ESCWA Centre for Women Newsletter
United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

October 2007
Volume 1, Issue 12

Gender Equality – Part Two

Gender Equality in Health & Education in the ESCWA Region

Centre for Women
UN- ESCWA
A monthly ECW issuance aiming at raising the gender awareness and responsiveness through highlighting the gender dimensions in various fields.

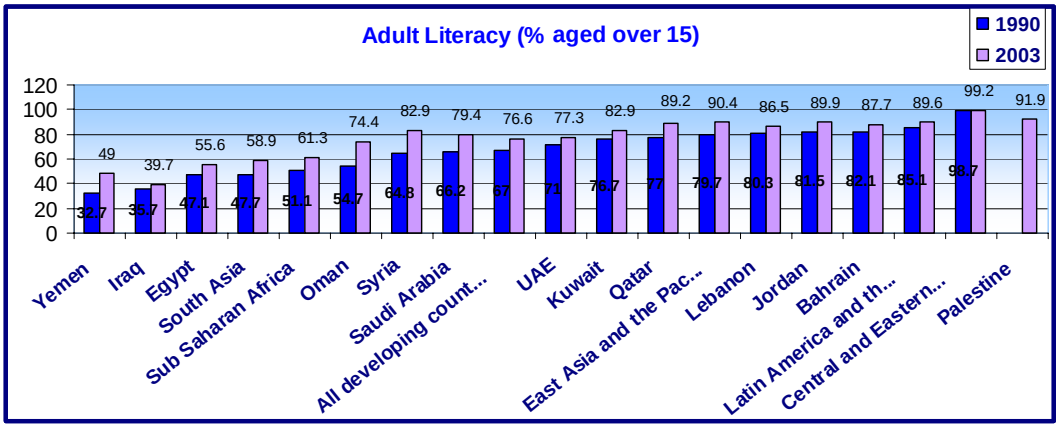
Over the past few decades great gains have been made the Middle East with regard to education. On average, Arab governments have spent 5.3% of GDP on education, the highest in the world, and there have been impressive improvements for both sexes in the major educational indicators: literacy and school enrolment. In many ESCWA countries, girls and women started with a much lower baseline than did their male counterparts. A major achievement of education policy in the Middle East in the past decades has been to bridge the education gender gap. While these achievements are indeed laudable, educational achievement remains stratified by gender in many ways and some Arab countries have among the highest rates of gender inequality in education in the world.

1- World Bank, Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa: Women in the Public Sphere, Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2004

Literacy

Over the past decades, many ESCWA countries have made great strides with regard to literacy, particularly rates for women, although progress has varied across the region. Throughout the Arab states women's average literacy rose from 17% in 1970 to over 52% in 2000[2]. Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and some Gulf states enjoy relatively high literacy rates by global comparison. Oman, Syria and Saudi Arabia, whose literacy rates were well below the developing world average in 1990, have made impressive gains. Importantly, youth literacy rates for both men and women are now higher than the world average in most ESCWA member states, a trend which bodes well for the future. Furthermore, while the gender gap for adult literacy remains high throughout the region, the gap is narrowing with regard to youth literacy in most ESCWA member countries.

2- World Bank, Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa: Women in the Public Sphere, Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2004



UN-DESA, United Nations Statistics Division, Millennium Development Goals Indicators http://unstats.un.org

Special events in the ESCWA Centre for Women

- ***ECW is organizing in collaboration with UNIFEM, a regional workshop on Gender Budgeting in Amman, Jordan on November 27 and 28 2007.***
- ***ECW will undertake an advisory mission to Qatar to train members of the Supreme Council for Family Affairs on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), from 11 to 12 December 2007.***

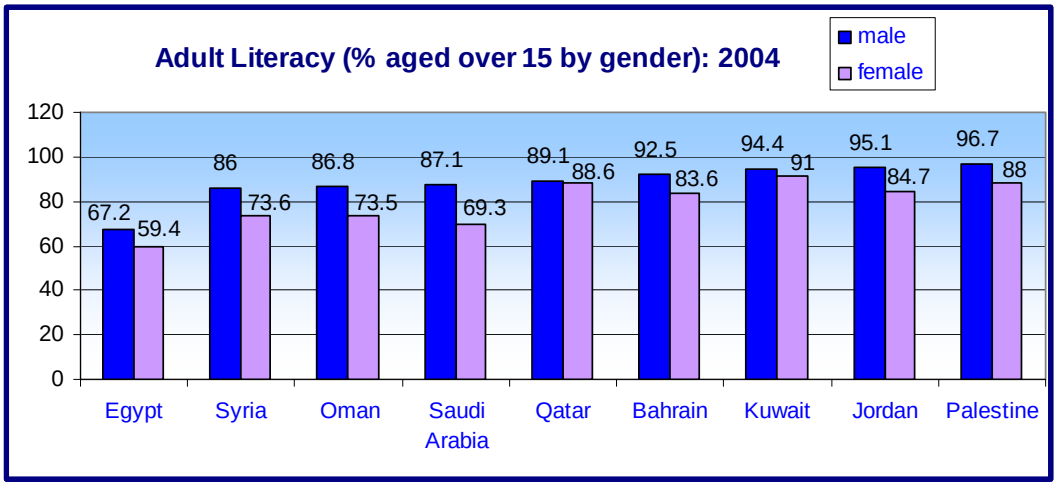
Highlights:

1- Primary and Secondary Enrolment

2- Tertiary Enrolment

3- Conclusion

"Throughout the Arab states women's average literacy rose from 17% in 1970 to over 52% in 2000"



UN-DESA, United Nations Statistics Division, Millennium Development Goals Indicators http://unstats.un.org

Some ESCWA countries, however, lag far behind global trends. Egypt, Iraq and Yemen all had literacy rates below the average of any developing region in 2003. Because of the large populations of these countries this means a large proportion of the ESCWA region's population remains illiterate. These countries' gender gaps with regard to literacy are also among the highest in the world. Only 28.5% of the female population of Yemen is literate; for every 100 literate Yemeni men above the age of 15, only 41 women can read and write.

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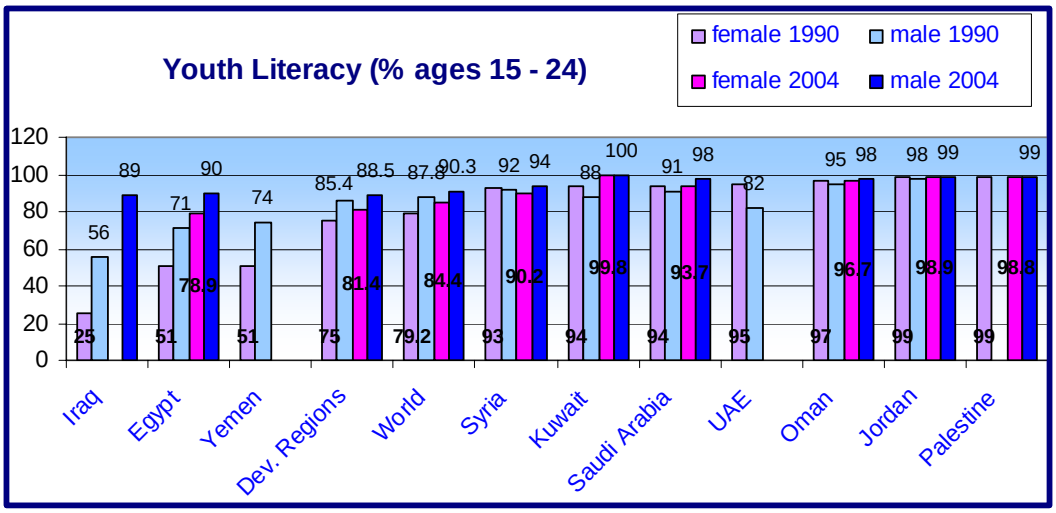

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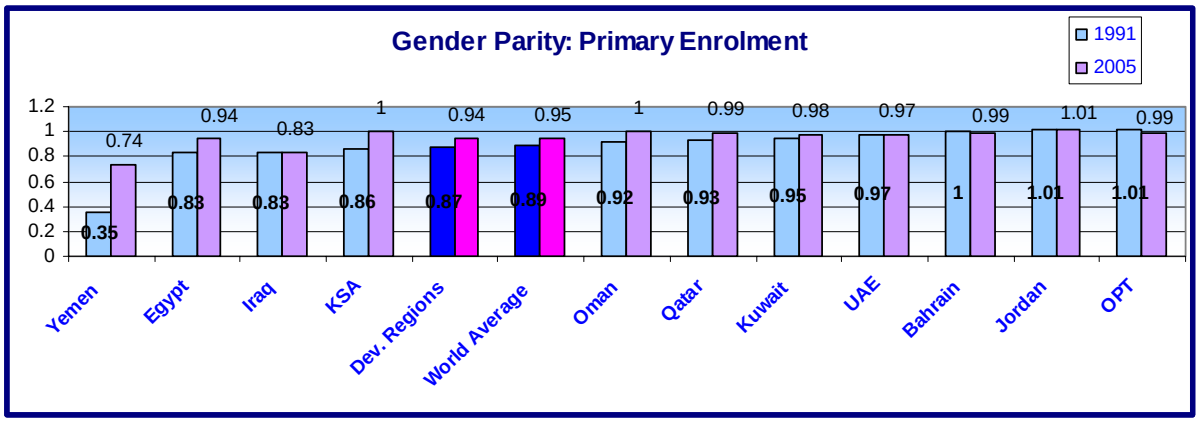
Primary and Secondary Enrolment

As a region, the Arab states have made impressive progress with regard to increasing primary enrolment and decreasing the gender gap. With a rate of change of 1.4%, the region has had the highest increase in net enrolment and attendance ratios of any world region between 1980 and 2001[3]. The region is also on track to reaching gender parity. The primary enrolment rates for girls are above 90% of that of boys in all ESCWA countries except Yemen.[4]

[3] UNICEF, Gender Achievements and Prospects in Education Report, www.unicef.org/gap

[4] UNDP, 2005 Arab Human Development Report



UN-DESA, United Nations Statistics Division, Millennium Development Goals Indicators http://unstats.un.org

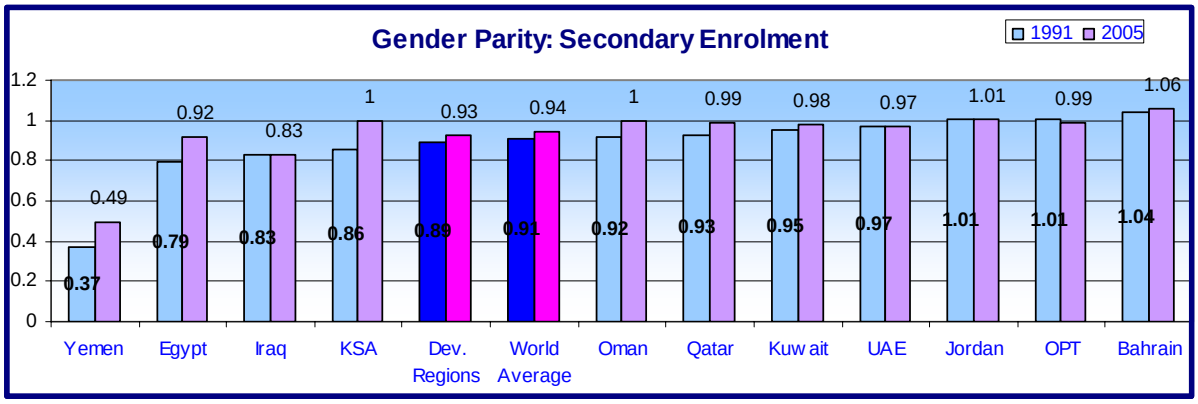
"The primary enrolment rates for girls are above 90% of that of boys in all ESCWA countries except Yemen"

Despite important gains in gender parity for secondary enrolment in the past decades, notably in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, fewer girls attend school at the secondary than primary level. In Yemen, where female net enrolment in secondary education is only 21%, gender parity is amongst the lowest in the world[5].

Yemen, Iraq and Egypt have significantly higher drop out rates for girls than for boys. While economic hardship negatively impacts schooling of both boys and girls, family's economic problems generally affect girl's schooling more dramatically than that of boys[6]. In times of economic hardship boys may be expected to leave school in order to pursue income generating activities and girls to contribute to household duties.

Many families, however, may perceive a return to boys' education in future income earned, that does not exist for girls who may become part of their husbands' household income or never participate in the labor market. Similarly, factors such a distance from a school may affect girls' school attendance more severely than that of boys. In Yemen, other barriers to girl's education include early marriage; the reluctance of many parents to let their children attend mixed gender schools; and limits on girls' freedom of movement after puberty[7] in addition to remoteness of schools in some areas.

5-UNDP 2005 Arab Human Development Report
6-UNDP, Human Development Report 1995: Gender and Human Development.
7-UN-OCHA/IRIN, *Yemen: Female Education Remains a Key Challenge*, 2007



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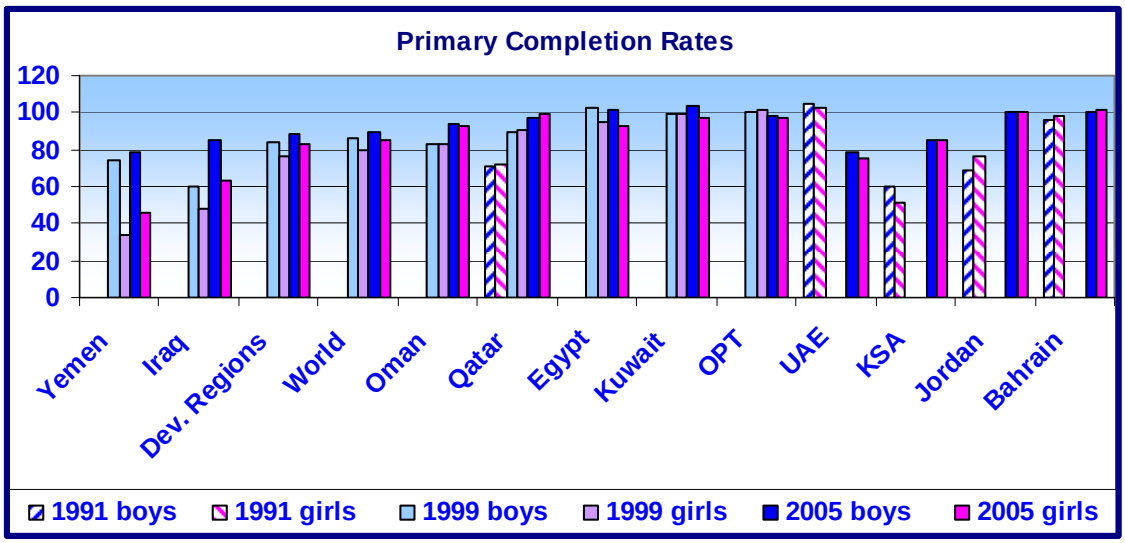
"Armed conflict and instability has also had a dramatically negative impact on girls' enrolment in the ESCWA region"

Armed conflict and instability has also had a dramatically negative impact on girls' enrolment in the ESCWA region. In Palestine, targeted interventions which have provided girls with educational options close to their homes have helped to mitigate the impact of instability on girls' dropout rates. Iraq, however, has seen a dramatic decrease in girls' school attendance due to the conflict there. Insecurity has led many children to withdraw from school; in general these numbers are higher for girls than for boys, in part because parents also fear gender based violence such as rape[8]. Furthermore, high levels of insecurity have caused many families to lose parents, and girls may be expected to drop out of school in order to care for their families and households.

8- UN-OCHA/IRIN, *Number of Girls Attending School Dropping*, 2007



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"The Arab world has seen an impressive expansion in the number of universities and tertiary enrolment rates in the past half-century and Women's increasing enrolment has constituted a large part of this expansion"

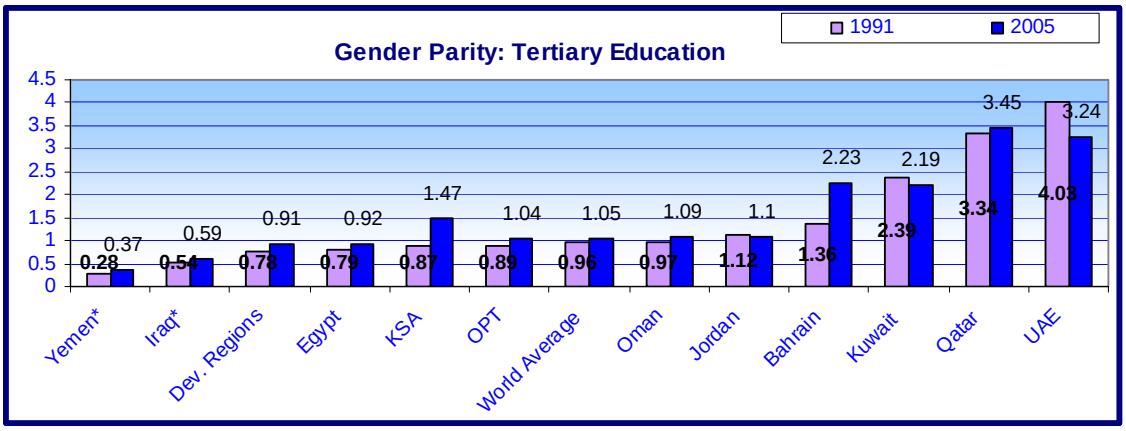
Tertiary Enrolment

The Arab world has seen an impressive expansion in the number of universities and tertiary enrolment rates in the past half-century. The Arab region saw an increase in the number of post-secondary students from 0.3 million in the mid-1960s to 2.5 million in the mid-1990s[9]. Women's increasing enrolment has constituted a large part of this expansion. Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Oman have all come close to or achieved gender parity in tertiary education. In the GCC countries, women's tertiary enrolment far exceeds that of men. 3.4 times more women are enrolled in universities in Qatar than are men.

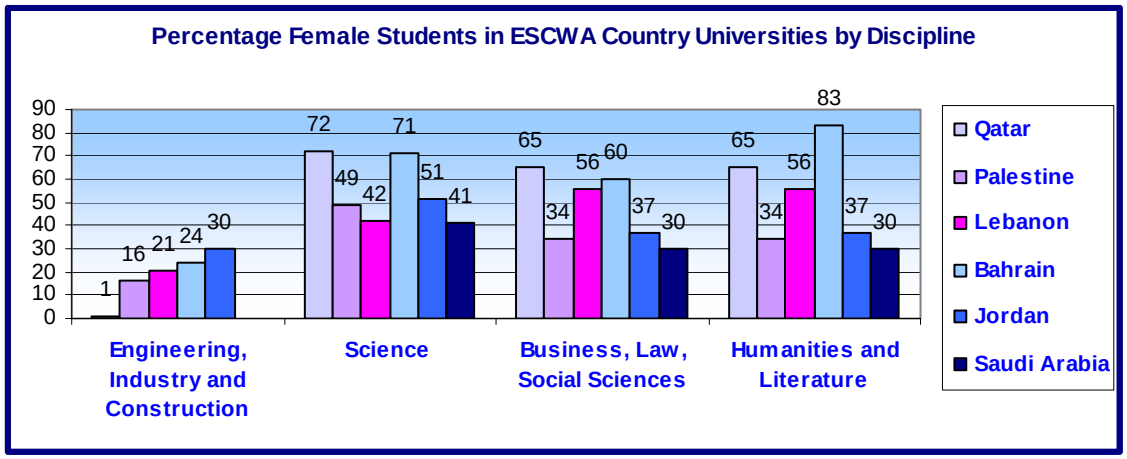
The dramatically high rates of female enrolment in universities in the Gulf states, may reflect strict gender roles rather than equality of opportunity. Many men study in universities abroad or join the labor force rather than studying, while many female students study in local universities. While in the majority of Arab countries universities are co-educational, many universities in the GCC states are single sex. While this has enabled more females to study in these countries, it has also contributed to stratification of tertiary education by gender; as many universities do not offer all disciplines, female students may be limited in their choice of field of study[10]. Expectations of women's tertiary education may also differ than those of men, and may be less focused toward future professional endeavors. As a result, though an increasing amount of women in the ESCWA region are attending University, they are concentrated in the humanities, and remain underrepresented in fields such as engineering.

"The dramatically high rates of female enrolment in universities in the Gulf states, may reflect strict gender roles rather than equality of opportunity"

9-Mazawi, Andre, *Gender and Higher Education in Arab States*, International Higher Education, Fall 1999
10-UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2005



* 1999; UN-DESA, United Nations Statistics Division, Millennium Development Goals Indicators http://unstats.un.org



UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2005

Conclusion

The ESCWA region is well on track to achieve gender parity with regard to primary, secondary and tertiary education as well as youth literacy. Despite these laudable achievements gender parity for education indicators remain low in Egypt, are depreciating significantly in Iraq, and are among the world's lowest in Yemen. Furthermore, although women now enjoy higher rates of literacy and complete more schooling than ever before, it is not clear that this education is adequate as a means of promoting women's further participation in the economic and political lives of their countries.

We're on the Web!

See us at:

www.escwa.un.org

About Our Organization…

The ESCWA Centre for Women was established on October 1, 2003, following the Commission's adoption of Resolution 240(XXII). This resolution, recognizing that a fundamental part of development is the empowerment of women, called for the creation of a Committee on Women comprising the member countries, and for the establishment of a women's Centre at ESCWA. The Centre continues and expands on the work carried out by the Women Empowerment and Gender Mainstreaming Team, formerly a part of the Social Development Division at ESCWA.

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