



GENDER IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: PROGRESS AND REMAINING CHALLENGES

Tara Vishwanath, Nandini Krishnan¹

Introduction: The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has made impressive strides in reducing gender gaps in human development. The ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary education is 0.96, women in the region are more likely than men to attend university, maternal mortality is around 200 deaths per 100,000 live births (compared to a world average of 400 deaths), and fertility rates have decreased in the past decade. Although gender gaps in school completion rates still exist in some MENA countries, most countries are well on their way to achieving gender parity in key human development indicators.

Remaining Challenges: Despite these remarkable achievements, significant gender gaps remain in economic and political inclusion. The region as a whole faces a considerable unemployment challenge, with low female labor force participation rates of 25 percent on average. Young women, in particular, face very high rates of unemployment (as high as 40 percent in Egypt and Jordan). Significantly, this comes at a time when the MENA region is undergoing a demographic transition characterized by a rising share of the young in the population. Women face significant challenges in the school to work transition and in the labor market: limited labor market mobility, a mismatch between skills acquired in school and what is in demand in the labor market, and legal or institutional factors related to cultural norms.

Female entrepreneurship opportunities continue to remain remarkably limited. These gender gaps in political and economic participation and labor market opportunities have now emerged as the key priority areas for the region.

The Regional Gender Strategy: The regional strategy for improving gender equality involves a concerted work program on gender and economic inclusion, which includes rigorous analytical products, experimental policy pilots, and gender-focused lending operations. Identifying effective policies by generating new evidence on what works through rigorous empirical analysis—both quantitative and qualitative—is a critical element of the MENA region's gender strategy.

Another innovative and emerging element of the strategy combines knowledge generation and operational learning in the form of policy pilots underpinned by carefully designed evaluations. Finally, the region is undertaking a comprehensive effort to mainstream gender in lending operations and policy dialogue. This involves the development of regional and country Gender Action Plans in conjunction with country teams, ensuring all Country Assistance Strategies (CAS) are informed by gender analyses and incorporate a gender focus in key priority areas, and that a system of regular reporting on a core set of gender indicators is put into place.

MENA's Regional Gender Action Plan: A Regional Gender Action Plan (RGAP) is being drafted. This RGAP will focus on (i) improving the diagnosis of gender issues at regional and country levels; (ii) establishing priorities for

¹ Tara Viswanath, Lead Economist, Nandini Krishnan, Economist, Middle East and North Africa Region, Social and Economic Development group (MNSSED).

policy dialogue with governments, non-state actors and development partners; (iii) strengthening mainstreaming of gender issues in Bank operations; (iv) defining clear roles and responsibilities for the implementation of these actions; (v) establishing a set of indicators and targets to monitor progress; and (vi) providing country teams with additional capacity building and technical backstopping support.

As part of this region-wide gender mainstreaming effort, a process of consultation and consensus building with government and other stakeholders will be undertaken to attempt to:

(i) Develop Country Gender Action Plans (CGAP) to overlap with the CAS period, where appropriate; and

(i) Ensure all CASs in the pipeline are informed by gender analysis and identify priority areas for intervention. For example, the Lebanon CAS (August 2010) adopts a gender-integrated approach, identifying the scope for addressing gender inequality in focus areas and commits to the monitoring of key gender indicators in selected areas of World Bank intervention. The CAS pipeline for FY11 includes Algeria, Jordan, and the West Bank and Gaza Interim Strategy Note.

Country Updates: The remainder of this Quick Note summarizes progress in selected countries on the regional gender strategy as laid out in the regional brief on Gender, *Bridging the Gap: Improving Capabilities and Expanding Opportunities for Women in the Middle East and North Africa Region* (World Bank, October 2010).

- **Jordan:** The Jordan Adolescent Girls Initiative (AGI) pilot, Jordan New work Opportunities for Women under the patronage of Queen Rania al-Abdullah, is currently well under implementation. The baseline report has been completed and will be disseminated shortly. The first follow up survey is planned for August 2011 and funding has been secured for a Poverty and Social Impact Analysis focusing on youth and women in the labor market.

- **Egypt:** The Egypt Gender Report of 2010 will be disseminated shortly, and will provide a strong analytical basis for mainstreaming gender issues in the upcoming Egypt Country Assistance Strategy (FY12). A rigorous impact evaluation of a new credit line for disadvantaged women through rural post office branches is planned as part of a USD 300 million project to foster micro and small enterprise growth.
- **Yemen:** A rapid qualitative assessment on Gender and Economic Decision Making is currently underway and is part of a multi-country analytical product for the WDR 2012 on Gender. The qualitative data and insights from this study will be combined with quantitative data from the Yemen HBS and result in a Gender policy note for Yemen in FY12. A new AGI pilot has also been announced for Yemen, and is currently being designed.
- **West Bank and Gaza:** The Poverty and Inclusion Assessment Report for WBG is near completion and will form analytical basis for incorporating gender issues into the upcoming Interim Strategy Note. A rapid qualitative assessment on Gender and Economic Decision Making is currently underway and is part of a multi-country analytical product for the WDR 2012 on Gender. The qualitative data and insights from this study will be combined with quantitative data and analysis and result in note on Youth, Women and Conflict in the WBG for delivery this calendar year.
- **Morocco:** The Morocco Household and Youth Survey is the basis for the ongoing report on employment in Morocco, focusing on the vulnerabilities of youth and women in the labor market. This aforementioned ESW is slated for completion in April 2011. The Morocco Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) pilot experiment specifically addresses gender issues in its design, for instance, by taking into

account higher dropout rates among girls by offering slightly higher transfers for girls.

- **Tunisia:** The “Turning Theses into Enterprises” program offers coaching to students interested in developing a business plan in their final year in university, and the evaluation will measure impacts disaggregated by gender.

Contact MNA K&L:

Emmanuel Mbi, Director, MNA Operational Core Services Unit

Regional Quick Notes Team:

Omer Karasapan, Roby Fields, and Hafed Al-

Ghwell Tel #: (202) 473 8177

MENA K&L Quick Notes:

<http://www.worldbank.org/mena-quicknotes>

The MNA Quick Notes are intended to summarize lessons learned from MNA and other Bank Knowledge and Learning activities. The Notes do not necessarily reflect the views of the World Bank, its board or its member countries.