

## **Female labour participation and pay equity in Arab countries: commonalities and differences**

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While there is a common belief that female labour indicators in Arab countries demonstrate a problematic situation, little is understood about the varieties within countries in that region. This paper attempts to draw a segmentation of the Arab world to show how different countries differ in this regard. It looks at two specific measures: the level of female participation as a percentage of male participation (FPM), and the female earned income to male income (FIM). Statistics from 20 Arab countries generated four clusters in which those countries are classified. Female labour indicators in most countries in the Arab world show similar patterns found in other countries in their stage of development. This confirms earlier research that indicates that women's labour participation decreases as societies move away from agriculture into manufacturing, services and industry. Only four countries are identified as outliers whose labour indicators can be understood within the context of the cultural values that dominate. The implications are discussed and individual research on female labour within each Arab country is invited.

**Keywords:** female labour participation; pay inequity; gender; working women; Arab countries; economic development

### **Introduction**

This article examines gender egalitarianism in terms of labour indicators in Arab countries. Statistics about women's work show troubling signs in terms of gender equity in work participation and pay (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2005).<sup>1</sup> This does not preclude the fact that there are distinct varieties within countries in the region. The problems are more intense in some countries than in others, and it would be problematic to deal with the Arab world as a coherent entity. Generalizing about women's status in Arab countries carries significant risks, as this leads to failures in coping with problems. This paper attempts to draw a segmentation of the Arab world in terms of female work participation and pay. It shows that there are many clusters in the Arab world, and it would be beneficial to understand women's positioning in each of the identified clusters. This leads to affirming the diversity of the Arab world, and also the diversity of reasons that may have caused such dismal rates of female participation and pay equity. While in some cases one can look for an overriding factor for such deficiencies, the stories are myriad and the struggles are different within each locality.

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Although there are commonalities among many Arab countries, several scholars have directly or indirectly challenged this assumption. They warn of the dangers posed by speaking of an ‘Arab mind’ or ‘Arab personality’, as this could lead to unwarranted over-generalization (Moughrabi 1978; Barakat 1993; Sidani and Thornberry 2010). Despite the shared geographic location in the Middle East area, there remains a certain degree of dissimilarity caused by political, economic, historical and other relevant variables (Al-Khatib et al. 2005). The existence of different ethnic groups and religions in such countries as Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Morocco and Algeria also defies the homogeneity premise (Ibrahim 1998). Recently, there has been a plethora of studies relating to women’s work and participation that indirectly challenge the homogeneity premise and highlight the varying experiences and contexts within which Arab women operate. Examples include Arab Gulf States (Dechant and Al-Lamky 2005; Al-Lamky 2007; Omair 2010; Metcalfe 2011; Rutledge et al. 2011; Aksaif 2013; Sidani and Al-Ariss 2014) and other countries (Hutchings, Metcalfe, and Cooper 2010) such as Morocco (Addouni 2013), Tunisia (Charrad 2007; El Harbi, Anderson and Mansour 2009), Lebanon (Tlaiss and Kauser 2011), Jordan (Latoum 2013), and Egypt (Amin and Al-Bassusi 2004). Scholars explain the unique attributes and challenges of the various environments within which women work. This shows that while there are some similarities among many Arab countries, there are also significant differences that cannot be ignored.

### **A contextual presentation of female participation**

It has often been the case that other priorities on the national agenda pushed women’s causes onto the back burner. Such was the case in the early 20th century when Arab countries started to lift the grip of colonialism; such is also the case now. In many Arab countries, problems of economic underdevelopment, poverty, illiteracy, nationalistic struggles, wars, East–West relations, terrorism and the like often take precedence over women’s issues. Rarely is the link seen between economic development and giving top priority to the advancement of women’s causes.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly there is always a certain primacy given to ‘other things’, eventually leading to the marginalization of women’s rights.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, it was also the rise of nationalistic ambitions in the early 20th century that made women more aware of their role in society, in general, and in the political arena, in particular (Graham-Brown 1988). At the turn of the 20th century, the Egyptian feminist movement was the most forceful and active across the whole Middle East,<sup>4</sup> and women participated actively in the struggles of the time. What was probably not expected was the fact that once the revolutions realized part of their objectives, women were again sidelined. The same thing seems to be happening in the wake of the latest Arab Spring revolts that rocked many countries in the region. This was explained early on by one of the first leaders of the Egyptian feminist movement when she said: ‘In moments of danger, when women emerge by their side, men utter no protest’ (Graham-Brown 1988, 131), but when danger subsides, women for the most part are ostracized one more time.<sup>5</sup>

While there are few studies that address women’s participation in the workforce in the first half of the 20th century, a closer look paints a picture that does not match the stereotypes of the Arab world. Graham-Brown (1988, 148) reports about a French anthropologist, Mathea Gaudry, who indicated that in many simple agriculture-based

Arab societies women played an active role. In Egyptian villages ‘[the woman is] almost absolute manager of the house. She is the treasurer of the crops, money and legal documents, and holder of the keys to the various chests in the house’ (Ammar 1988, 50). Women were actively involved in agriculture, but their participation diminished as they climbed the social ladder. Women’s presence in the fields was commonplace and their economic participation was strong, especially among poor families. Yet, wage for employment outside the home was a rarity and did not meet much social approval. This does not negate the fact that in some countries such as Egypt women were active in light industries such as textile and food processing. It seems that as countries developed and women became more educated, their economic participation started to suffer. The general picture of working women in the second half of the 20th century reflects cases where women left the fields for schools and universities, only to find the doors of business shut before them.

Hence education did not alleviate the case for female economic participation. The UNDP Human Development Report indicates that women’s education in the Arab world has improved tremendously since 1970 (UNDP 2011).<sup>6</sup> There is, however, a paradox between significant improvements in education and modest increases in work participation rates. This is sometimes explained by a cultural mindset that accords the right to paid work to men (Dris-Aït-Hamadouche 2007). Women’s labour force participation has only increased by 9 percentage points since 1980 to 27%, on average, in 2008, which is still about half the world average (UNDP 2010). Arab Fund reports also indicate that despite the improvements made in women’s economic participation, there are still significant gaps in their work indicators compared with men (Arab Fund 2012). As societies started moving slowly from being agriculture-based to manufacturing and services, women ‘lost many of the economic roles they were playing’ (Graham-Brown 1988, 167). Women suddenly found themselves outside their traditional work habitat with limited access to professional positions. The loss in agricultural work was not compensated for in industry or services sectors. Improved educational opportunities did not mean that these could be used to access new jobs (Marmenout and Lirio 2014). Saudi Arabia is a very good example of this phenomenon. While a major societal transformation was needed to improve female education, a parallel shift in societal attitudes regarding women’s work did not materialize in a sufficient manner.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that while women own about 40% of private Saudi wealth (Kayed and Hassan 2010), they have not been able to transfer this wealth into leading successful businesses that give other women fair opportunity. The great potential in Saudi Arabia is not utilized yet, and the extensive jumps in education do not negate the fact that there is a lot to be done to come close to world standards.<sup>8</sup> According to the Saudi Labor Ministry, constraints on women’s participation have been causing severe economic drainage for the kingdom (Assiri 2010). This should not obscure the fact that the Saudi Arabian government and other local actors have been trying gradually to change legislation in order to support vulnerable segments of the population, including women (Alhargan 2012).

The discovery and extraction of oil has been perceived as bliss to the Arab world; but with oil come numerous problems. Concentration on the oil industry marginalizes other sectors such as agriculture or light manufacturing – the two areas where women have traditionally been present in good numbers in the Middle East (Simpfendorfer 2011). This contributed further to gender inequality in the workforce. According to some scholars, oil is the real culprit, not religious norms:

Women have made less progress toward gender equality in the Middle East than in any other region. Many observers claim this is due to the region's Islamic traditions. I suggest that oil, not Islam, is at fault, and that oil production also explains why women lag behind in many other countries. (Ross 2008, 107)

The sudden wealth that emerged out of oil has also acted as a disincentive for women to enter the workforce given the new economic prosperity that many women now enjoy in their wealthier families. This affirms earlier research that indicates that women's labour participation will tend to go down as societies move away from agriculture into manufacturing and industry (Goldin 1994). In non-oil-producing Arab countries, the move from agriculture to industry-based economies was not sufficient to replace labour loss. To top it all, factory automation and mechanization hit employment for both men and women. However, impact struck the latter the most.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) (2011) indicates that the gap between male and female employment in the Middle East and North Africa (at about 47%), while slowly improving over the past two decades, is still twice the global average. Unemployment for women is about twice that of men and persists among both adults and youth workers. The ILO estimates that:

less than a quarter of the total female working-age population in the region actually has a job, while the potential of the remaining 75% to contribute to economic growth is not tapped. These numbers become even more extreme if one considers young women.

The ILO discusses employment situations in North Africa (which includes all Arab countries in North Africa) separate from those in the Middle East (which includes other Arab countries in south-west Asia in addition to Iran). In both cases it is mentioned that there are significant male and female employment gaps. While assessing the reasons behind these gaps in the Middle East, strong cultural, social and economic gender divisions are mentioned. On the other hand, when attributing the cause of the gap in North Africa, the burdening population growth is mentioned along with the mismatch between skills in demand and skills available, and little is mentioned about the cultural forces that are at play. This indicates that some factors behind the gender employment gap found in the North African Arab labour market are not as powerful in other areas of the Arab Middle East (such as the exponential population growth in Egypt), and vice versa.

### **Female labour participation in some Arab countries**

A quick scan of the term 'status of working women in the Arab world' in research databases reveals an overgeneralization of the commonalities and understatement of the inter-country variances. In an effort to understand the role of Arab culture in determining the rates of women's participation in work, it is often the case that scholars give sweeping generalizations attributing their status to traditions and religious factors.<sup>9</sup> It has already been indicated that women have always worked in the Arab world, especially in the agricultural sector and many traditional light craft industries. However, in many cases, women's work was regulated through a system of social norms that ensured minimal or no contact between the sexes (Taraki 1995). These norms build social understandings that – as some scholars contend – are not commensurate with real religious teachings.<sup>10</sup> The following section presents some aspects of

the work of women in select Arab countries to show unique factors that exist more forcefully in some contexts and not in others. A description of all 22 countries deserves a separate, more comprehensive investigation.

Traditionally, women comprised a small proportion of the workforce in Arab Gulf countries. After the discovery of oil, the disposable income of the new upper middle class left many women totally out of the workforce. Nonetheless, there are disparities among the Gulf countries in that regard. For example, since the 1960s women in Bahrain looked for jobs to supplement their families' income, a practice not common in other Gulf states at the time; and some of those women were able to occupy high-level administrative posts (Seikaly 1994). It has always been the case that when oil prices drop or when an economic problem gets in the way, women are the first to be dispensed with: 'women feel that there is a tacit official understanding that men should be given priority, and that women should be discouraged from working wherever men could replace them' (Seikaly 1994, 423). Women have recently been faring very well in several other countries in the region, namely Kuwait (Metle 2001), Qatar (Bahry and Marr 2005), and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Nelson 2004), where participation rates have been steadily increasing over the past 20 years (Al-Suwaidi 2011).

Within close geographical proximity of the above countries, Saudi Arabia presents a unique level and type of female participation in the labour force. Some statistics indicate that a very small percentage of Saudi women are employed in the private sector. However, they have a significant presence in the public sector workforce, mainly in the education and health fields (Madhi and Barrientos 2003). These are contexts where it is socially acceptable for women to work, because of minimal interaction between them and men. Saudi Arabia enjoys high indicators on the Human Development Index (HDI); the country is ranked 55th, has an HDI of 0.75 and a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of about US\$25,000 (UNDP 2010). These indicators are not reflected in higher rates of female participation in the public sphere, where the country ranks 128th of 138 countries in the gender inequality index.

In Jordan, the last few decades have witnessed a significant influx of women into the labour force, but this ran contrary to the traditional dominant value systems (Malt 2005). Jordanian society is a conservative tribal society (Antoun 2000), but economic necessities and a ruling system that apparently leans towards social liberalism have slowly made it easier for women to increase their involvement. This entry into the paid market arena has led to the creation of an evolving set of social relationships at work that sometimes challenge the traditional social order, creating unique complexities and challenges (Taraki 1995).

In Egypt, many young women who work in the industrial sector have to keep a fine balance between two things: their commitment to their job to ensure a minimum level of living standards, and being held accountable in a conservative society that does not always look favourably at women's work outside their homes (Cooke 2000). For many years, Egypt witnessed massive worker (mostly male) migration to other Arab countries. This resulted in women in rural areas of Egypt increasing their labour participation, while in urban areas the result has been a reduction in female labour participation (Binzel and Assaad 2011). The increased work participation of women in the labour force in some areas does not mean that they have more opportunities for corporate promotion. Egyptian women seem to be torn between two pressures: the first pushes women to work because of economic necessities; and the second pushes women to leave the workplace to fulfil their expected societal roles as housewives (MacLeod

1992). There are certain recent changes that seem to have turned back the trend of female labour participation in Egypt, with the rise in social conservatism and the repatriation of large numbers of migrants from other Arab countries (Amin and Al-Bassusi 2004). Some researchers assert that the need for women to enter the workforce resulted from economic necessities rather than a genuine belief that women should be equal to men in terms of access to the workplace (Hatem 1988).

In many relatively less conservative Arab countries, such as Lebanon and Tunisia,<sup>11</sup> female participation rates are still well below world standards. Although the social taboos on women's work do not resemble those found in some Gulf countries, this is not reflected in the degree to which they occupy positions in the labour force. The banking sector in Lebanon – the most vibrant in the economy – seems to be more welcoming of women, as they make up a large proportion of the workforce; most still, however, occupy supervisory-level positions. The regulatory environment in Lebanon has proven to be rigid, while Tunisia, in comparison, made significant regulatory improvements in promoting women's status.<sup>12</sup>

The above examples hint at the disparities between countries in the Arab region. In general, however, the Arab world has been witnessing significant transformations that, in some respects, but not in others, contradict the traditional stereotypes about the varying roles of men and women (e.g. Itani, Sidani, and Baalbaki 2011; Tlaiss 2013a, 2013b). It remains the case that – compared with other world regions – women's political and business participation remains low (Saleh 2006; Soufi 2009). While women in the 1960s and 1970s entered the workplace in relatively significant numbers, the trend seems to have been reversed in some Arab contexts due to changing demographics, rising unemployment and a strong preference for women staying at home (Al-Krenawi et al. 2004). The scarcity of women in upper management positions in the Arab world relates – at least partially – to socialization when their families direct them into traditional roles as mothers and housewives (Sharabi 1988). In addition, institutional barriers and norms emphasize the role that women play within their families (Barakat 2005), making their work outside the home the result of economic necessity, especially in less affluent Arab countries, and not an issue of equal opportunity.<sup>13</sup> Certain strict religious understandings aggravate the participation of women in the workplace and their advancement to higher managerial ranks (Jamali, Sidani, and Assem 2005), despite the fact that within Islam there are disparate interpretations and practices that differ from one country to another (Sidani 2005; Metcalfe 2007).

Most Arab populations now live in urban areas, and many are employed in the industrial and service sectors (Rashad, Osman, and Roudi-Fahimi 2005). The population explosion in some countries has led to increasing unemployment (Mirkin 2010). In a society where men are seen as the breadwinners, it would be expected that men would be given the opportunity to work more than women. This may not always be the case, given that for a number of reasons female employees are sometimes more attractive to employers than their male counterparts. They are typically paid less, and are less likely to leave a job due to wage disparities. Moreover, many men leave their jobs in the less affluent Arab countries in attempts to seek employment in the more economically prosperous Arab countries, thus making the Arab male work population more mobile and less stable. This is similar to the status of women in other parts of the world, where wage disparities sometimes encourage employers to hire women for certain jobs (Cooke 2010).

On the other hand, similar to other world regions, there is an institutional framework in many Arab countries that works against women. Several laws stem from the

perception that a woman's work is peripheral and secondary. Accordingly, laws do not accord women, in some cases, the same rights as men (UNDP 2005). The bottom line in women's work is that the Arab world, despite commonalities, is far from being monolithic. It, thus, becomes incumbent to investigate and understand how countries within this part of the world resemble each other, and in what ways they differ.

### **Clustering the Arab world**

In order to assess the varieties of Arab world countries, we looked for indicators that would help in identifying differences among those countries as related to women's work. There are several gender statistics available for the Arab world, but they are far from complete. The UNDP Human Development Report (UNDP 2010) and the Arab Human Development Report (UNDP 2009) were good sources for pertinent gender statistics.<sup>14</sup> The data deemed important for this study pertained to, first, the level of participation of women in the work force and, second, the degree of gender pay equity. A basic premise of the argument is that these should vary in a meaningful manner from one Arab country to another. Once relevant measures can be identified, the search for potential explanations for these varieties becomes possible.

The two specific measures that capture participation and equity are (1) the level of female participation as a percentage of male participation (FPM) and (2) the female earned income to male income (FIM). Statistics are available for about 20 Arab countries. Iraq and Palestine were excluded from this analysis for two reasons. In addition to data not being available, they both have been experiencing significant political and social turmoil that would skew any findings and would confound any potential explanations. It should be noted that all collected data are prior to the 2011 'Arab Spring' revolutions that swept many parts of the region. We anticipate that these revolutions will have a significant long-term social impact, including the relative position of working women and their public participation. Immediate short-term gains, however, are not expected and, accordingly, these statistics remain relevant for the foreseeable future.<sup>15</sup>

Data for the 20 Arab countries on the above two dimensions are presented in Table 1. Plotting the data reveals the existence of four clusters. The first factor is female labour force participation as a percentage of male labour force participation that has globally ranged from 14.2% to 91.5% (ILO 2011). The second factor is the ratio of estimated female to male earned income. This is a measure that has ranged globally from 0.16 to 0.9 as per the Human Development Report (UNDP 2009).

Earned income is estimated in the UNDP reports by looking at the ratio of the female non-agricultural wage to the male non-agricultural wage, female and male shares of the economically active population, the total female and male population, and GDP per capita in purchasing power parity (PPP) (US\$) (UNDP 2007–08b). Labour force participation pertains to the percentage of those who are actively engaged in the labour market either by working or by actively looking for work (UNDP 2010). The female labour participation rate as a percentage of the male rate gives an indication of the relative positioning of women in the workforce vis-à-vis the male active labour force. The data available under study are averaged for five years to eliminate any single-year biases. Because data for earned income were only available till 2007, the 2003–07 periods for both indicators were taken for comparability. More recent data for participation are used below.

Table 1. Female labour force participation as a percentage of male labour force participation.

	Female participation as a percentage of male participation (FPM) <sup>a</sup>	Female earned income to male income (FIM) <sup>b</sup>
Algeria	0.44	0.34
Bahrain	0.39	0.39
Comoros	0.85	0.52
Djibouti	0.74	0.51
Egypt	0.31	0.25
Jordan	0.30	0.28
Kuwait	0.54	0.37
Lebanon	0.30	0.30
Libya	0.31	0.29
Mauritania	0.71	0.52
Morocco	0.33	0.28
Oman	0.32	0.20
Qatar	0.49	0.26
Saudi Arabia	0.25	0.17
Somalia	0.68	0.48
Sudan	0.40	0.28
Syria	0.25	0.30
Tunisia	0.35	0.30
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	0.43	0.25
Yemen	0.25	0.29

Sources: <sup>a</sup>2003–07 – International Labor Organization (ILO).

<sup>b</sup>2003–07 – United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The first observation is that overall Arab countries score rather low on gender measures as compared with world averages. The global average for estimated female to male earned income in 2007 was 0.54 compared with 0.33 in the Arab world (UNDP 2009). The global average for female labour participation as a percentage of male participation was 0.69 compared with 0.43 in the Arab world (UNDP 2010). While these figures portray a dismal picture of the Arab world, they do not identify specific variations within the more than 20 countries comprising this region. It could be true that all Arab states share certain problems when it pertains to women's work, yet looking at the aggregate average figures does not indicate which problems are found where, or where the most acute problems exist. Our work at dissecting these figures aims to highlight the differences that exist and to segment the Arab states according to their performance on these two indicators.

A close analysis of how the different countries are positioned yields the identification of four clusters (Figure 1). It is clear from plotting the two variables that there was one distinct group that was later classified as Cluster 4 (Somalia (SM), Djibouti (DJ), Mauritania (MA) and Comoros (KM)). Cluster 4 had FPM greater than 0.70. To distinguish between the remaining countries that are less than 0.70 on FPM, we chose the median of this range, which is 0.70 divided by 2 (= 0.35). To distinguish between the remaining countries in terms of FIM, we chose the country with the highest FIM (excluding Cluster 4 countries) – which was Bahrain – to represent the upper end of FIM, and divided those countries into two categories. Category 1 was represented by Cluster 1, which included low FIM values. Category 2 was represented by Clusters 2 and 3, which represented medium FIM values. The end result was



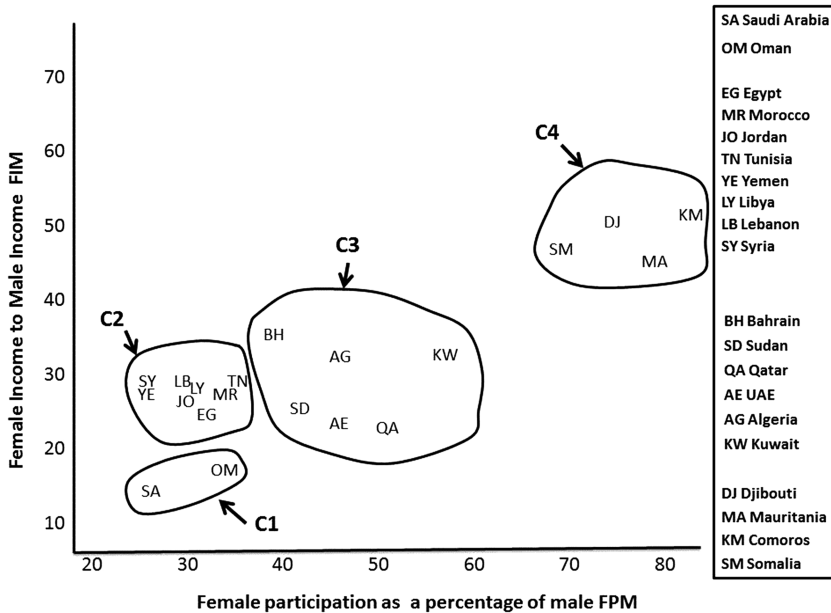


Figure 1. Female participation as a percentage of male participation (FPM) and female earned income to male income (FIM) positioning for 20 Arab countries. Source: authors.

identification of the four clusters as described below. The analysis of these clusters helps in explaining the patterns of the different countries' positioning for those gender statistics. The clusters fit nicely with economic and other related indicators that will be supplemented by some country-specific analysis. There are few outliers in some clusters, i.e. there are a couple of countries that would be expected to belong to a different cluster given their socio-economic background. Potential reasons as to why those countries do not perform as expected are now explained.

**Cluster 1**

Cluster 1 (C1) is characterized by both very low FPM and very low FIM. By low FPM is meant rates than run below 0.35, and by low FIM is meant rates than run lower than 0.2. This depicts contexts where there is very low labour participation by women, when compared with their male counterparts, and where female income relative to male income is also low. Two Arab countries belong to this cluster: Saudi Arabia and Oman. These are two affluent Arab countries where it seems that working women have been facing numerous roadblocks. Not only is their participation significantly hurdled, but also women seem to be positioned in low paying jobs, or low paying economic sectors impacting their overall income. One explanation for this could be that women in those countries are concentrated in the education sector which pays less than the industrial or services sectors. Both Saudi Arabia and Oman have high oil reserves where the GDP per capita in this cluster is about US\$15,500. Women in this region have very good access to educational opportunities, but it seems, given the transition of the economies over the past few decades, they have yet to translate

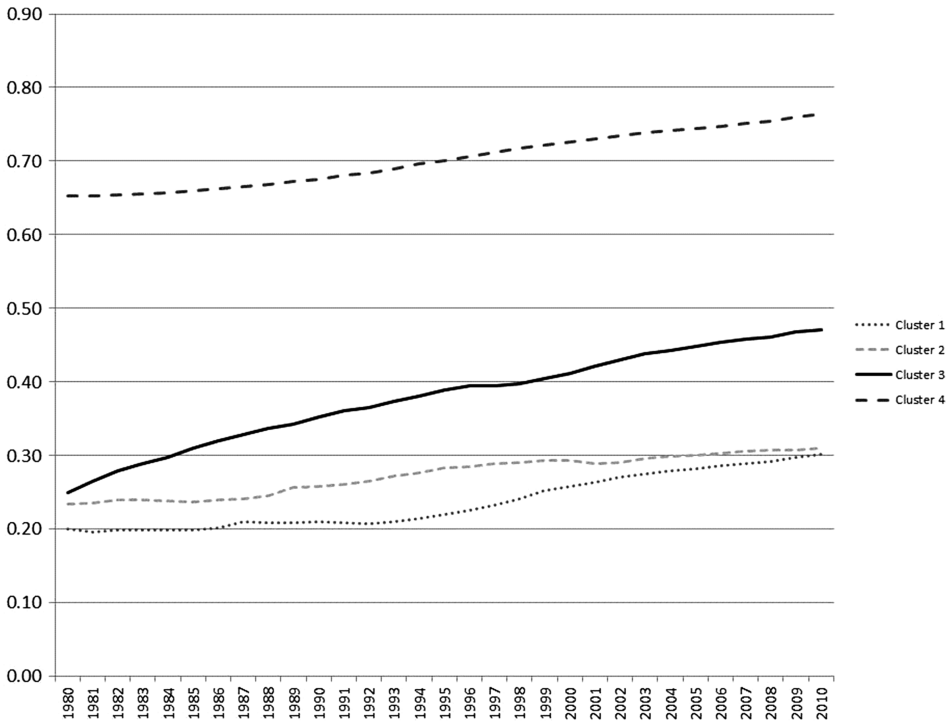


Figure 2. Female participation as a percentage of male participation (FPM) rates for the period 1980–2010.

Source: authors.

their educational attainments into job opportunities. Over the past three decades, FPM in this cluster has been increasing, albeit at a very slow rate (Figure 2). In 1980, FPM averaged about 0.2, while in 2010 it increased to 0.3, which is far below world averages.

### Cluster 2

Similar to Cluster 1, Cluster 2 countries suffer from low female participation compared with men, but female incomes tend to be relatively higher than cluster 1 (medium FIM between 0.2 and 0.4), although this is still low compared with their male counterparts. FPM rates in this cluster are less than 0.35, while FIM falls between 0.2 and 0.4. It seems that women in this sector have been able to move into relatively higher paying jobs or sectors. The rates, however, remain much lower compared with world averages. With the exception of Yemen, this is a diverse group of countries that do not depend on oil revenues, and are located in North Africa or the Levant. GDP per capita in this cluster averages about US\$5400 with wide in-country variations, which is much lower than the first cluster. Data for the past 30 years indicate that FPM has been steadily increasing, although it remains very slow (Figure 2). In 30 years, FPM in this cluster managed to increase from an average of just above 0.2 to just above 0.3; it even has shown signs of levelling off, as it has averages of about 0.3 to 0.31 for the past 10 years.

A close look at this cluster indicates that most of these countries have varying societal dynamics. For example, Yemen is very different from Lebanon, as the latter is socially more open and religiously and ethnically diverse (Rubin 2009). However, when translated into FPM and FIM, Lebanon gets only slightly higher ratings. As will be demonstrated below, Yemen, given its current economic situation and structure, seems to be an outlier in this group.

### **Cluster 3**

Cluster 3 includes countries that enjoy a relatively higher FPM compared with Clusters 1 and 2, but has about similar rates of FIM compared with Cluster 2 and is higher than Cluster 1. Countries in this cluster have FPMs that fall between 0.35 and 0.6, while rates for FIM fall between 0.2 and 0.4. Most countries in this cluster are oil-producing with a GDP per capita of over US\$18,000. Sudan seems to be an outlier in this group as its economy does not depend on oil, and its FPM would typically be expected to be higher given its economic structure (80% employment in agriculture) (CIA 2011). This cluster includes countries such as Kuwait and Qatar, where women have had an opportunity for education and business participation greater than Saudi Arabia and Oman. In general, this cluster includes affluent, oil-producing countries whose leaderships have been trying to co-opt restrictive norms through regulatory reforms and supportive measures, aiming at including more women in the business arena. While most of these countries are traditionalist, they compare favourably with Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Rates of FPM in this cluster have been steadily increasing and, contrary to Cluster 2, there are no signs of levelling off as FPM has been increasing at about 1% yearly for the past 10 years (Figure 2).

### **Cluster 4**

Cluster 4 includes four countries that are homogenous. Countries in this cluster have FPMs that are higher than 0.6 and FIMs higher than 0.4. GDP per capita in this region is slightly above US\$2000. These countries are less prosperous Arab countries that are dependent on agriculture and simple services with no proven oil reserves. The FPM and FIM in this cluster are significantly higher than the other clusters. Women's rates of participation (FPM) ranges from 0.68 to 0.85, while ratios of estimated income range from 0.48 to 0.52. These are very high numbers relative to other Arab countries, but those mostly reflect the nature of the economic development that their economies have been undergoing. While rates of FPM are high to start with, it has been increasing steadily to reach an all-time high of 0.76 in 2010 (Figure 2).

The four clusters of countries show the diversity of the Arab region in terms of female participation in the workforce. The Arab world is also diverse in terms of incomes earned by female members of society. With few exceptions that will be explained below, each cluster enjoys a certain set of common attributes. For example, Clusters 1 and 3 represent countries that are mostly oil-producing with high GDP per capita. Sudan is an exception in Cluster 3 as its GDP is significantly lower than its counterparts (US\$2083) (UNDP 2010). Given the structure of the Sudanese economy where about 80% of the labour force is concentrated in agriculture, a different positioning – in Cluster 4 – would be expected for this country (CIA 2011). It seems that cultural norms in Sudan are more forceful than economic realities and, thus, Sudan diverts from the pattern expected for agricultural economies.

Table 2. Socio-economic indicators for the four clusters.

	Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (US\$)	Education Index	Human Development Index (HDI)	Internet penetration	Employment by economic activity (%)		
					Agriculture	Industry	Services
Cluster 1	15 657	0.79	0.81	0.52	5.50	16.00	78.00
Cluster 2	5431	0.74	0.71	0.30	25.54	23.24	51.10
Cluster 3	18 354	0.82	0.85	0.54	9.76	42.87	47.35
Cluster 4	2135	0.53	0.54	0.20	65.00	10.00	25.00

Cluster 2 is the most diverse but there are common features among most of its members. None of the countries is considered to be dependent economically on oil production. Many countries in this cluster are religiously or ethnically diverse (Lebanon, Syria, Libya and Egypt). The economic factor seems to be the overriding thread in this cluster, as most of those countries have relatively low-to-medium GDP per capita. Similar to Sudan, Yemen is an outlier in Cluster 2. All economic indicators would lead to the expectation that, similar to countries in Cluster 4, Yemen should experience high rates of female participation. Most people in Yemen are employed in the agricultural sector (more than 54%) where female participation is typically higher (UNDP 2007–08a). Similar to the case of Sudan, but definitely more forcefully, Yemen suffers from strict social controls<sup>16</sup> that limit women's ability to contribute to the workforce. Future studies can concentrate on these two cases to explain why they do not behave similarly to other countries that share around the same level of economic development, but with much higher levels of female labour participation. It is reasonable to assume that societal constraints and traditional values in these two countries may contribute to this phenomenon (e.g. Manea 2011; Hamdan 2005).

Table 2 shows some of the socio-economic indicators of each cluster (UNDP 2007–08a, 2010). The differences among the clusters are striking. Cluster 4, which has the highest female labour participation rate, is the poorest with the lowest GDP per capita, a low level of HDI and a low education index. Cluster 1 has a very high GDP per capita, a very high education index, a relatively HDI and a high employment in services. This high service employment activity is not reflected in high female labour participation rates. This leaves the possibility that cultural attitudes and norms have a strong impact in this cluster. Policy-makers within this cluster need to become more cognisant of the importance of women's economic participation in overall societal development (Hamdan 2005).

The above clusters differ in their economic structures. The services sector employs 78% of the labour force in Cluster 1, 51% in Cluster 2, 45% in Cluster 3 and 22% in Cluster 4. This has implications for female participation, as women tend to be more active in agricultural-based economies. This is evident in Cluster 4 where agriculture comprises the backbone of the economies of most of those countries. This is in line with previous research that has shown that as economies progress from being agricultural to industrial, female labour participation tends to suffer as women are not able to substitute for the jobs they lost in the agricultural arenas. Women tend to be very active in the labour force when economies are based on agriculture and related production, but as economies shift away from agriculture, women's rate of participation tends to

dwindle. Later, as women get higher education and become more skilled, they start to join the labour force again. This is probably accompanied by the fact that women may accept lower wages making them attractive to employers; consequently, their participation rates start to increase again.

For the Arab world as a whole, levels of economic development seem to play a primary role in female labour participation. This looks to be the case in the Arab Gulf region which has accomplished a higher level of economic development, and where female participation rates seem to have picked up in the last few years. The only exceptions to the relationship between economic development and female participation are four countries: Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen and Sudan. The remaining Arab countries seem to follow the path seen in other world economies. However, the transition that many Arab countries had, especially the oil-producing ones, has not followed the usual pattern of economic development. Many economies around the world have gradually moved from being agriculture-dependent into industrial economies, and the movement of women out of the labour force, and then back into the labour force, seems to have happened, on average, in a gradual manner. The case for some oil-producing Arab countries is arguably different. There have been sharp, sudden changes in their economies that would make any influx of women out of the labour force abrupt. In addition, it could be argued that higher GDPs in the oil-producing Arab countries do not reflect a gradual movement out of agriculture into industry that would eventually hire more women. The oil sector is by definition male dominated (mostly migrant workers), and female labour proportions in this sector are far less than the participation of their counterparts in light industries in many industrialized societies.

Irrespective of how the economies developed in the Arab world, the relationship between GDP per capita and female participation holds for most countries. Notwithstanding the exceptions mentioned above, this shows the similarity of many countries in the Arab world to other world economies. This is not to say that cultural norms and constraints in the Arab world do not contribute to rates of female labour participation. Many outliers in the model presented above can be understood within the context of the cultural values that dominate (Hofstede 1997). These would be understood in relation to the masculine nature of such societies where specific, often impermeable, roles are assigned to men as breadwinners and women as housewives (Omair 2008). The important point here is that, similar to other parts of the world, there are other explanations that also offer good explanations of female labour participation, and they should not be ignored.

### **Implications and conclusions**

The implications of the above study are manifold. Considering the varying historical, political and economic experiences, Arab countries deserve individual attention. Most previous investigations that have concentrated on the role of religion and cultural traditions describe part of the picture. What needs to be explained are the dynamics operating in each individual Arab country. For example, what explains the low labour participation rates of women in a country, like Lebanon, that is religiously and ethnically diverse, and where women have enjoyed social and economic freedoms over the past few decades? What institutional mechanisms, still in place, limit women from adequate participation in a country like Tunisia, where the regulatory changes aiming at advancing women's causes have been much faster than other Arab countries? Why have some traditional Arab Gulf countries been able to improve drastically the

integration of more women into the labour force, while other equally conservative countries seem to be running around in circles in that regard? What is the impact of migration of both men and women workers on female labour participation both at the sending (such as Lebanon and Egypt) and at the receiving (such as the UAE and Qatar) ends? For the case of different Arab countries, the investigator will be able to identify a mix of social, cultural, regulatory and economic forces that play at different intensities in different locations. Understanding the type and power of these forces will be a necessary step towards coming up with policy recommendations that are unique to each country's unique practices and experiences. Looking at the Arab region, from a perspective that it is represented by different clusters, helps in understanding the varieties that exist, and thus sweeping, unwarranted generalizations can be avoided.

Thus, despite the apparent commonalities, each Arab country has its own labour legislation, and its unique institutional practices that need to be addressed distinctly. Human resource strategies in the region can benefit from understanding the dynamics of women's employment within each country. Women are becoming more conscious about their evolving roles, and the trend indicates that their work participation will improve, albeit still slowly in many countries. There is a large body of literature that shows that perceived organizational support is a key factor that limits employee turnover (Allen, Shore, and Griffeth 2003; Batt and Valcour 2003). Accordingly, companies are advised to proactively implement diversity programmes that include women in different functional areas, while providing them with fair wages. Companies also need to support women to motivate them to stay in the workforce, and not drop out. Flexible working hours, telecommuting and childcare facilities are some of the ways that corporations may implement to keep careers for women uninterrupted. Governments in the Arab region also need to consider implementing a framework for positive discrimination that guarantees better participation for women in the public sphere.

Increasing the participation of women requires an understanding not only of the institutional practices that sometimes make it hard for women to obtain employment in certain positions, but also of the reasons that interrupt women's tenure inside their organizations. A closer look may uncover that, especially in cases when women develop in terms of their education and expertise, this does not always translate in higher relative wages and labour participation. The glass ceiling, which has long kept women in lower levels of the hierarchy, may prove to be too powerful and – in effect – often keep women outside organizations altogether.

## Notes

1. See also the Gender Statistics Programmes in the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) (<http://www.escwa.un.org/gsp/documents/publications.html>).
2. There are, however, several attempts that aim at creating more consciousness as to the link between women's participation and economic development (e.g. Awad and Khamees 2013; Handoosah 2005).
3. For the case of the feminist movement in Lebanon, see Charafeddine (2008).
4. For a critical assessment of those early movements, see Hatem (2013).
5. For more on feminism in the Arab world, see Hollis (2013) (in a special issue in *Contemporary Arab Affairs*).
6. See also the example of education in UAE in Al-Suwaidi (2011).
7. Refer to the issue of *ikhtilat* or gender-mixing debate and its impact on women's participation in Meijer (2010).

8. For more on the challenges brought forward by a growing young population in Saudi Arabia, see Yamani (2010).
9. For the relation between women, work and Islam, see Sidani (2005). For a discussion on how institutional factors create variations among Arab countries, see Karam, Afioni, and Nasr (2013).
10. For an elaborate discussion, see Mernissi (2002).
11. To understand more about the Lebanese society, see Rubin (2009).
12. For more information about the status of women in Tunisia, see Solidarity Center (2013). For the status of women in Lebanese legislation, see the *Al-Raida* (2005-06) journal special issue.
13. For the Egyptian case, see, for example, Sieverding (2012).
14. Farah (2006) indicates that UNDP measures of women's development are biased towards high-income countries as high incomes distort gender indices. The measures used in this paper are raw statistics that are not impacted by general levels of income.
15. For more on the potential effect of Arab revolutions, see Hanafi (2012).
16. For the changing roles of Yemeni women, see Al-Sakkaf (2012).

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