in non-stereotyped gender roles. Moreover, the media can assist in advancing gender equality by addressing controversial issues, particularly violence and crimes committed against women in the name of honour, so-called “honour crimes”, which constitute a flagrant violation of human rights based on archaic, unjust cultures and traditions.

#### *Improving legislative systems*

Improvements within the legislative system are needed to remove impediments to gender equality and to reform those laws that discriminate against women. Within that context, legislative reform is needed in the following: (a) laws pertaining to personal status in the areas of marriage, divorce, inheritance and child alimony; and (b) laws governing the labour market, thereby creating better and equal access to job opportunities, and eradicating current discrimination in terms of occupational status, wages and benefits accrued from tax or employment policies.

#### *Revising educational curricula*

Educational curricula in schools need to be reviewed with a view to streaming girls and boys into more equitable and empowering gender roles, and to eradicating traditionalist stereotypes of women as homemakers and men as breadwinners. Additionally, these revisions need to be undertaken such that the enhanced educational systems provide women and men with the necessary knowledge and skills to compete in the labour market. Furthermore, there is a need to strengthen efforts aimed at providing equal access for women in vocational and technical training.

#### *Creating job opportunities and expanding the labour force*

According to a recent report by the World Bank, given that the current unemployment rate in the Arab region is approximately 15 per cent, “the more ambitious goal of absorbing unemployed workers in addition to the new entrants implies the need to create close to 100 million jobs by 2020”.<sup>32</sup> Women are largely more prone to unemployment than men due to a lack of economic opportunities in Arab countries

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<sup>32</sup> The World Bank Group, “Overview: Creating 100 Million Jobs for a Fast-Growing Work Force”, *Unlocking the Employment Potential of the Middle East and North Africa: Toward a New Social Contract* (The World Bank Group, September 2003). The overview is available at: [http://web18.worldbank.org/mna/mena.nsf/Attachments/EmploymentOverview/\\$File/Employment-overview.pdf](http://web18.worldbank.org/mna/mena.nsf/Attachments/EmploymentOverview/$File/Employment-overview.pdf).

combined with prevalent social and traditionalist perceptions of women as caretakers of the household, and to a general reluctance by employers to recruit women on account of such entitlements as maternity leave.

*Peace-making and democratic governance*

Conflicts in the Arab region, particularly the continuing occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the presence of foreign troops in Iraq, have created unstable, unhealthy and unsafe living conditions for a significant percentage of the regional population. The process of peace-making and the reconstruction of civil societies along democratic lines must include women and men. Arab women need to engage themselves more actively in public life through both formal and informal channels, thereby becoming their own agents of change.

Democratic governance is achieved when women and men are able to influence the political agenda on an equal footing. In this regard, gender equality is one of the pillars of democratic governance, given that it is aimed at meeting the needs of both women and men and of guaranteeing the rights of all citizens.

*Developing better measurement tools*

New methods for measuring the participation of women in national economies and civil society are needed to attain an accurate image of their situation in order to assess progress and pinpoint challenges. Time-use surveys, improved data collection methods with emphasis on the informal sector, for example, are in dire need. Statistics from censuses, surveys and administrative records must be periodic, accurate and policy-relevant so that they may serve as effective awareness raising tools for garnering political support as well as a factual basis for policy making and analysis.