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Research report

Forum: General Assembly 3

Issue: Reducing Gender Discrimination in
Education and Employment Opportunities in the
Middle East

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Introduction

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), gender discrimination in the workplace and in education remains a serious human rights and development concern. Although women's educational opportunities have improved, particularly at the elementary and university levels, advancements in employment and economic involvement have been gradual and uneven. A combination of institutional practices, legislative restrictions, and cultural norms limits women's full participation in public and economic life. These obstacles are systemic and frequently strengthened by national legislation and deeply ingrained social norms.

Not only does gender inequity hurt individual women, but it also limits entire countries. The World Bank estimates that in certain MENA nations, closing the gender gap in labour participation could boost GDP by as much as 30%. Higher levels of gender equality are associated with better political stability, health, and educational outcomes. Therefore, combating gender discrimination is both a moral requirement and a sensible business move.

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Definitions of key terms

Gender Parity Index (GPI)

A measure by UNESCO that compares the number of girls to the number of boys enrolled at various educational levels. A GPI of 1.0 indicates perfect gender parity.

Male Guardianship System

A legal structure in some MENA countries requiring women to obtain permission from a male relative (father, husband, or even son) for decisions such as education, work, or travel.

CEDAW

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. While most MENA countries have signed it, many maintain reservations on equality in personal and family law.

Glass Ceiling

The invisible barriers that prevent women from advancing to higher leadership or management positions, regardless of qualifications.

STEM Fields

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics — fields that are essential to economic growth but in which women remain underrepresented in the MENA region.

Wasta

A system of social connections and favouritism in hiring or promotion, which tends to disadvantage women due to their limited access to male-dominated networks.

SDG 5

United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 — aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

A foundational United Nations document asserting the equal rights of all human beings, regardless of gender.

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General overview

Over the past century, women's status in the MENA region has changed dramatically. National education programs during the 20th century increased girls' access to education and literacy, particularly in metropolitan areas. But in the 1980s and 1990s, conservative political movements gained traction, which resulted in increased limitations on women's participation in public life. Although women's rights movements gained momentum during and after the 2010–2012 Arab Spring, violence, social conservatism, and unstable economies have prevented development from being equitable.

In the majority of MENA countries, gender parity has been achieved in primary education. In school, especially in urban areas, girls often outperform boys. However, problems still exist in underserved and rural areas, where cultural norms, long commutes, and early marriage can restrict females' access to school. Despite making up more than half of university students in nations like Jordan and Tunisia, women are disproportionately found in lower-paying professions like education and the humanities, with much fewer of them pursuing STEM or vocational training.

Despite advancements in education, women continue to have the lowest rates of workforce participation worldwide, averaging only 20–25% as opposed to 70–80% for men. Women who do work frequently have limited career advancement, employment insecurity, and income inequities. While the private sector continues to be dominated by men, women's work is concentrated in the public sector and informal economy. Workplace safety, daycare availability, and maternity policies are frequently lacking or inadequate.

The digital gender gap is significant as well. Women in rural regions are less likely to have access to the internet and to be digitally literate, which prevents them from taking advantage of remote jobs and e-learning opportunities. The scope and financial support of initiatives to increase girls' access to technology are still restricted.

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Major parties involved

Countries with Progressive Reforms

Tunisia: renowned for having the region's most progressive laws about gender equality. Equal rights and protections for women, including prohibitions on domestic abuse, are guaranteed by the country's 2014 constitution.

Morocco: Improved women's rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance by reforming the family law (Moudawana) in 2004. The number of women participating in politics has also increased.

The United Arab Emirates: Appointed women to half of the Federal National Council seats and established a Gender Balance Council.

Countries with Ongoing Reforms

Saudi Arabia: The Kingdom has boosted female workforce participation, relaxed limits on male guardianship, and repealed the driving ban for women through Vision 2030.

Egypt: Puts the National Strategy for Women's Empowerment into practice, emphasizing economic involvement, legislative change, and education.

Countries Facing Structural Barriers

Iran: Despite its high levels of education, women's civil rights and employment are restricted by religious and legal constraints.

Yemen: Gender-based violence is pervasive, and the country's infrastructure and educational systems have been severely damaged by the ongoing conflict.

International Organizations

UN Women: carries out regional initiatives centred on economic inclusion, legal rights, and political representation.

UNESCO: Conducts studies and promotes gender-responsive educational practices.

World Bank: Provides financial support for economic and legal measures aimed at empowering women, particularly in Morocco and Tunisia.

Islamic Development Bank (IsDB): supports women's businesses and education within Islamic standards

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Civil Society Organizations

Arab Women's Organization: Advocates for reform, education, and participation across the region.

Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights: Promotes workplace protections and anti-harassment laws.

Women's Learning Partnership (WLP): Trains women leaders and civic actors across MENA.

Timeline of Key Events

1960s–1970s	National literacy campaigns increase female education
1979	UN adopts CEDAW.
1981	Tunisia expands its Personal Status Code
1995	Beijing Platform for Action pushes gender policy reform globally
2000	UN introduces Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)
2004	Morocco enacts Moudawana reform
2010-2012	Arab Spring sees major female-led protests
2015	UN launches Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 5
2016	UAE establishes a Ministry for Gender Equality
2017	Saudi Arabia lifts driving ban on women
2018	Tunisia passes a comprehensive law against gender-based violence
2020	COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacts female employment
2021	Taliban returns to power in Afghanistan, sparking regional fears
2023	Morocco hosts the UN Women Arab States Regional Conference
2024	Several Gulf states report gender parity in university enrolment

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Previous attempts to solve the issue

In the MENA region, there have been many attempts to alleviate gender imbalance in education and employment, but the results have varied because of political, economic, and cultural barriers.

UN Women's Regional Program (2016–2020) was a notable effort that aimed to increase women's economic participation through public awareness, skill development, and support for law reform. This project started women's entrepreneurship programs, accelerated workplace protection changes, and supported inclusive policies in Tunisia and Jordan. But in spite of its successes, the program had significant drawbacks. Social transformation has been hampered by cultural resistance, particularly in conservative rural populations. Its scope and sustainability were also constrained by a lack of infrastructure in conflict-affected areas and a lack of finance.

The World Bank's MENA Gender Strategy (2018–2023) was another significant endeavour. This program placed a strong emphasis on encouraging gender-informed investment methods and reducing regulatory restrictions on women's economic engagement. It was crucial in assisting with the family law reforms in Morocco and Tunisia, funding women-owned businesses, and enhancing data systems that monitor indicators of gender equality. However, wider obstacles include regional political unpredictability, long-standing preconceptions about women in leadership roles, and an inability to effectively reach the informal labour sector—where many women work—hampering its implementation.

In order to increase girls' involvement in science and technology, regional ministries started STEM education and infrastructure programs in partnership with UNESCO. These included upgraded educational infrastructure, particularly in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon; gender-inclusive teacher training; and scholarship opportunities. Even though these initiatives were successful in increasing access and increasing awareness of the value of education for girls, they were usually thwarted by dominant social norms, a lack of media attention, and persistent financial pressures. This forces girls to drop out of school early or pursue conventional, gendered careers.

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Possible solutions

In order to eradicate gender bias and foster inclusive learning environments, school institutions must be reformed. This can be accomplished by including gender-sensitive content in national curricula, educating educators to dispel preconceptions, and constructing facilities like safe transportation or dorms to assist girls in rural areas. Mentorship programs that pair girls with women in academic and professional domains, particularly STEM, can also assist in shifting societal norms and encourage aspiration in the next generation.

In terms of the economy, women require more legal protections at work, such as rules that forbid discrimination in employment based on gender and mandate equal pay. Job security, maternity leave, and harassment must all be addressed under updated and enforced national labour rules. Strategies that would help women better balance work and family obligations include encouraging flexible work schedules, increasing maternity leave regulations, and supporting women's access to reasonably priced childcare. Access to financing, incubator programs, and gender-sensitive financial services should all support entrepreneurship.

In terms of legal and institutional reform, progress requires a review of discriminatory personal status laws and the development of specialized judicial mechanisms for handling gender-based discrimination. Some nations might think about enforcing gender impact evaluations in public policy choices and implementing gender quotas for government jobs. Prioritizing comprehensive anti-harassment laws in workplaces and educational institutions is essential, particularly in nations where social stigma frequently keeps women from speaking up.

Religious and traditional leaders should be involved in public awareness efforts that question patriarchal norms and highlight the social and religious legitimacy of women's rights to promote cultural change. Dispelling negative preconceptions and promoting good narratives about successful women are two benefits of using media, especially social media platforms. In order to guarantee that gender equality is accepted by all facets of society, educational initiatives aimed at boys and young men are also crucial.

Finally, international and regional collaboration can act as a catalyst. Reform can be accelerated by establishing scholarship exchange programs, collaborating with international financial institutions, and setting up networks for cross-border information sharing. Coordinated gender research projects can also help countries in the region better understand issues and track the effects of reforms over time.

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Further reading

UN Women Arab States Regional Portal

<https://arabstates.unwomen.org>

UNESCO Gender and Education Data Dashboard

<https://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/gender-equality-education>

World Bank MENA Gender Portal

<https://mena.genderdata.org>

UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 Tracker

<https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>

Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 – Women’s Empowerment Strategy

<https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/vision/strategic-objectives/women-empowerment/>

Tunisian Constitution (2014) – Gender Equality Provisions

https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tunisia_2014.pdf

CEDAW Country Reports Database (UN Treaty Body Database)

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Countries.aspx

Arab Women’s Organization – Publications and Programs

<https://arabwomenorg.org/>

Women’s Learning Partnership (WLP)

<https://learningpartnership.org/>

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