The Paradox between Women's Educational Attainment and Social Mobility in the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract

Modernization theory predicts a strong correlation between increased access to education and positive changes in women's social status and eventual social mobility. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, women's increased access to education deviates from the expectations of the modernization perspective. While the MENA region is going through a modernization process, improvements in women's social status still lags due to limited opportunities in the job market and their exclusion in the political arena.

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region defies modernization theory's expectations that increased education and reduced fertility rates lead to higher employment placements and improved social mobility for women. Working from the premise of modernization's theory of societal transition and the role of formal education as a stepping stone toward work,

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access to societal resources, and upward mobility – I trace the path of educating women in the MENA region. It is generally assumed that a society's investment in education pays off in the creation of more jobs and a better educated workforce. Contrary to expectations, the MENA regions investment in education is not contributing to the economic growth of the region, which is experiencing economic stagnation and regional political conflicts.

I address the issues of gender disparity in education, which in the MENA region has narrowed significantly, and declining fertility rates. I then juxtapose those advances against the disproportionately high unemployment rates for men and women and the dramatic income disparity between men and women. While it would be encouraging to be able to point to increased education and declining fertility rates as indicators of a vigorous process of modernization, that does not seem to be true for the MENA region. Unfortunately for women, education and lower fertility rates do not predict improved social status unless there are employment opportunities to complete the picture – and that aspect of the modernization process in the MENA region, the creation of job opportunities, is following a different trajectory from the modernization process that has occurred in the West.

Background on Modernization Theory

In demographic and development literature, modernization theory has provided the dominant theory for explaining the ways in which societies reach economic prosperity. According to modernization theory, as societies begin to evolve from the preindustrial agricultural stage to the industrialized urbanized stage, and eventually to the postindustrial stage, step-by-step transformations are expected. Countries are defined as modern based on their degree of industrialization.[1] Modernization also transforms a society's intellectual and technological properties, and helps the members of the society take greater control of nature and their environment.[2]

During the transitions, occupational structures and job opportunities change[3] and educational opportunities increase for all citizens. Attendant with these demographic changes are changes to a society's values and norms. Transformations such as these can bring more prosperity and comfort to women's lives, especially when they are followed by reduced fertility and fewer domestic responsibilities. Interestingly, women's participation in the labor force declines during the early transitional stages (from preindustrial agriculture to industrial manufacturing economy) and picks up momentum when the society enters the postindustrial service economy stage. As the formal labor market grows during the early stages and agricultural sector jobs decline, more women leave agricultural work. How-

ever, the absence of jobs for women in the early manufacturing economy leads to an overall decline in women's employment.[4] Later on, with job growth in the service and white-collar occupations, women's labor force participation increases again.[5] The transition from a preindustrial agriculture economy to an early industrial urbanized economy, and later to a postindustrial economy, is explained by modernization theorists as having a U-shaped effect on women's labor force participation. Thus, there is a *curvilinear* rather than a *linear* relationship between economic development and female employment.[6]

When women's employment declines during the transition from a preindustrial agricultural economy to an industrial economy, changes also take place with respect to their domestic and family responsibilities. In preindustrial societies, women are able to combine domestic and childcare responsibilities with market work (that is, carpet and basket weaving, small-scale farming). Industrialization and urbanization divide the home and work spheres (work is done in an urban setting removed from the domestic residence). Because domestic responsibilities remain primary to women, the physical separation of work and home constrains their opportunities to participate in the market. Therefore, their rate of participation in the labor force declines.[7] By the time a society reaches the late-stage industrialization phase and is moving into the post-industrialization stage, women have benefited from more education and reduced fertility rates. These improvements, aligned with more job opportunities, facilitate women's increased participation in the labor force.[8] Modernization theory predicts a strong correlation between access to education and positive changes in women's social status and upward social mobility.

Modernization Theory on the Impact of Education for Women

Modernization theorists argue that formal education plays a central role in modern societies, and credentialism (acquiring education with degrees and diplomas) becomes an important stepping-stone toward job opportunities, access to societal resources, and a successful life.[9] Policymakers also argue that an educated society is a more productive and affluent one, especially in regions such as the MENA where poverty is not as deep as in other developing regions.[10] They also acknowledge that improving education and employment opportunity helps improve women's lives more effectively and easily than changing other factors that require deeper cultural intervention.[11] For example, studies show that educated women use contraceptives significantly more frequently than illiterate women.

The UN Population Fund reports that countries that have made social investments in education, health, and reproductive services experience faster economic improvement and slower population growth.[12] Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi and Valentine Moghadam list the benefits of female education on women's empowerment and gender equality:

- As the rate of female education rises, fertility, population growth, and infant and child mortality rates fall and family health improves.
- Increases in girls' secondary school enrollment are associated with increases in women's participation in the labor force and increased contributions to household and national income.
- Women's increased earning capacity has a positive effect on child nutrition.
- Children—especially daughters—of educated mothers are more likely to be enrolled in school and attain higher levels of education.
- Educated women are more politically active and better informed about their legal rights and how to exercise them.[13]

The Arc of Education for Women in the MENA Region

In the West, formal education emerged as an important feature of modernization in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Schools were established in different parts of Europe and the United States with the goal of providing access to formal education for most children. As the industrial economy expanded, an educated and knowledgeable workforce was needed; preindustrial societies did not have a need for educated individuals with knowledge of abstract subject matters (such as math, science, and literature), whereas industrial and postindustrial knowledge-based economies increasingly needed an educated and literate population.

The advent of formal and mass education in the modern MENA region is both indirectly and directly connected to the influence of the West and the era of colonization. Broadly speaking, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, children from elite families in the MENA region would receive religious and language lessons from private tutors, or from places called *maktab* (similar to a school but lessons were conducted on a one-on-one basis with a tutor). Overall, access to modern education was restricted to a select few and mainly reserved for the sons of the elite. Furthermore, the colonizers were not keen on educating the masses since the belief was that intellectual development would lead to the colonizer's loss of political influence and control.[14]

But the Western influence had an impact in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Iran. Each country made investments in a handful of their elite children by sending them to European countries to learn about the latest technologies and ways of life. Ultimately, when the students returned to their own countries, this had the effect of diffusing knowledge about the West. Local schools, especially those modeled on European schools, such as the Tunisian Polytechnic School of Bardo (modeled after the French *Ecole Polytechnique*), also had a significant impact on disseminating knowledge about the West.[15] In countries such as Iran, schools were available for non-Muslim girls in the 1830s, but political resistance from Islamic clergy prevented the schooling of Muslim girls until the first decade of the twentieth century. Muslim girls were kept illiterate or, in the case of the children of the elite, tutored privately at home. Even though the schools were available, there was limited support from families to send their daughters to school.

The first school in Iran that opened its doors to Muslim girls was established in Tehran in 1899. These schools were attended by daughters of the elite and progressive middle class Iranian families, whereas for decades prior to 1899, non-Muslim girls (middle class Christian, Zoroastrian, Jewish) had been attending the few missionary schools that were available to them.[16] Up until the schools opened, daughters of the Muslim elite would often receive some basic education by private tutors in subject matters such as Persian literature, religious studies, French language, and French literature. Mitra Shavarini and Guity Nashat's description of Iran's history of education for women was representative of the history of women's education in other parts of the MENA region.[17] In many of these countries, especially ones under the direct influence of colonizers – such as Lebanon, Egypt, and Tunisia – bilingualism among elite families became widespread by the late nineteenth century. It was a way to learn about Western cultural practices and technological advancements, and a way for the children of the elite to distinguish themselves from others by claiming a higher status and a higher level of literacy and knowledge of the Western cultures.

In different parts of the MENA, political leaders attempted to "modernize" their countries during the first part of the twentieth century by giving women more access to societal resources such as formal education. In the 1920s and 1930s, Reza Khan in Iran, Ataturk in Turkey, and Habibullah Khan in Afghanistan tried to implement programs to modernize their countries. Important aspects of their modernization process were to give women more rights and provide access to schools for Muslim girls. Mass education for girls was also accompanied by an attempt to de-institutionalize the

practice of *hijab*. These leaders had the difficult task of convincing religious authorities that modern secular education did not clash with the Sharī'ah and, furthermore, it would not "contaminate" the minds of young women who were sent abroad to study at European colleges. These leaders saw women's education as one of the main avenues to Westernize/modernize their countries, and they challenged the structure of patriarchal and tribal relations. These leaders as well as their successors continued to experience resistance from rigid fundamentalist Islamist forces for decades to come.

After World War II, and particularly between the 1950s and the 1970s in the MENA region, there was a dramatic rise in the popularity of educating young women. Girls were integrated into gender-specific school systems throughout most of the MENA. In the 1970s, political upheavals in different parts of the region mounted strong opposition to giving girls and women access to education and to the presence of women in the workforce. For example, in Iran during the 1979 Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini, women were among the most loyal revolutionary fighters against the Shah's regime. Afterward, however, they were the first to be sent home and deprived of their access to education and employment. Eventually, Iranian women and girls recovered some access to educational institutions after the government "Islamicized" education in schools and universities. Women were allowed access as long as the educational institutions followed the strict rules of the Islamists.

In Afghanistan, women have always been subject to strict tribal and patriarchal rules, and their social status was complicated by a low level of economic development and a high rate of poverty. Their oppression became even more extreme, however, under the U.S.-backed mujahedeen. In the 1970s, Islamist resistance groups rallied in Kabul demanding that women be prevented from holding any public office, enforcing the return of the *hijab*, and ending coeducation in schools.

When the Soviet Union pulled its troops from Afghanistan in 1989 and the mujahedeen took power, ordering women out of political life was among their first changes. Then, they threatened women and girls to abide by oppressive rules, such as wearing a full *burgha*. Frequently, families were ordered to pull their daughters out of school. These actions created an even larger gap between the number of boys and girls receiving education. When the fundamentalist (originally supported by the United States and Pakistan) Taliban regime emerged in 1993, the suppression of women reached its most extreme point in the history of Afghanistan. Women were forbidden to work and forced to leave their jobs and schools. They had to become completely invisible in public life and were forbidden to be seen

outside of their homes. The U.S. government's invasion of Afghanistan, after September 11, 2001, toppled the Taliban and allowed women back in public spaces. Eventually, some girls returned to school. However, Afghanis, especially Afghani women, continue to suffer from centuries of poverty and an absence of economic development. Their oppression is still visible in their low social status and particularly in their high levels of illiteracy.

Patterns of Education in the MENA Region after the 1970s

Gender disparity in education is an ongoing problem in many parts of the developing world, although an overwhelming majority of the countries in the MENA have narrowed gender gaps in literacy (a larger gap remains in rural areas). In Iran and Kuwait, for example, female college enrollments frequently exceed male enrollments. The gender gap at the primary school level has narrowed or disappeared in almost all parts of the world, but it is still pronounced at the secondary school and tertiary level.[18] Promoting and expanding formal education has been closely linked to ideals of democracy, and is seen as an effective strategy to reduce poverty in developing societies. The overall trend seems to indicate that the gender gap in schooling is slowly closing, but there is still much progress to be made.

Until the late 1970s, the MENA region had one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world compared with other less-developed nations. Three decades later, there have been some improvements: 42 percent of women (age fifteen or older) and 22 percent of men (age fifteen or older) were still illiterate in the region, but the rates were comparable to other less-developed countries; 34 percent of women and 19 percent of men in other less-developed nations were still illiterate by the year 2000 (refer to Table 1). For the year 2000, there are countries that still report a very high illiteracy rate for both men and women fifteen years or older (includes the older and younger generation). Countries such as Morocco, Yemen, and Iraq show an unusually high rate of illiteracy among their women ages fifteen or older – 64 percent, 75 percent, and 77 percent respectively. In contrast, a female illiteracy rate of 20 percent or less is reported for Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Qatar. The rate has been dramatically reduced for the younger generations (ages between fifteen and twenty-four) for both men and women as it is explained in detail in the text below.

The data in Table 1 compares illiteracy rates between men and women. The data are listed for each gender by individual MENA countries, different world regions, age groups, and date range. Group 1 compares illit-

eracy rates for men and women fifteen years of age and older in 2000. This group is a snapshot of the entire adult population of each country/region and serves as the baseline for comparing changes that took effect over the four years between 2000 and 2004. Group 2 (column three) shows the illiteracy rates of men and women, ages fifteen to twenty-four years, during the period of 2000–2004. By contrasting the first and second groups, we can determine the rate and direction of change in illiteracy, which serves as an indicator of the change in education. By restricting the second group to the fifteen to twenty-four age group, we can focus on progress made by those most likely to be in or having just completed the education process – that is, the education level of the entire population (group 1) compared to the education of the younger generation of fifteen to twenty-four-year-olds.

Examining Table 1, we can draw several conclusions. Among the countries making up the MENA region, we see that from group 1 to group 2, there is an increase in literacy (or a decline in illiteracy) in every country. Considering the MENA region as a whole, the overall illiteracy rate among women declined in the 2000–2004 period as compared to the years up to the year 2000. The world illiteracy rate among women (last line in Table 1) shows a global reduction in the 2000–2004 periods as compared to the years up to the year 2000.

Table 1 also allows us to rank the MENA region among different regions of the world. The comparison ranks the reduction in female illiteracy in the MENA as third, behind Latin America and the category of less-developed countries. MENA is ahead of Africa only in reducing the female illiteracy rate. Comparing the world to the category of less-developed nations, the change is almost the same.

In 2000–2004, the younger generation of women and men (between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four) in both the MENA region and the less-developed countries had a lower percentage of illiterates among their population (23 percent of women and 11 percent of men in the MENA region and 19 percent of women and 12 percent of men in less-developed countries). The reduction in illiteracy among the younger generation is an indication that these countries' governments are providing better access to education, and perhaps also an indication that there is a societal shift in thinking about the relevance of education for women. Almost all the countries in the MENA region report that nearly all of their children (both boys and girls) are enrolled in primary school (refer to Table 2). It was seen that 91 percent of girls and 100 percent of boys were enrolled in primary school in year 2000. Omani and Yemeni girls still fall behind their counterparts (71 percent and 61 percent, respectively) but other countries show near perfect statistics for male and female primary school enrollment.

Table 1: Selected Literacy Indicators in the MENA Region

	Group 1		Group 2		
	% Illiterate (15 years or older), 2000		% Illiterate (ages 15-24), 2000-2004		Literate women as % literate men (ages 15-24), 2000–2004
Country	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Algeria	43	24	16	7	91
Bahrain	17	9	1	2	101
Egypt	56	33	37	24	85
Iran	31	17	9	4	95
Iraq	77	45	71	41	49
Jordan	16	5	1	1	100
Kuwait	20	16	7	8	102
Lebanon	20	8	7	3	96
Libya	32	9	7	0.05	94
Morocco	64	38	42	24	79
Oman	38	20	4	0.5	98
Qatar	17	20	3	7	102
Saudi Arabia	33	17	10	5	96
Syria	40	12	21	5	96
Tunisia	39	19	11	3	93
Turkey	24	7	6	1	95
United Arab Emirates	21	25	6	13	108
Yemen	75	33	54	17	60
REGION					
MENA	42	22	23	11	-
Africa	48	30	31	19	-
Latin America/ Caribbean	14	11	4	5	-
North America	-	-	-	-	-
More Developed	-	-	-	-	-
Less Developed	34	19	19	12	92
World	31	17	18	11	92

Sources:
Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi and Valentine M. Moghadam, E*mpowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, November 2003), www.prb.org/publications/policybriefs/empoweringwomendevelopingsocietyfemaleeducationinthemiddleeastandnorthafrica.aspx?p=1.

We can conclude that roughly half of the MENA countries have succeeded in significantly reducing illiteracy among their younger generations of women and men (nine of the eighteen countries within the MENA region report illiteracy rates of less than 10 percent for both boys and girls aged fifteen to twenty-four years). Those countries are Bahrain, Iran, Jordan, Ku-

wait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Qatar, and Turkey. Iraq, Yemen, Morocco, and Egypt still have a significant population of women in the fifteen to twenty-four age bracket (ranging from 71 percent in Iraq to 37 percent in Egypt) who are illiterate (Table 1). The illiteracy rate among women over fifteen is still high in several other countries in the MENA where women are roughly twice as likely to be illiterate as men in that same age group.[19]

Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Education Patterns in MENA

As stated earlier, in many of the MENA countries the gender gap in providing education for the younger generation is closing. Most children in the region are enrolled in primary school (91 percent of girls and 100 percent of boys). But not all countries have been able to provide equal access to secondary school enrollment. Only 62 percent of girls and 71 percent of boys were enrolled in secondary school. Countries such as Libya and Bahrain have an impressive 91–108 percent[20] rate for secondary school enrollment – while Syria, Morocco, and Yemen show rates of 42, 36, and 27 percent, respectively, for female enrollment in secondary school.

However, in the two decades between 1985 and early-to-mid-2000, many countries experienced an increase in the enrollment of both male and female students in secondary school (refer to Table 2). For example, in 1985, 57 percent of women in Libya were enrolled in secondary school compared with 108 percent in year 2000. Oman and Tunisia provide other great examples. In 1985, only 18 percent of girls in Oman and 32 percent in Tunisia were enrolled in secondary school; by 2000, 78 and 81 percent of girls were enrolled in Oman and Tunisia, respectively. Almost all countries have improved male and female secondary schooling since 1985. There are some fluctuations for countries such as Syria and Lebanon but the decline is not consistent. The one consistent decline for secondary school enrollment, for both boys and girls, is in Iraq. Iraq has failed to improve secondary school enrollment for boys and girls since 1985 (the enrollment has decreased). The reason for this decline could be due to its depressed economy and continuous political conflicts and wars during the past two decades.

Women's share of university enrollment is impressive in some of the Arab Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, 56 percent; Oman, 58 percent; Bahrain, 60 percent; Kuwait, 68 percent; and Qatar, 73 percent) and low for Yemen and Iraq (20 percent and 34 percent, respectively). In countries where women make up the majority of the university population, it is because men seek greater social status by leaving the country to attend foreign universities.[21]

Table 2: Selected Education Indicators in the MENA Region

	% Enrolled in Primary School, 2000		% Enrolled in Secondary School					
			1985		1993–1997		2000–2003	
Country	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Algeria	107	116	44	59	62	65	74	69
Bahrain	103	103	97	98	98	91	99	91
Egypt	96	103	50	72	73	83	85	91
Iran	85	88	36	54	73	81	75	79
Iraq	91	111	39	68	32	51	29	47
Jordan	101	101	-		-	-	87	86
Kuwait	95	93	87	95	66	64	88	83
Lebanon	97	101	60	61	84	78	81	74
Libya	117	115	57	61	-	-	108	102
Morocco	88	101	28	42	34	44	36	45
Oman	71	74	18	35	79	80	78	79
Qatar	104	105	86	79	66	68	93	88
Saudi Arabia	-	-	31	48	57	65	65	73
Syria	105	113	48	68	40	45	42	47
Tunisia	115	120	32	46	63	66	81	78
Turkey	96	105	30	52	48	68	66	86
UAE	99	99	55	55	82	77	82	77
Yemen	61	96	-	-	14	53	27	65
MENA	91	100	-		50	60	62	71
World	-	-	43	54	55	63	62	67
Africa	-	-	23	33	32	38	36	41
Latin America/ Caribbean	-	-	-	-	-	-	90	83
North America	-	-	97	97	98	99	93	95
More Developed	-	-	94	93	102	99	103	101
Less Developed	-		31, 44	44	47	57	55	61

	Women as share of university enrollment (%), 2000	Public Education as share of Total Government Expenditure (%)
Country		
Algeria	-	16
Bahrain	60	12
Egypt	-	15
Iran	47	18
Iraq	34	-
Jordan	51	20
Kuwait	68	14
Lebanon	52	8
Libya	48	-
Morocco	44	25
Oman	58	16
Qatar	73	-

Saudi Arabia	56	23
Syria	-	14
Tunisia	48	20
Turkey	41	15
UAE	-	20
Yemen	21	22
REGION		
MENA	-	-
World	-	-
Africa	-	-
Latin America/ Caribbean	-	-
North America	-	-
More Developed	-	-
Less Developed	-	-

Sources:
Women of Our World. 2005. Population Reference Bureau, Washington, DC., www.prb.org/Publications/Datasheets/2005/WomenofOurWorld2005PDF255KB.aspx.
Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi and Valentine M. Moghadam, *Empowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, November 2003), www.prb.org/publications/policybriefs/empoweringwomendevelopingsocietyfemaleeducationinthemiddleeastandnorthafrica.aspx?p=1.

Families with the financial resources prefer to send their sons to European and American universities not only to learn the latest technology, but also to increase their social status with the foreign degree. Daughters, however, are still kept close to the family home and so are more likely to populate the local universities. The number of sons in the wealthy states going overseas for a university is enough to skew the data comparing local university attendance by gender.

In general, governments in MENA countries spend a high percentage of their GDP on education.[22] As noted earlier, statistics reflect the region's improvement in literacy rates during the past three decades – all boys and over 90 percent of girls have been enrolled in elementary schools. Additionally, 62 percent of girls and 71 percent of boys were reported to be enrolled in secondary school in the year 2000 (Table 2).

Education and Declining Fertility Rates

Education has been shown to affect a wide range of behaviors such as the postponement and timing of marriage, the number of children conceived, and the participation of women in the labor force (John Bongaarts[23] refers to education as one of the proximate determinants of fertility[24]). The rela-

tionship between education and fertility has been closely studied and suggests that women's education does not necessarily produce similar results in every society but is "*conditioned by socioeconomic development, social structure, and cultural context, as well as by a society's stage in the fertility transition.*"[25] J. Harvey Graff argues that education has a more substantial impact on the "psychological modernity" of people in societies that are experiencing industrialization.[26] Psychologically, men and women begin to accept the idea of limiting family size, and controlling fertility, which leads to a subsequent decline in population growth. Kamran Asdar Ali, in his ethnographic study of urban and rural communities in Egypt, came to the same conclusion – that people's more modern attitudes and thinking processes are the main reason they take advantage of family planning services that lower fertility rates.[27] Robert Freedman finds a consistent correlation between education and literacy, and demographic outcomes such as fertility rates.[28] Bangladesh, a majority Muslim nation and one of the most populous Muslim countries is an anomaly. Bangladesh still struggles with a low level of female literacy, but through effective family planning programs, the country had succeeded in lowering its fertility rate despite its still high mortality rate. It is estimated that 45 percent of Bangladeshi couples use contraceptives, therefore, the fertility rate has dropped despite the still low female literacy rate.[29] Bangladesh is considered an exceptional case but the literature shows a strong case for the education-low fertility connection.

When women in the upper educational range are compared with women in the lower range across one society, fertility is substantially lower among better-educated women.[30] Teresa Castro Martin reports on the results from the World Fertility Survey (WFS) and Demographic Health Survey (DHS) and concludes that, in general, societies with limited literacy and limited schooling have high fertility rates, but as societies advance and education becomes more available fertility, rates start to drop.[31] In most societies, women who are more educated use modern contraception more frequently than women who are less educated:

> [In Latin America] women with no formal schooling have, on average, six to seven children, whereas highly educated women have fertility levels analogous to those found in the developed world, in the range of two to three children. . . . [In the sub-Saharan African region,] the association between female education and fertility appears weakest . . . prior studies have attributed this atypical pattern to the dominance of physiological factors in a context of natural fertility. In the absence of conscious birth control, education has the potential of increasing fertility as a result of reduced breastfeeding and postpartum abstinence.[32]

The Relationship between Education and Employment in the MENA Region

According to modernization theory, education is expected to pull more women into the labor force, but statistics in the MENA region show otherwise. Table 3 shows patterns of women's employment and unemployment from 1980 to 1990 and 2000–2004. In fifteen out of eighteen cases, female labor force participation has increased between 1980 and 2004. In Turkey, we see a steady decline. In Egypt and Lebanon, we see an initial increase between 1980 and 1990 followed by a decline by 2004. The same data, grouped by region, shows that overall in the MENA region female labor force participation has increased, as is also witnessed in the United States. The lowest rate of female employment in the MENA region in 2000–2004 belongs to United Arab Emirates (13 percent) and Saudi Arabia (15 percent). The highest rates are reported for Iran (33 percent), Algeria, Lebanon, and Syria (all 30 percent). Female labor force participation for the MENA region is as low as 27 percent. Despite the relative levels of rising employment for women, unemployment rates in the MENA region for both men and women are among the highest in the world indicating a high demand and a low supply of jobs. In Iran, women's employment rate is 33 percent – the highest in the region (still low compared to countries in other regions) – and the female unemployment rate is over 20 percent. In Syria, the labor force participation of women is 30 percent, and the unemployment rate for women is 24 percent (a pattern similar to Iran). While the unemployment rate in high income countries is slightly lower for women than for men (6.8 percent for men and 6.6 for women in the United States) – in the MENA region, women's employment rate is much lower than men's. The highest recorded unemployment rates among these countries belong to Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, and Syria. These countries also have a higher percentage of college educated women among their younger population (with the exception of Iraq), once again countering modernization's theory of a positive correlation between higher education and higher labor force participation.

Income disparity between men and women in the MENA region is even more prevalent (Table 3). For example, Kuwaiti men earn three times more than women; Omani men, four times more; Saudi men, five times more. In contrast, there is a much smaller gap between men and women's earnings in the United States, Norway, and Sweden.

As of year 2000, about 27 percent of women in the MENA region are reported to be employed, which is the lowest rate when compared with other regions (Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin American, and North America).

Within the MENA region, despite higher achievements in educating women and lowering fertility rates, the female unemployment rate is still disproportionately high relative to men.

A society's investment in education is generally assumed to pay off in the creation of more jobs (mainly in the nonagricultural sector) and better-educated individuals in the workforce. For a society to receive returns on its investments on education, it needs to facilitate the building of a skilled and flexible labor force. Contrary to expectations, the MENA region's substantial investment in education has not been paying off as expected. There is little evidence that education has contributed to economic growth in the region.[33] The Arab Human Development Report (2002) indicates that one in five Arabs still live on less than $2 a day.[34] Over the past twenty years, growth in income per person at an annual rate of 0.5 percent was lower than anywhere else in the world except in sub-Saharan Africa. Stagnant economic growth together with a fast-growing population – in spite of current declining fertility rates (the MENA region is still in the midst of the consequences of earlier unchecked fertility rates) – has contributed to high unemployment. About twelve million people, or 15 percent of the labor force, are unemployed in the Arab world.[35] Therefore, despite their great improvements in education, the unemployment rate especially among the educated is high, in some cases an astounding 15–20 percent.

The Unfortunate Disconnect between Education and Social Status and Paid Employment

In the MENA region, we see declining fertility rates and increased education markers of modernization, and an indication of improved social status. However, in the region, these advances are accompanied by economic stagnation and regional political conflicts.

The high rate of women's access to secondary and higher education in most of the MENA region is impressive, although much improvement is still needed. According to modernization theorists and based on the experience of many Western societies, women who are more educated are more empowered women. They claim that as educational access for women improves it creates more favorable conditions for women to enter the labor force. Social and cultural changes – such as marrying at a later age, declining fertility rates, and a demand for a more educated labor force – all contribute to a larger supply of female workers. The demand for a more

Table 3. Selected Indicators of Employment for Men and Women

Country	Estimated earned income (PPP US$), 2001		Income disparity between men and women* (in %)
	Female	Male	
Algeria	2,784	9,329	30
Bahrain	7,578	22,305	34
Egypt	1,970	5,075	39
Iran	2,599	9,301	28
Iraq	—	—	—
Jordan	1,771	5,800	31
Kuwait	8,605	25,333	34
Lebanon	1,963	6,472	30
Libya	—	—	—
Morocco	2,057	5,139	40
Oman	3,919	17,960	22
Qatar	—	—	—
Saudi Arabia	4,222	21,141	20
Syria	1,423	5,109	27
Tunisia	3,377	9,359	36
Turkey	3,717	8,023	46
United Arab Emirates	6,041	28,223	21
Yemen	365	1,201	30

Country	Estimated earned income (PPP US$), 2001		Income disparity between men and women* (in %)
	Female	Male	
Algeria	2,784	9,329	30
Bahrain	7,578	22,305	34
Egypt	1,970	5,075	39
Iran	2,599	9,301	28
Iraq	—	—	—
Jordan	1,771	5,800	31
Kuwait	8,605	25,333	34
Lebanon	1,963	6,472	30
Libya	—	—	—
Morocco	2,057	5,139	40
Oman	3,919	17,960	22
Qatar	—	—	—
Saudi Arabia	4,222	21,141	20
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Tunisia	3,377	9,359	36
Turkey	3,717	8,023	46
United Arab Emirates	6,041	28,223	21
Yemen	365	1,201	30

REGION/ECONOMIC CATEGORY			
MENA	-	-	-
Lower middle income			
High income			
United States	26,389	45,540	58

Sources:
Women of Our World. 2005. Population Reference Bureau, Washington, DC., www.prb.org/Publications/Datasheets/2005/WomenofOurWorld2005PDF255KB.aspx. The World Bank Group, GenderStats, Database of Gender Statistics, http://devdata.-worldbank.org/genderstats/genderRpt.asp?rpt=profile&cty=BHR,Bahrain&hm=home.

educated labor force in modernizing societies is generally assumed to work in women's favor since modernization also increases women's access to better jobs, but that can only happen if jobs are available. As of the year 2000, women's formal employment in the MENA region was as low as 27 percent.

Mirna Lattouf attributes this low employment rate to women's lack of improved social status.[36] For example, she examines women's social status in modern Lebanon and identifies several factors contributing to their lack of economic success despite their high level of education. Historically, modernization has occurred in conjunction with industrialization – a successful process of growth and diversification due to a growing domestic economy through the export of goods and services. She argues that economic stagnation and regional political problems led the government to run campaigns to legitimize discrimination against women and force women to operate within the traditional cultural framework – in the home and with limited social power.

Lattouf states that:

> Despite low rates of return on education for women in terms of employment income, families educate their daughters with the idea of finding them more suitable husbands. A woman with a higher level of education and choice of a husband can achieve a higher social and financial status. Education

> is not a stepping-stone to greater autonomy for women, but rather a way to achieve a higher level of social status, but still as a dependant.
>
> Advocating women's rights is connected directly with the West and national disloyalty. Women and men are bombarded by popular messages in the regional media that stress traditional gender roles, where it is emphasized that women's primary roles are housewife and mother. Her employment is portrayed as unimportant to her and her family despite her level of educational achievement.
>
> Education and employment changes initiated at the institutional level will work only if they are administered along with socialization tactics to change attitudes and behaviors of people on a personal level.[37]

Lattouf's observation of why families support their daughters' higher educational attainment despite the questionable rate of economic return is about the relationship of women to men; families support their daughter's higher education as a way to improve their daughter's chances of finding a suitable husband of a similar or higher social status, which in turn adds to the families' collective social status.[38]

A similar study by Mitra Shavarini reveals similar constraints on women in Iranian society.[39] In 2003, a notable 62 percent of women compared with 38 percent of men passed the national college entrance examination called *Konkur*, indicating that a larger percentage of women are applying to college and are more eligible than men. Closing the educational gender gap and surpassing men in attending and receiving post-secondary degrees is an achievement for Iranian women. However, the advances in educational attainment do not correlate to an increase of women in the workforce or an increase in social status except by extension through a good marriage.

In her study of female college students, Shavarini describes the experiences of women in present day Iranian institutions of higher education and the challenges female students face in their everyday life.[40] Shavarini tries to answer two main questions in her ethnographic study: what role does higher education play in the lives of Iranian women? – and what are the experiences of Iranian women at these institutions? Shavarini posits that women's ability to gain access to higher education at an increasing rate is explained in part by the "Islamic packaging" of higher education. She states that women's access to colleges "reveals that college has become the only viable institution through which young Iranian women can alter their public role and status."[41] Here is a quote from one of her respondents:

> The only right women find that is granted to them and is encouraged is the right to an education. . . . In today's Iranian society, women are considered "second-class citizens." They have no rights; no place in

> society, there is a place for women's rights. Going to the university has become the only thing that we are allowed to do.[42]

Many of the women interviewed by Shavarini had the full support of their families to obtain a higher education. However, the support and promotion of a college experience for women by their families was often mentioned as a way to improve their daughter's chances of finding a suitable husband of similar or higher social status. Many of these women were aware they were facing societal discrimination when it came to finding jobs even with their higher education degrees. The discrimination is a consequence of living in an economically depressed country such as Iran, with a high inflation rate and a high rate of unemployment. Men are given priority in access to jobs and therefore highly qualified women with college degrees are unable to find suitable employment. Discrimination against women is partially an expedient response to the faltering economy and has its roots in history and culture. For the most part, in a patriarchal society men are the breadwinners, and many women are dependent on the male members of their family – including fathers, brothers, uncles, husbands, and sons. From a political standpoint, it makes sense to ensure that men are not facing competition from women for jobs especially where there is a scarcity of work. The deep historical roots of the patriarchal social structure within this system lead to discriminating against women in the labor force, which is further compounded by economic stagnation, political conflicts, and global events. The rate at which the new jobs are created lags behind the growth in the number of young people entering the job market. The MENA region suffers from an unusually high rate of unemployment not only for women but for men as well. In 2006, the unemployment rate for men and women averaged 10 and 17 percent, respectively.[43] The unemployment rate is further complicated by age; the younger generation of men and women are experiencing even higher unemployment rates in the MENA region than the older age groups. Faraneh Roudi-Fahimi and Mary Mederios Kent express this concern:

> While less than 15 percent of young men and women were unemployed worldwide, the ILO estimated that just over 20 percent of young men and just over 30 percent of young women in MENA were unemployed in 2005. The situation is particularly dire for members of MENA's youth bulge in some countries. More than 40 percent of Algeria's young men and women were unemployed in 2005, which may be why so many Algerians are emigrating [sic] to Europe and elsewhere in search of jobs. Between 21 percent and 31 percent of young men were unemployed in Tunisia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and several other MENA countries,

> along with between 29 percent and 50 percent of young women. Qatar, with a labor force dominated by foreign male workers, has relatively low unemployment for young men, but high unemployment for young women.[44]

To illustrate the level of women's low status despite their high educational attainment, Shavarini describes the experience of a female engineering student in the highly competitive Tehran Polytechnic Institute.[45] The female student expresses disappointment and a degree of anger with the discrimination she experiences each day and the lack of prospects for her future:

> My battle starts the minute I walk out of my home each morning. As I am waiting to catch a ride, I endure honks and lurid comments by passing male motorists; during the ride I am made offers of *sigha* [temporary marriage]. At the university gate, I am stopped and told that my makeup and *hijab* are important and in class my comments are dismissed or discredited by my male peers and male professors as "emotional female viewpoints." Do I think I will find a job after I graduate? What man in this society is going to take me, take us [women], seriously enough to hire us?[46]

There is no doubt that women's improved access to higher education is a monumental achievement. On the other hand, if their status is not improved on a societal level, their higher education credentials will not help them get far in the job market. As Shirin Ebadi – the Iranian human rights lawyer, activist, and the winner of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize – concluded, "higher education is paradoxical: it both limits and expands women's possibilities in Iran."[47]

In the MENA region, the effect of greater access to education for women deviates from the expectations of the modernization perspective. Modernization theory shows a strong relationship between increased access to education and positive changes in women's social status and eventual social mobility. While the MENA region is going through a modernization process, the results do not exactly mirror the West. In the countries of the MENA, modernization is complicated by a strong patriarchal culture, the overlap of religion and government, and the absence of a diversified economy. While we would like to be able to point to increased education and declining fertility rates as indicators of a vigorous process of modernization, in the MENA region these factors do not seem to be contributing to women's improved social status and increased social mobility.

Women's social status in the MENA countries has been and continues to be conditioned by the economic and political realities of the region. When expedient, Islam and historical traditions of patriarchy have been

engaged as frameworks and justifications for controlling the population. However, in MENA countries where we see a more diversified economy, Islam has not been an altogether limiting influence. Studies of the modernization process have shown that women's status improves when they become essential to the financial system – when the unstoppable forces of a growing and a diversified economy are able to provide jobs at least equal to the demand. This theme is reflected in the studies by Djavad Salehi-Isfahani.[48] Although his discussion is centered on the size and distribution of the population in Iran, and the effects this will have on economic and social development in the next few decades – his reasoning is applicable to all MENA countries experiencing a "youth bulge."

Hope, according to Salehi-Isfahani, lies in the government changing the country's base of economic growth from oil to "human capital." The oil industry, based on a finite quantity of a natural resource, produced a financial windfall for the Iranian economy – but not a sustainable economic model. This is also true for the other major oil-producing nations such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. The transition from an oil export economy to a human capital economy is paramount. All MENA countries with declining fertility rates must make a rapid investment in their human capital and create a diversified economic base for sustainable growth before the current youth bulge reaches retirement (estimated around 2040). At that point, there will be a smaller cohort of working contributors to care for a larger elderly population. Investment in human capital today and diversification of a sustainable economy away from just an oil-based industry will provide tomorrow's generations with stability and prosperity. And it seems clear that an exclusively oil-export-based-economy can have adverse effects on women's status.

It is possible to predict a substantial improvement in women's social mobility in the MENA region if the region is able to move away from the reliance on oil exports and focus on an investment in human capital and a diversified economy with ample jobs. With the population growth under control, and women already attaining higher education, regional stability and prosperity lies in continued and intelligent modernization. Most importantly, women's status would improve by virtue of the natural economic forces that would ensue from stability and economic diversification.

Notes

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