

THE STATE OF WOMEN IN THE ARAB WORLD



THE ACQUISITION OF HUMAN CAPABILITIES

Introduction

In Arab countries, women have far fewer opportunities than men do to acquire essential capabilities and to utilise them effectively on a broad front. They are also more widely deprived than men of their civil and human rights. In human development terms, such deprivation is seen as the main characteristic of “the marginalisation of women”. Women’s opportunities to develop and utilise their capabilities differ greatly both within each Arab country as well as among them. However, available globally comparable statistics may not be sufficient to enable a comprehensive overview of these discrepancies.

BOX 2-1

Fowziyah Abu-Khalid: Images of Arab Women in the Mirror of Reality

Is there a sculpture however pregnant with countless possibilities and dreams that resembles her image? Is there a portrait, even one fashioned of flesh, blood and love, capable of reflecting the ephemeral world present in her features? Is there not enough darkness to cast into relief the image of the Arab woman, or is there not enough light to capture it in the first place? Where is her true likeness to be found?

In literature, images of Arab women are either those of victims or rebels, figures engaged in struggling against their respective conditions or torn between resignation, accommodation and defiance. In political discourse, images of women are similarly opposed. Women are either thrust aside from, or embroiled in, formulating the premises and corollaries of that discourse. Often, they themselves are divided over its assorted theoretical propositions about their identity, which variously portray them as conformist, non-conformist or indifferent. Sometimes, women are little more than female mannequins upon which the discourse tests its fancy. Such subjective discourse may conceal or emphasise features that reflect not so much the view that women or society have of women but rather the view which the authors believe that women or society should hold. Thus, the image of Arab women has been fabricated in the moulds of Western and enlightened Islamist liberation rhetoric alike, in the moulds of insular religious rhetoric and those of conciliatory or invented discourses, and in the innumerable imitative and derivative moulds to be found in the prevailing official discussion.

Even as the image of Arab women has been popularised in such simplistic forms in Arab literature and political rhetoric, the mirror of reality displays that image in all its rich variety and profusion.

Yet who sees the women of southern Saudi Arabia, their slender frames in flowing gowns bent over their tilling, their heads concealed by palm-frond hats, not to hide from prying eyes but because the sun forever tries to match the brilliant dawn that radiates from their hands,

which spread across the land from the Sarawat mountains down to the Tihama Plains, which scatter artemisia, kadi and wheat, which mix their henna and massage their cracked heels in the seasonal rains?

Who sees those Algerian women no less proud and beautiful than Djamila Bouhared, reweaving the dismal darkness into new dreams, as though fearless of the looming spectres of failure and undaunted by the disaster-ridden pageants of the past?

Who sees the schoolgirls of al-Sham, outwitting their austere regime of khaki smocks and military marches as they tiptoe lightly out of doors in their apricot candy skirts, woven of the hearts of aloes with their reddish-orange pulp, like tendrils of jasmine silently threading their way out from behind walls and doors and trailing their fragrance through the alleys, with the daring of innocents, heedless of curfews and the barbed wire girdling the Golan Heights?

Who sees the ageing women on the pavements of the nation, their fragile spines gnawed away inch by inch, while they remain mute, loath to suffer the humiliation of complaining to anyone but God? With their hand-worked crafts, “women’s” products and made-in-China wares, they are spread across the length and breadth of Arab streets, yet invisible to official eyes except the municipal officers who extract the fruit of their toil.

And who sees, in the breadth of Egypt, the woman dropped like a seed into the depth of the earth, kneading, baking, nursing and protecting the fields with her seven lives? She emerges with a body shaped not like a cotton flower or ear of wheat but like a question mark. In one guise, she digs her fingernails into her own flesh as though beset by [the disease] bilharzia; in another, she impersonates the brides of the Nile, who will change the fate of Egypt’s daughters in ways no less confrontational.

Source: Abu-Khalid, in Arabic, background paper for the Report.

OBSTACLES TO THE ACQUISITION OF BASIC HUMAN CAPABILITIES

CHALLENGES TO HEALTH

The maternal mortality rate in Arab countries averages 270 deaths per 100,000 live births.

This section considers health according to the definition of the World Health Organisation (WHO), in its positive, comprehensive sense of complete physical and mental well-being.

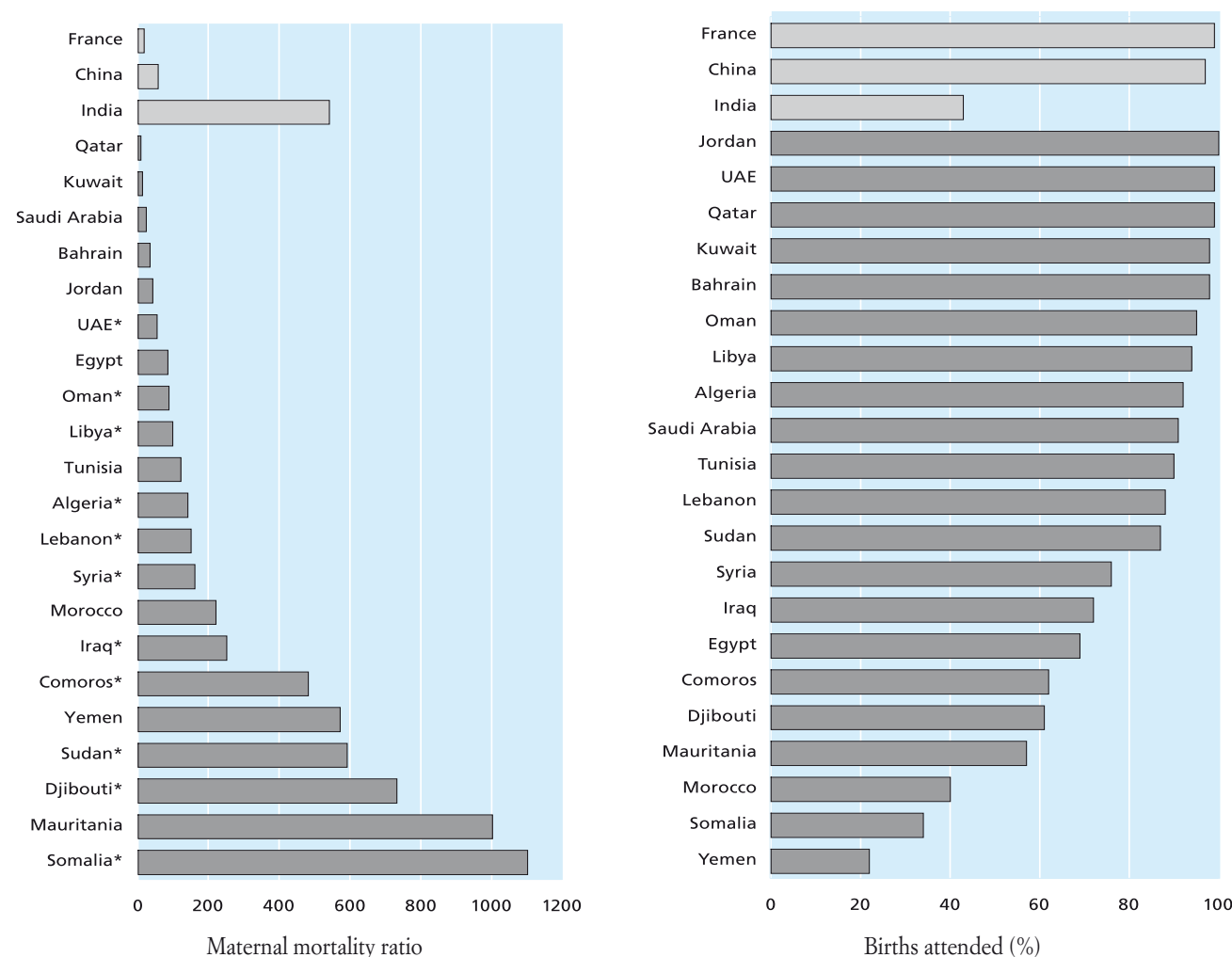
How women fare on indicators of reproductive health

Women in Arab countries, especially the least developed countries, endure unacceptably high rates of risk of morbidity and mortality connected with pregnancy and reproductive functions (Figure 2-1).

The maternal mortality rate in Arab countries averages 270 deaths per 100,000 live births. This rises to over 1,000 deaths in the poorest Arab countries (Mauritania and Somalia) and falls to levels such as 7 for every 100,000 births in Qatar. The rate of births attended by trained personnel exceeds 80 per cent in most Arab countries, which indicates improved health coverage; however, it remains weak in less developed countries such as Mauritania, Somalia and Yemen. In Yemen, for example, only one quarter of births are attended by trained personnel. The level of effective supervision of pregnancy, which requires four medical visits, varies among countries and is not necessarily tied to income levels, since, for instance, it is higher in Lebanon than in Qatar.

Figure 2-1

Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births), 2000, and percentage of births attended by skilled personnel, latest year available during the period 1993-2003



* Estimate derived by regression and similar methods.

Source: World Health Organisation, 2005.

Pregnancy supervision and continuing care for the new-born are in accordance with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which encompass the improvement of puerperal (childbed) health and the reduction of infant mortality rates.

The average fertility rate in the Arab region remains high despite its decline to 3.81 live births for the period 2000-2005, down from 4.13 for the period 1995-2000. This is high compared to the rest of the developing world, where the rate does not exceed 2.9 live births (World Health Organisation, 2005). Fertility rates are especially high in the less developed Arab countries, such as Yemen, that do not have a health apparatus capable of providing necessary health care to mothers and infants. It is also worth noting the problematic consequences of unwanted pregnancies among married women in the Arab world. These lead not only to abortions, which are unsafe, but also to physical and emotional pressures on mothers and their children.

Likewise, the sterility problems and miscarriages from which Arab women suffer are ignored, a matter that seriously harms their mental and social well-being. Failure to bear children leads some women to resort to dangerous treatments (electric cauterization, dilation and curettage, and inflation of the fallopian tubes) that expose them to serious health hazards. It also contributes to social pressures and high rates of divorce (UNIFEM, in Arabic, 2004, 54).

Years of life lost to disease

“Years of life lost to disease” has become a critical global health (in its comprehensive sense) indicator in a given society.¹ On average, women lose a relatively greater number of years of life to disease than do men (Figure 2-2). This falls harder on women in wealthier Arab countries.

Since Arab women generally enjoy high levels of health care during pregnancy and childbirth, especially in the wealthier Arab countries (figure 2-1), the larger number of years they lose to disease is attributable to general differences in lifestyle that do not necessarily

BOX 2-2

The Millennium Development Goals

Goal 1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day, and halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

Goal 2. Achieve universal primary education: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

Goal 3. Promote gender equality and empower women: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary

education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015.

Goal 4. Reduce child mortality: Reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate.

Goal 5. Improve maternal health: Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio.

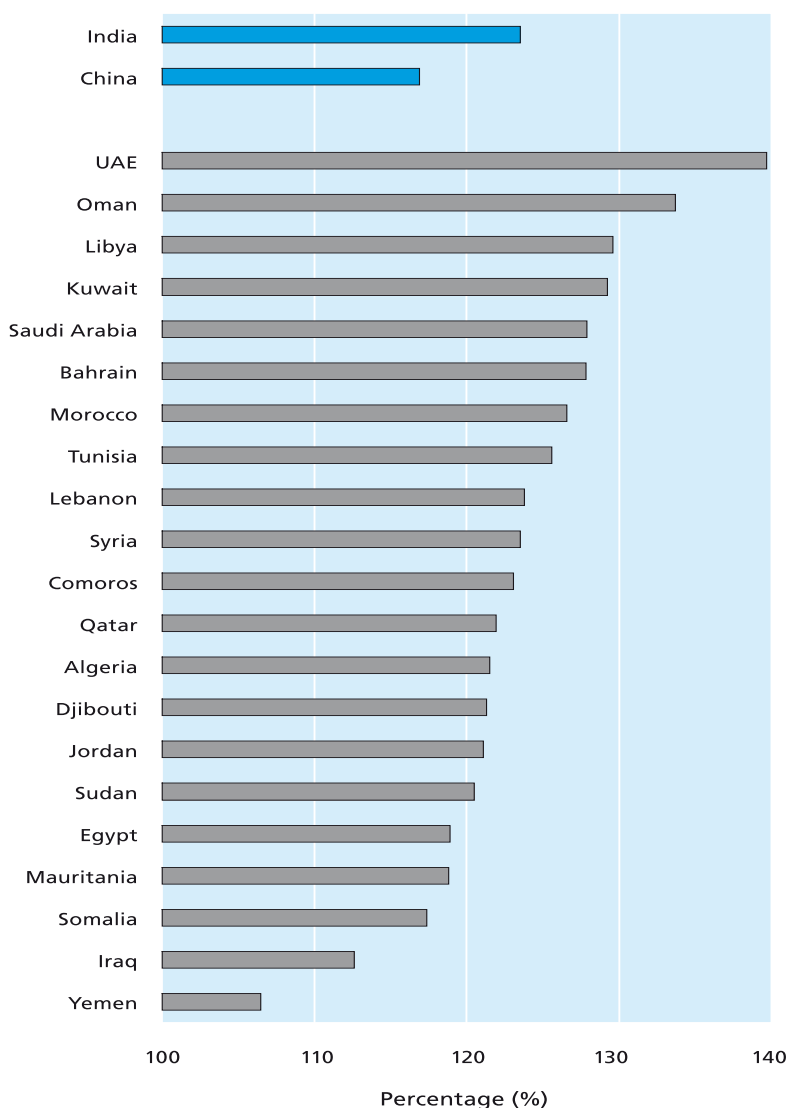
Goal 6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.

Goal 7. Ensure environmental sustainability.

Goal 8. Develop a global partnership for development.

Figure 2-2

Expectation of lost healthy years at birth (years), females as a percentage of males, Arab and comparator countries, 2002



Source: World Health Organisation, 2004.

¹ On the other hand, the “life expectancy at birth” indicator points to the reduction of death rates in a society and thus how long an individual can expect to live. The importance of “years of life lost to disease” is thus its ability to indicate how many years on average an individual spends in illness.

More women than men suffer from obesity and overweight in all the Arab countries where statistics were available.

Women are now at greater risk of catching the HIV virus and contracting the AIDS disease.

depend on the wealth of the country. Rather, the higher rate of sickness among women has to do with deep-seated discrimination based on gender, on which the material wealth of the society has little impact.

Special health problems

Obesity and diabetes

The Arab region is witnessing a continuing transformation in its way of life as urban lifestyles move into the villages and desert. This transformation has led to a decline in the rate of bacterial, viral and parasitical diseases along with an increase in chronic diseases such as cancer, hypertension, diabetes and heart disease.

The spread of late-onset diabetes in the Arab world is worrying. The most important risk factor in the appearance of late-onset diabetes is obesity, which WHO considers

(with AIDS) to be the epidemic of the age, with more than one billion adults suffering from overweight and at least 300 million of those suffering from obesity (World Health Organisation, 2003).

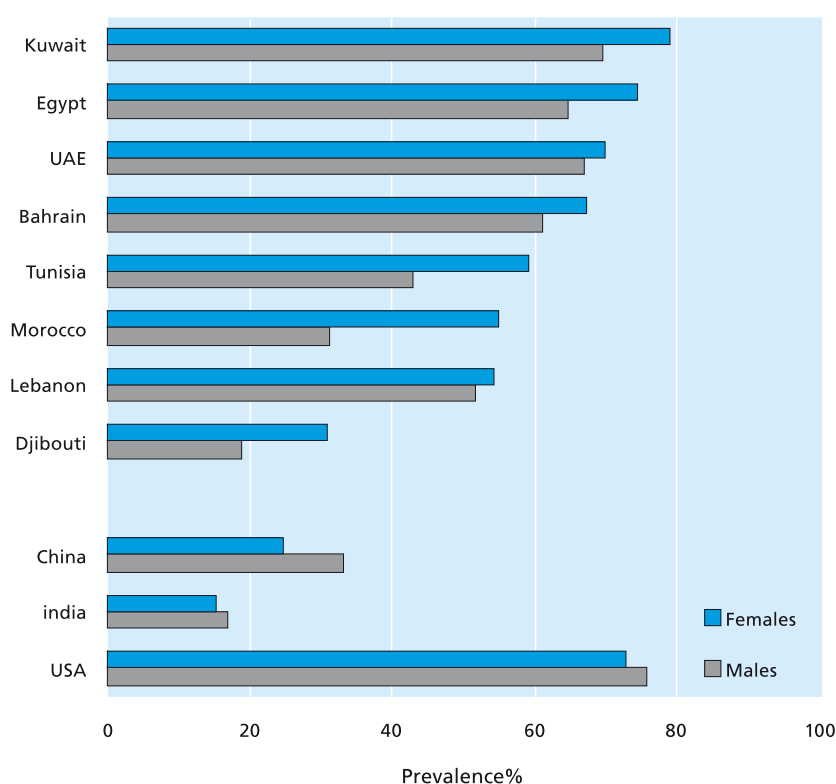
WHO measures levels of obesity and overweight on the basis of the increase of body mass.² It is clear that obesity and overweight constitute a widespread problem in richer countries both in the Arab region as well as in the rest of the world. Nevertheless, what is important to note here is that more women than men suffer from the problem in all the Arab countries where statistics were available, as opposed to comparator countries, where, apparently, on average, more men are overweight than women (Figure 2-3).

The problem of obesity and overweight has worsened as societies have moved towards urban lifestyles and as the need for physical exertion has diminished, coupled with a paucity of sports facilities, especially in crowded schools in rural areas. It has been compounded as corporations promote foodstuffs excessively rich in sugar, fats and salt – foodstuffs that, given cultural predispositions, facilitate the emergence of extremely serious health hazards, especially among children and women. Cultural and social factors may play a role in that they fail to encourage women and girls to engage in sports, partly reflecting the ingrained notion that the female body is deficient.

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) virus

The Arab region remains one of those currently least affected by the AIDS virus.³ Despite this, Arab women and girls are becoming infected by it in increasing numbers and now represent half the total number of people carrying the virus in the region. Women are now at greater risk of catching the virus and contracting the disease: the probability of infection among females from 15 to 24 years of age is double that of males in the same age group (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, in Arabic, 2004, 5). Among the main causes of heightened risk are: the low level of empowerment of Arab

Figure 2-3
Rates of obesity and overweight (population 15+ years) by gender, Arab and comparator countries, 2005



Source: World Health Organisation, 2005.

² The body mass index (BMI) relates weight (in kilograms) to height (in metres). A person is considered overweight if the index is higher than 25 and obese if the index is higher than 30.

³ The number of people who tested positive for the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in the Arab region was estimated to be about 540,000 in 2004.

women; the poor quality of health services provided to them; poor monitoring and testing services; and the dearth of information on methods of protection against the AIDS virus in the prevailing culture of silence surrounding issues of sexual and reproductive health.

Many girls and women in Arab countries know little about their bodies, their sexual and reproductive health and the AIDS virus. High rates of illiteracy and the low rate of school attendance among females in some Arab countries compound the problem. A study carried out in 32 countries showed that the rate of awareness of facts about the AIDS virus was five times higher among women who had received some education beyond the basic level than among women who were illiterate (UNICEF, in Arabic, 2004, 31).

In addition, women in many parts of the Arab world are not economically independent, which increases their reliance on men and makes them more exposed to sexual subjugation and physical violence. This in turn limits their ability to protect themselves from the AIDS virus, especially since a large number of sexually active men do not use condoms, thus exposing their wives to the danger of infection. Estimates indicate that the vast majority of women in the Arab region infected by the virus contracted it from their husbands (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, in Arabic, 2004, 39-40).

Practices such as female genital mutilation

(female circumcision) increase the probability of female infection. This may result from the use of unsterilised tools during circumcision or from being exposed to tearing or injury during sexual intercourse, which leads to bleeding and increases the capacity for transmitting the virus. The problem is now manifesting itself in its ugliest form in Darfur in western Sudan, where many circumcised women have been raped during the conflict, leading to a sharp rise in the incidence of AIDS among the women there.

Factors adding to the suffering of women with AIDS are the discrimination, exclusion, and marginalisation to which they are exposed in their societies.

ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH EDUCATION

The quantitative spread

Despite the tremendous spread of girls' education in Arab countries in the last five decades (AHDR 2002 and 2003), Arab women remain poorly prepared to participate effectively and fruitfully in public life by acquiring knowledge through education. This is most clearly manifested in the extent to which girls and women are still deprived of education and knowledge, especially those forms of knowledge that bring high social returns. As shown in Figures 2-4 to 2-6, the Arab region

The vast majority of women in the Arab region infected by the AIDS virus contracted it from their husbands.

Arab women remain poorly prepared to participate effectively and fruitfully in public life by acquiring knowledge through education.

BOX 2-3

The Cairo Declaration of Religious Leaders in the Arab States in Response to the HIV/AIDS Epidemic, 13 December 2004

We, the assembled Muslim and Christian religious leaders . . . have agreed upon the following:

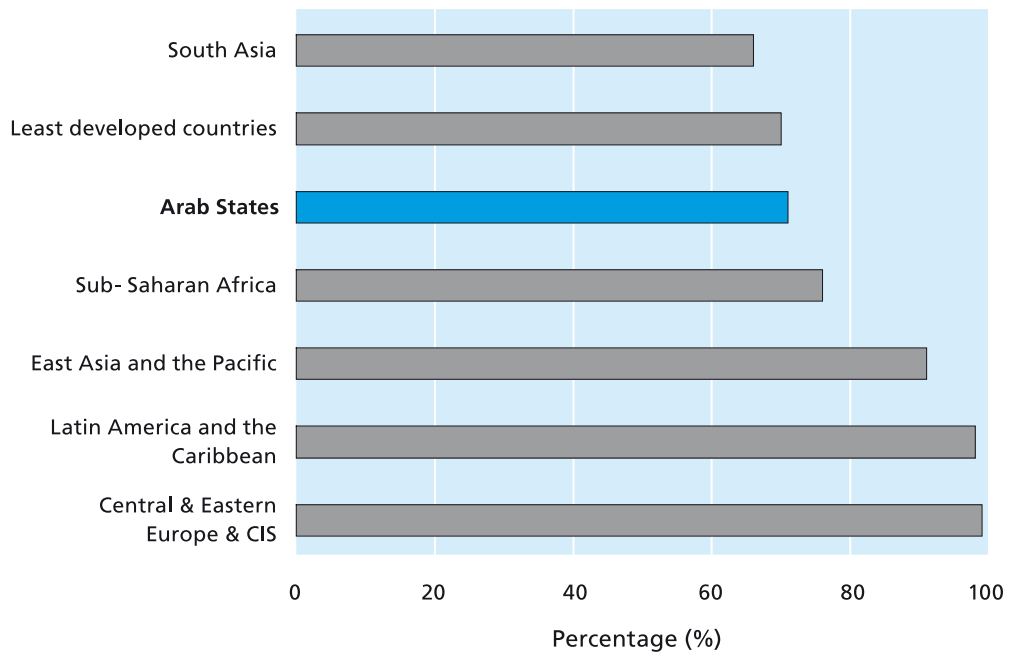
- Being aware of the value of every human being and conscious of God's glorification of all human beings irrespective of their situation, background or medical condition, we declare that we bear a major responsibility and duty to move rapidly in the face of the imminent danger of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.
- Illness is one of God's tests; anyone may be afflicted by it according to God's choice. Patients are our brothers and sisters, and we stand by them seeking God's healing for each one of them.
- We advocate the rights of women to protect themselves from exposure to HIV/AIDS and to take advantage of the relevant medical and educational services.

- People living with HIV/AIDS and their families deserve care, support, treatment, and education, whether or not they are responsible for their illness. We call on our religious institutions to provide them with spiritual and psychological aid and, in cooperation with other institutions, to assure them economic assistance. We also encourage them not to lose faith in God's mercy, and aspire to a rewarding and productive life to the last, embracing fate with courage and faith.
- We emphasise the necessity to abolish and reject all forms of discrimination, exclusion, marginalisation and stigmatisation of people living with HIV/AIDS and we insist on the necessity for them to enjoy their basic freedoms and human rights to the full.

Source: "Family Health International." (2006). <http://www.fhi.org/NR/rdonlyres/eqq22beakmsi57uhzlr5azfnhyup4oyyycluyhvvouua3cg7vmppsy3dkldicx3hgnflxkggtmh/CairoReligiousLeadersDeclarationEnglish.pdf> (Accessed 18 April, 2006).

Figure 2-4

Female literacy rate as a percentage of male literacy rate (age 15+ years), world regions, 2003



Source: UNDP, 2005.

The Arab region has one of the world's lowest rates of female education.

has one of the world's lowest rates of female education, i.e., one of the highest rates of illiteracy (one half of females are illiterate compared to only one third of males), and of enrolment opportunities at the various levels of education, especially that of higher education.

The relatively higher deprivation of girls in terms of educational opportunities at all levels extends across all Arab countries, with female access to education remaining below that of males (three quarters of females versus four fifths of males) though the situation may vary from one to another (Figure 2-5). The enrolment rate of girls in several Arab oil-producing countries and in Jordan, Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory and Tunisia is higher than that of boys. The highest relative rate of deprivation of education occurs in the less developed Arab countries, such as Djibouti and Yemen, and in those with the largest populations, such as Egypt, Morocco and Sudan.

This relatively greater denial of educational opportunities to girls runs counter to Arab public opinion as indicated in the field survey, which unanimously affirms women's right to education on an equal footing with men.

This relatively greater denial of education to girls runs counter to Arab public opinion.

Enrolment at various educational levels, by gender

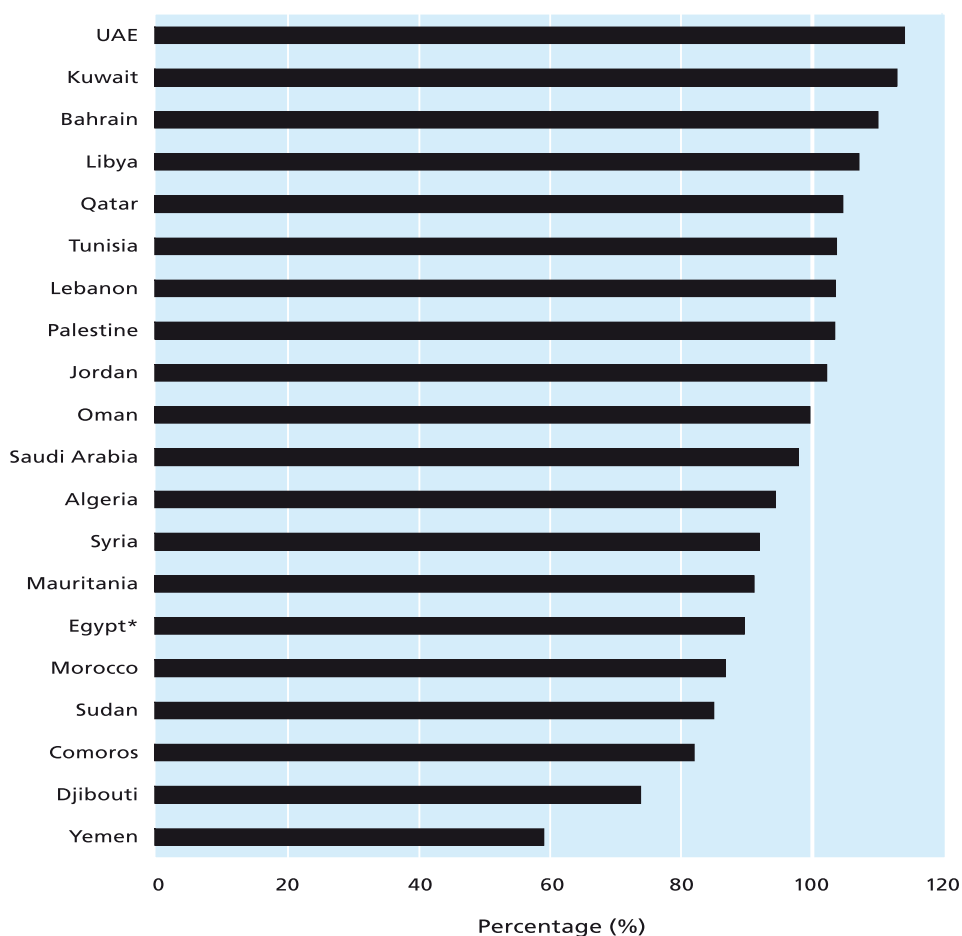
Despite the success of Arab countries, especially Gulf Cooperation Council countries, in increasing the rate of female educational enrolment, which has narrowed the gaps between the sexes at all three educational levels, a number of Arab countries continue to exhibit large discrepancies throughout the education system.

Pre-school education

Statistics show a major deficiency in pre-school education in Arab countries. The Arab child on average is provided with 0.4 years of pre-schooling compared to 1.6 years in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1.8 years in Central and Eastern Europe and 2.2 years in North America and Western Europe (UNESCO, 2005, 1). In general, the enrolment rate in pre-school education in the Arab region is less than 20 per cent and reaches its lowest levels in Algeria, Djibouti, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, where it is less than 5 per cent. Kuwait, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates are considered the most successful countries in that the pre-school enrolment rate has reached

Figure 2-5

Combined gross enrolment rate, all levels of education, female as a percentage of male, Arab countries, 2002/2003

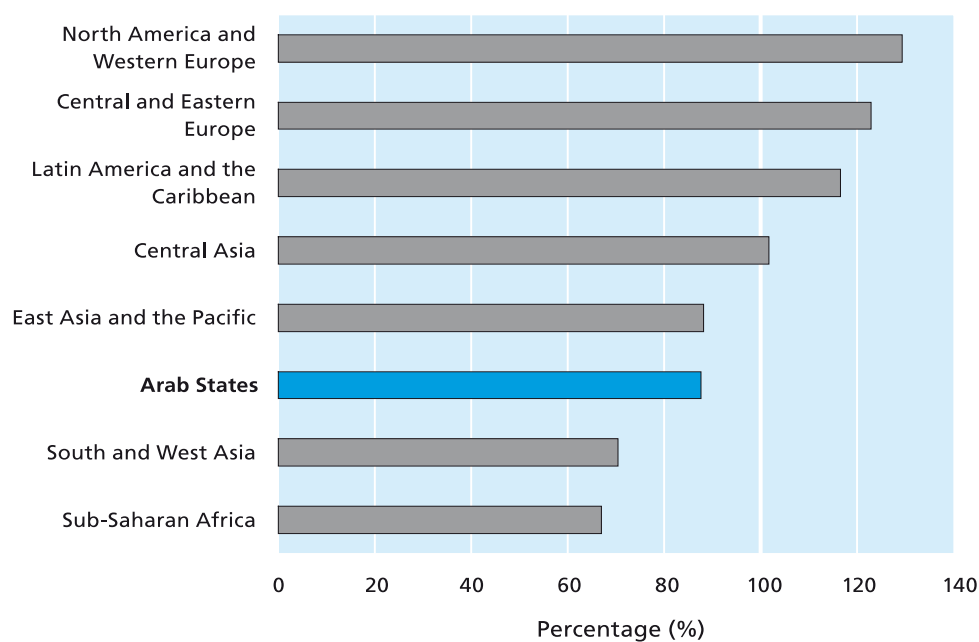


* Data for the year 2000/2001 (from: UNDP, 2003).

Source: UNDP, 2005.

Figure 2-6

Gross enrolment rate in tertiary education, females as a percentage of males, world regions, 2002/2003



Source: UNESCO web site (<http://stats.uis.unesco.org/ReportFolders/reportfolders.aspx>, Table M)

The support of small children is considered basically a women's issue and not a public priority.

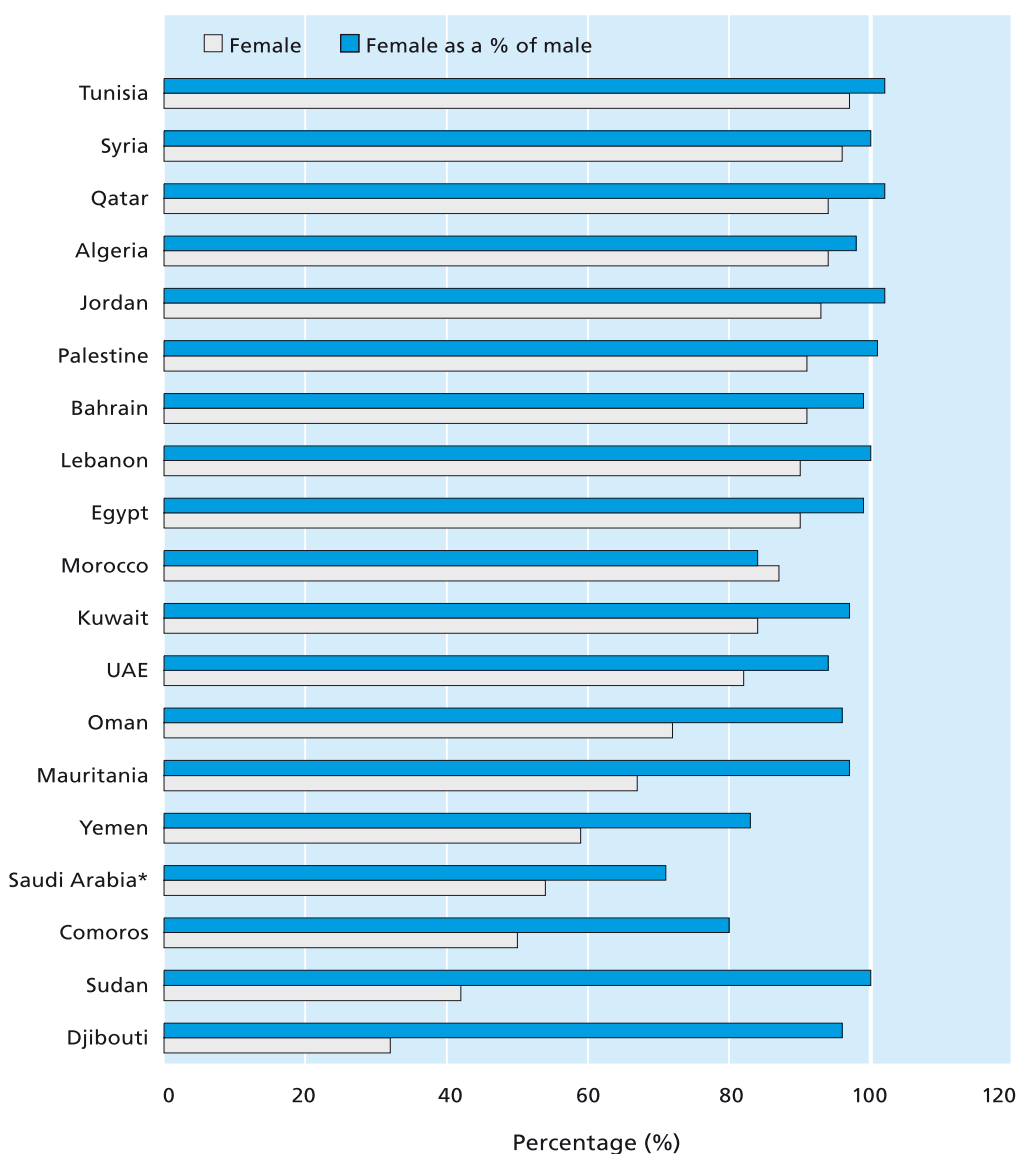
70 per cent. Likewise, the rate is less than the average in developing countries (42 per cent compared to 47 per cent in 1995) (AHDR 2002, 52). Also, in general, most countries of the region fail to give the necessary priority to this level of education. For the most part, reliance is placed on for-profit private institutions or women's organisations, indicating a belief that the support of small children is considered basically a women's issue and not a public priority.

Primary education

The enrolment rate in primary education fluctuates greatly from one Arab country to another. It has reached 95 per cent in Syria and Tunisia but is less than 50 per cent in Djibouti and Sudan (Figure 2-7). Despite this, most Arab countries have taken great strides in reducing the educational gap between the two sexes at the primary level: the enrolment rate of girls is at least 90 per cent that of boys in all Arab States except the Comoros, Morocco and Yemen.

Figure 2-7

Girls' net enrolment rate in primary education (%) and girls' rate as a percentage of boys', Arab countries, 2002/2003



* National surveys in Saudi Arabia indicate that female enrolment at the elementary level is 95 per cent. However, this has yet to be entered in the international database used to monitor enrolment.

Source: UNDP, 2005.

Secondary education: academic and vocational

In general, the rate of female enrolment is lower in secondary education than in primary education. Fewer than 80 per cent of girls attend secondary school in all Arab countries except for four: Bahrain, Jordan, the occupied Palestinian territory and Qatar. Female enrolment is less than 20 per cent in Djibouti and Mauritania (Figure 2-8). As for the gender gap, nine Arab countries have been able to close it entirely, but it remains wide in Yemen, where female enrolment in secondary education is only 46 per cent that of male enrolment, and in Djibouti, where it is only 69 per cent.

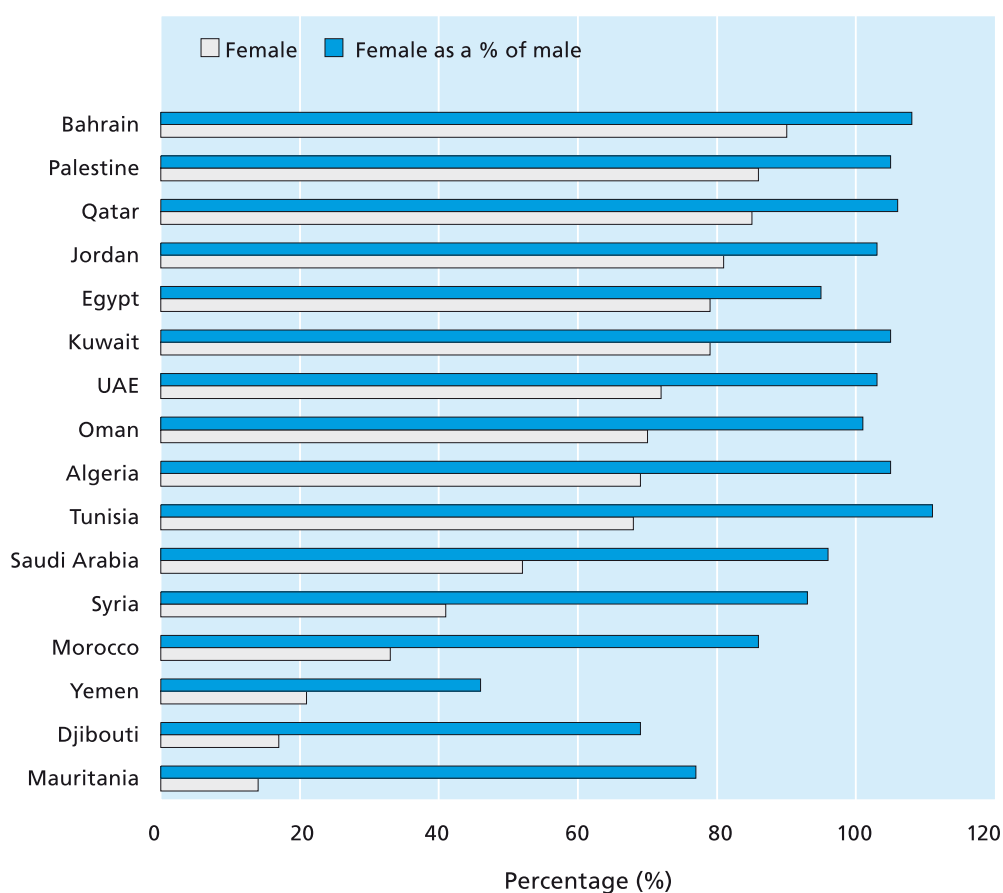
Despite the focus on the web of customs and traditions normally cited to explain the social composition of secondary education,

a number of experiments have demonstrated that the adoption by governments of serious policies to decrease the gap in this area bears fruit. In the occupied Palestinian territory, for example, the rate of girls in applied skills training rose to 45.1 per cent in 1999 from 38.9 per cent in 1995. The increase was due to the expansion of the number of classes open to girls near their homes and in their villages, with the number of first-level educational branches for girls rising to 160 in 1999 from 33 in 1995. One study indicated that, especially among the poor, economic reasons were considered to be the most important factor limiting girls' potential to complete their post-basic school education and that the factors preventing males from completing their education differ from those hampering females.

The factors preventing males from completing their education differ from those hampering females.

Figure 2-8

Girls' net enrolment rate in secondary education (%) and girls' enrolment as a percentage of boys', Arab countries, 2002/2003



Source: UNDP, 2005.

Discrepancies in the gender dimension of education become wider in vocational and technical education.

It is clear from table 2-1 that family economic problems impact more negatively on female than on male education. Likewise, families perceive educating girls to be less important than schooling boys. It is the need to work that has the largest effect on the withdrawal of boys from school.

Discrepancies in the gender dimension of education become wider in vocational and technical education, where the rate of female enrolment is less than half that of male enrolment (UNESCO, 2002). In the occupied Palestinian territory, for example, in spite of an increase in the average enrolment rate of females to 23.8 per cent of all students in 1999 from 18.8 per cent in 1995, males still constitute nearly 77 per cent of this sector (Abu 'Awwad, in Arabic, 2003, 41). Similarly, this type of education generally tends to confirm the prevailing traditional division of the sexes in society, as girls generally move towards service-oriented professions, such as secretarial work, nursing or work as beauticians, whereas boys gravitate towards industrial, agricultural or vocational education.⁴

Some studies on how extra-curricular education (technical training, physical education, music and professional training) can confirm inequality between the two sexes have found that, in general, the participation of female students in physical education is neglected, especially in coeducational schools. The wearing of school uniforms is enforced more strictly for female students than for male students. The rate at which girls participate in

extra-curricular school activities is lower than that of boys. Likewise, boys reject participation in home economics or sewing classes (Abu Nahla, in Arabic, 1996; Shukhshayr, in Arabic, 2000).

Higher education

Most data show that equality between the two sexes in higher education has been achieved in twelve Arab countries (Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, occupied Palestinian territory, Oman, Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia). The number of women registered in higher education is greater than that of men in Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE. However, a large number of men are enrolled overseas, and most countries provide enrolment data only for local institutions. In light of this lack of reported data, it is likely that a hitherto improperly estimated gap between the sexes in higher education will be uncovered (UNESCO, 2002, 48).

In general, the enrolment of Arab women in higher education varies, being highest in Libya and the UAE, where the enrolment rate for girls is more than 50 per cent. Similarly, in Lebanon, the rate of female enrolment reached 48 per cent in 2002/2003. Female enrolment rates were lowest in the Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, the Sudan and Yemen where they did not exceed 10 per cent.

Despite the increase in female enrolment in university education, women are still concentrated in specialisations such as literature, the humanities and the social sciences, where

TABLE 2-1
Reasons for dropping out after basic education in the occupied Palestinian territory, by gender (%)

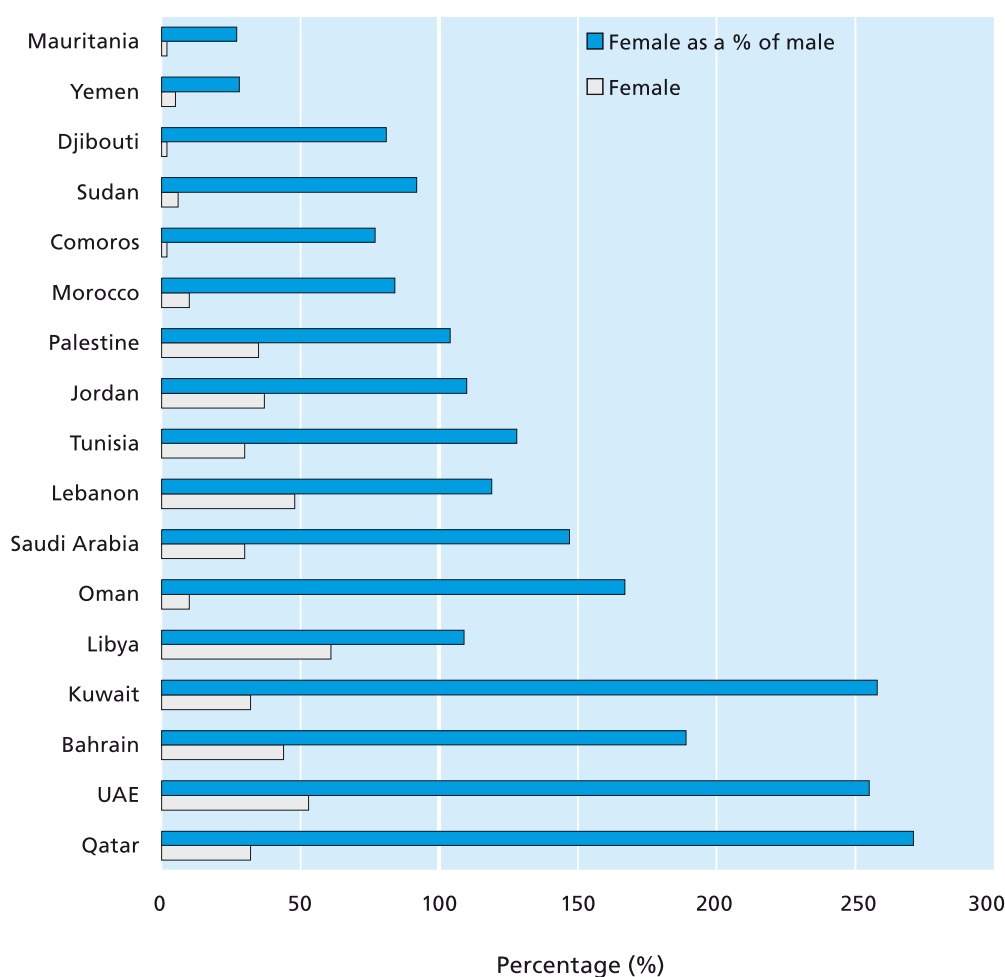
| Gender | Reason | | | Total |
|--------|----------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|-------|
| | Desire to work | Family perspective on education | Family economic status | |
| Male | 60 | 12 | 28 | 100 |
| Female | 37 | 30 | 33 | 100 |

Source: Abu Nahla, in Arabic, 1996, 117.

⁴ Governments have a large role to play in changing views towards skills education. An example is the role played by the Palestinian Ministry of Education in opening up to girls new fields of vocational education that had long been closed to them. In 1998, industrial education was opened to girls though this was confined to computer maintenance. Agriculture was also opened up to them although this was limited to plant production at the expense of animal husbandry. Likewise, students were encouraged to enrol in commercial education, where girls constituted a majority: girls accounted for 85 per cent of enrolment in 1995, but later this rate fell back to 60 per cent as more boys enrolled (Nida' Abu 'Awwad, 2003:42).

Figure 2-9

Girls' gross enrolment rate in tertiary education (%) and girls' enrolment as a percentage of boys', Arab countries, 2002/2003



Women are still concentrated in specialisations... which are not in high demand in the job market.

Source: UNDP, 2005.

they constitute the majority, which are not in high demand in the job market. Enrolment rates for females are noticeably lower in the fields of engineering and industry, as table 2-2 shows.

This trend is due also to women's orientation towards jobs that permit part-time work and that do not contravene the traditional view of their reproductive role or the division of work in the house and the raising of a family. Examples are education and part-time jobs as civil servants. In addition, some universities discriminate against women in their acceptance criteria. At the University of Kuwait, for example, males are accepted in the engineering and petroleum studies on the basis of a grade point average of 67.9,

while female students must achieve an average of 83.5 to be accepted for the same fields of study. Even so, the region has witnessed a shift as more girls have moved towards scientific and high-tech fields. Discrepancies still exist, however, in terms of the areas of focus towards which girls are oriented within individual scientific fields. For example, most women who study engineering specialise in architecture or chemical engineering, whereas men lean towards mechanical or electrical engineering. In medicine, men gravitate towards surgery and other specialist areas whereas women take up gynaecology, paediatrics and dentistry.

Even so, the region has witnessed a shift as more girls have moved towards scientific and high-tech fields.

The rate of illiteracy in the Arab world is higher than the world average and higher even than the average for developing nations.

TABLE 2-2

Percentage of female students in selected specialisations in Arab universities, 2002/2003

| Country | Humanities and literature | Business, law, social sciences | Science | Engineering, industry and construction |
|--------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|---------|--|
| Bahrain | 83 | 60 | 71 | 24 |
| Djibouti | 52 | 52 | 18 | 25 |
| Jordan | 37 | 37 | 51 | 30 |
| Lebanon | 56 | 56 | 42 | 21 |
| Mauritania | 23 | 23 | 14 | - |
| Morocco | 45 | 45 | 34 | 22 |
| Palestine | 34 | 34 | 49 | 35 |
| Qatar | 65 | 65 | 72 | 16 |
| Saudi Arabia | 30 | 30 | 41 | 1 |

Source: <http://gmr.uis.unesco.org/> (14/2/2006 assembled from various tables).

Illiteracy still high among women

The Arab world has certainly witnessed a tremendous expansion in female education, outpacing other regions, with the discrepancies between the region and other parts of the world decreasing. The success in increasing female enrolment in schools, however, does not mean success in eradicating female illiteracy overall. At a time when some countries at medium levels of human development such as Jordan and the occupied Palestinian territory have succeeded in raising the rate of adult (fifteen years and older) education of women to 85 per cent, the rate remains below 50 per cent in six Arab countries: the Comoros, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, the Sudan and Yemen. The rate of illiteracy in the Arab world is higher than the world average and higher even than the average for developing nations. Arab countries are entering the twenty-first century weighed down by the burden of about 60 million illiterate adults, i.e., 40 per cent of all adults, most of them impoverished and rural women (AHDR 2002, 51). The results of the public opinion survey confirmed the right of girls to any level of education and to the free choice of specialisation (Box 2-4).

Only a minority (not exceeding ten per cent) did not support the right of girls to choose the specialisation that they prefer. Among these respondents, the specialisations that some thought ought to be restricted to males included the military sciences (most Moroccan respondents), engineering (more than 15 per cent of respondents to this question in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon) and medicine.

Girls are the better learners

International data indicate that girls in the Arab region perform better in school than boys. Dropout rates for girls are lower than those for boys in all the countries for which data are available with the exception of the UAE. The probability of a girl completing fifth grade exceeds 90 per cent in Algeria, Jordan, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the UAE. Similarly, the percentage of girls repeating a year is lower than that of boys in the countries of the region for which data are available⁵ with the exception of the Sudan (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2002, 42-43).

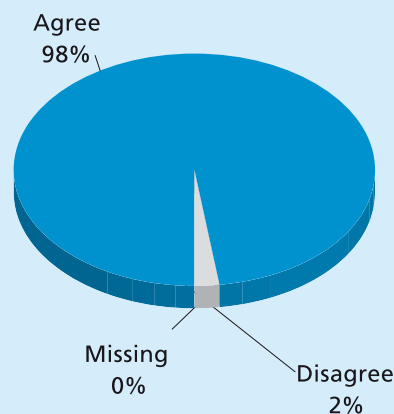
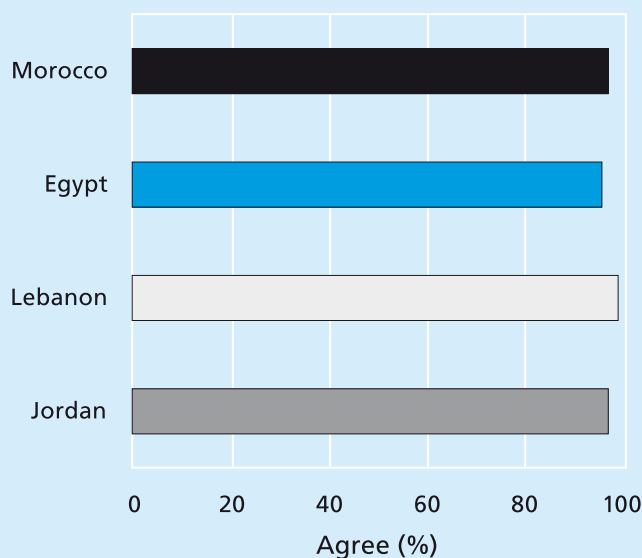
All the same, discrimination against women in the Arab countries continues to limit their access to knowledge despite the mass of

Girls in the Arab region perform better in school than boys.

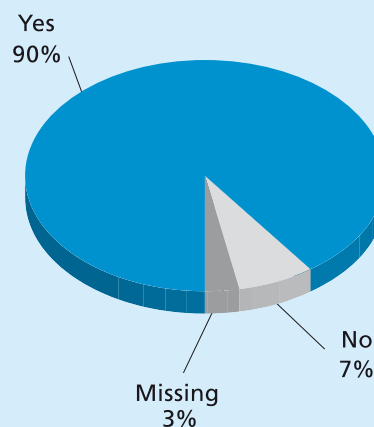
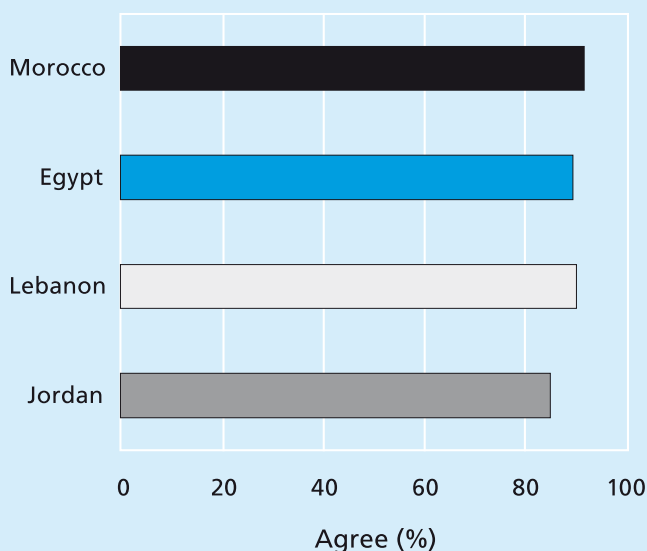
⁵ Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, UAE, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Tunisia.

Public Opinion on Aspects of the Rise of Arab Women, Four Arab Countries, 2005

Girls should have the same right to all levels of education, including university, as boys



Girls should have the right to choose their field of specialisation at university



statistical and other evidence indicating that Arab girls are the better learners, especially on the first rungs of the educational ladder. This is illustrated in the following two boxes.

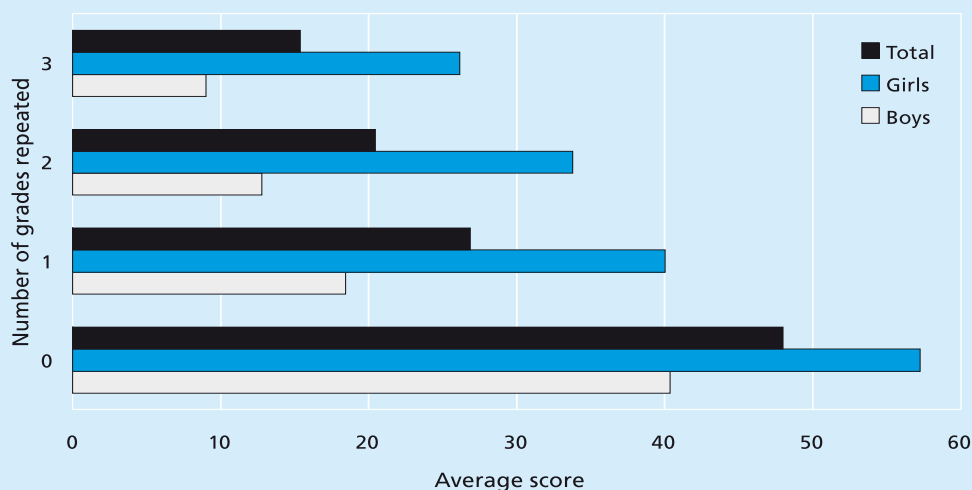
In Egypt in mid-2005, for example, the

annual scene of girls securing the highest places in the national secondary school final examination – the great obstacle on the educational ladder for the wider public in Arab countries – was repeated. Despite

Girls Perform Better in Basic Education in Bahrain

The results of field studies provide ample evidence supporting the better performance of girls. In Bahrain, among the 20 students who received top scores in each of two tests, in Arabic and mathematics, 12 were girls. Of the 20 schools whose students achieved the highest average scores, 19 were girls' schools. Among the 20 lowest-scoring students, there was only one girl. The results of the analysis show that girls scored higher than boys, especially in the Arabic language.

Average scores in Arabic and mathematics (out of 100), by number of grades repeated and by gender, Bahrain, 1999



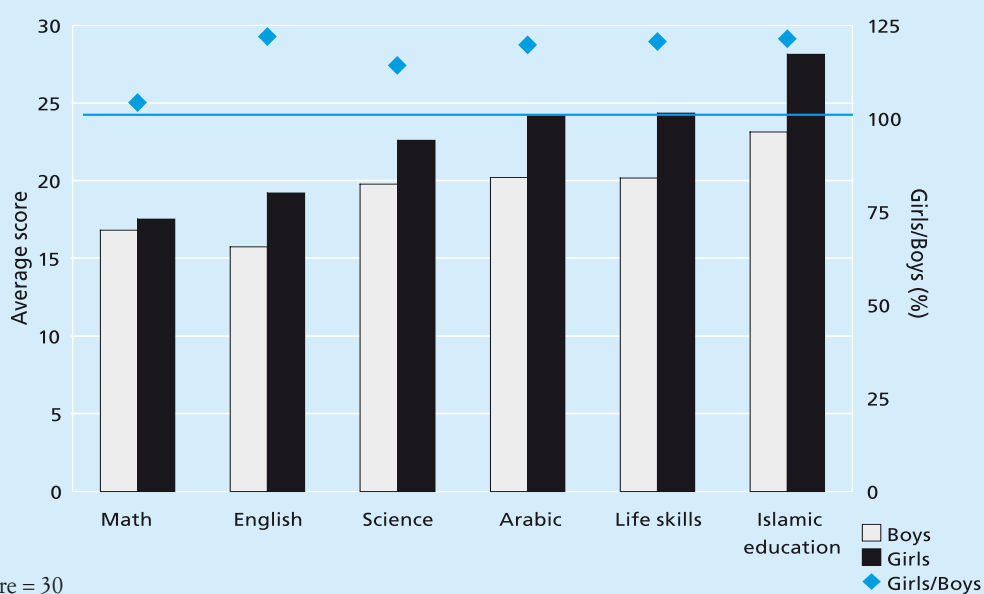
A low performance rate is associated with the repetition of grades, with the number of grades repeated by a pupil increasing as performance worsens. (The symbol "0" indicates the pupil has not repeated any grade). Girls maintain their excellence in all cases.

Source: Bahrain, Ministry of Education, Centre for Pedagogical Research and Development and Almishkat, in Arabic, 1999.

The Superior Performance of Girls in Primary Education in Kuwait

The results of an education-indicators project undertaken by the Kuwait Society for the Advancement of Arab Children show the overwhelming superiority of girls' academic scores in every subject covered by the study.

Girls' average scores in primary education subjects compared to those of boys, Kuwait, 2000



Note: top score = 30

Source: Al-Sarraf, in Arabic, 2001, 108.

the misconception that the humanities befit women most, a girl captured the number one place in both humanities and sciences. Among the top ten places, girls took 11 out of 12⁶ in humanities and 7 out of 15 in sciences. The outstanding success of girls in the secondary school examination was not limited to Egypt (Figure 2-10). They also swept the board in humanities in the occupied Palestinian territory and the UAE.

Girls' share among top scorers in all Arab countries where data are available is over 50 per cent. The fact that, on average, girls make up less than half the total enrolment in education serves to confirm their higher level of academic achievement. Noticeable, too, is the higher level of academic achievement of girls in a wide variety of circumstances, in rich and poor Arab countries alike and under the most obstructive of military occupations, underscoring the intrinsic, non-circumstantial nature of their success.

The higher relative enrolment of girls in the humanities is largely due to the fields of employment open to women given current social beliefs. The jobs available tend to be

linked to humanities subjects studied at the secondary level, which in turn direct girls' choices between the arts and science.

The higher level of achievement of girls extends to all levels of education, including higher education. It is important to emphasise that girls achieve their academic successes in spite of obstructive social and family environments, which envelop many of them in the fallacy that a woman's destiny is the home while learning and careers are basically the domain of men. The logical outcome here is a vindication of the distinctive qualities of girls that enable them to be proficient and, indeed, excel in the acquisition of knowledge against the odds.

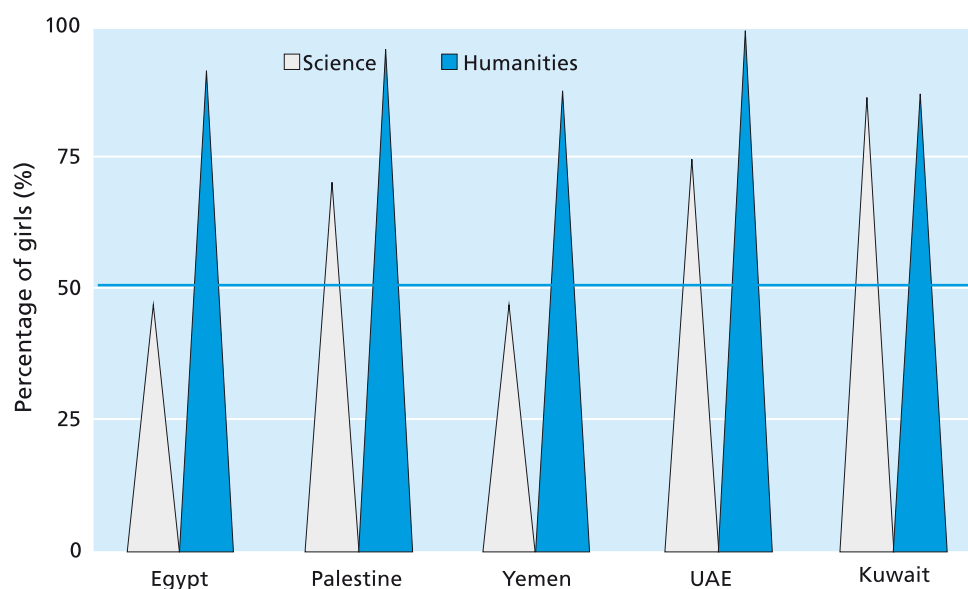
In a more positive light, equality between men and women in the acquisition and use of knowledge would deliver tremendous gains, benefits that would elevate Arab society in all branches of human endeavour. At present, however, this rich harvest is something that harmful discriminatory traditions and practices prevent the region from reaping.

In reality, justice requires that the best performers be rewarded so that they and others

Despite the misconception that the humanities befit women most, girls captured the number one place in both humanities and sciences.

Figure 2-10

Percentage of girls among eminent secondary school graduates, five Arab countries, 2003-2005



Girls achieve their academic successes in spite of obstructive social and family environments.

Source: compiled from various governmental sources, Nader Fergany.

⁶ More than one person may be listed in each place in the case of a tie.

Luminary: Mervat Badawi

The late Mervat Badawi was an extraordinary contributor to development in the Arab world not only as an academic but also, and possibly more importantly, as a practitioner. In the field, she made a name for herself through her unrelenting energy and her leadership role in one of the premier joint Arab development organisations, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD). Nothing indicates the value of her contributions more than the diversity of her interests and her consistently unsparing work on major development projects. Perhaps one of these – the linking of the Arab countries through a common electrical grid, to which she devoted much of her effort in a campaign that lasted up to her death – may be singled out.

Badawi distinguished herself early in life among the outstanding Arab scholars and researchers of the day, being always the youngest among her peers in any scientific endeavour that she undertook.

While still in her early twenties, she received first-class honours in economics from both Cairo University and the University of Paris. She capped this achievement with higher diplomas from Paris (in mathematics and computer science), ending with a doctorat d'Etat in quantitative economics and another doctorate in electrical engineering and regulation.

Starting in the early 1970s, Mervat Badawi took on a number of academic positions at the University of Paris, reaching the peak of the French academic pyramid with her appointment as director of research at the National Institute for Scientific Research in Paris when she was still younger than thirty. Less than ten years later, these

achievements were crowned with the French State prize for economics and an appointment to a professorial chair at the University of Paris.

Following this, AFESD drew her into work in the larger Arab world. Her contributions to the work of the Fund and to development in the region in general continued increasing until she rose to the highest technical position at the Fund when she assumed the post of Director of the Technical Department.

As if this were not enough, Mervat Badawi was a noted figure at many Arab and world assemblies, where her language skills added much to her efficacy. Among such we may mention her membership of the Board of Governors of the International Development Research Centre, Canada, the Oversight Committee of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, and the Board of Directors of the Arab Trade Financing Programme.

We wish to recognise, in particular, Mervat Badawi's incomparably serious, assiduous and effective participation in the activities of the Arab Human Development Report. She was a vital force in the supervision of its publication in her capacity as AFESD representative on the Report's Advisory Board, where she shared in crystallising the Report's concept of development and its substance from the days of its first conception until she quit this life of struggle in the autumn of 2004.

Nader Fergany

The release of Arab girls' and womens' capabilities...would be the freshest sign of spring in the blossoming of the Arab world.

may be encouraged, not merely that equality among the whole be imposed. If justice were done, the rewards that Arab countries would garner from the rise of women through a project for human renaissance are almost beyond reckoning.

The release of Arab girls and women's captive energies in the fields of knowledge and creativity through the creation of a familial and societal environment that rewards high achievement regardless of gender, would be the freshest sign of spring in the blossoming (izdihar) of the Arab world.