

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA (ESCWA)

**ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC
PARTICIPATION IN THE ARAB REGION**

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Mr. Mansour Omeira was commissioned to review several drafts of the study and generated invaluable comments and suggestions.

In addition, Ms. Lauren Meyer, a specialist in early education, contributed her perspectives, which appear in box 3 of the present study.

CONTENTS

Page

Acknowledgements	iii
Abbreviations	vii
Executive summary	viii
Introduction	1
<i>Chapter</i>	
I. MOVING TOWARDS SOUND POLICY FRAMEWORKS FOR WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT	3
A. Development policy in a historical perspective	3
B. Recognition of all types of work	4
C. Reading statistics with a critical eye	5
D. Policy framework coherence	8
II. THE POWER AND LIMITATIONS OF EDUCATION	12
A. Solving the riddle: is there a mismatch between women's skills and the labour market	12
B. Engendering the learning environment: dismantling barriers at the beginning	16
III. LEGISLATION TO ADDRESS GENDER NEEDS IN THE WORLD OF WORK	19
A. Discriminatory legislation	19
B. Addressing gender needs in the world of work	20
IV. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS	25
<i>Bibliography</i>	28

LIST OF TABLES

1. Employment by sector	4
2. Labour-force participation, 2010	5
3. Female adult labour-force participation	6
4. Female youth (age 15-24) employment to population	7
5. Unemployment, age 15+	7
6. Women's suffrage and political representation, 2012	11
7. Secondary gross enrolment	12
8. Literacy, age 15+	13
9. Tertiary gross enrolment	14
10. Pre-primary gross enrolment	17
11. Statutory pensionable age	20
12. Ratification of key ILO Conventions on gender equality in the world of work	21
13. Key national provisions for maternity protection	22

CONTENTS *(continued)*

Page

LIST OF BOXES

1. Policy coherence challenges: addressing women’s unemployment in Saudi Arabia.....	8
2. Women in computing.....	14
3. Effects of early education on shaping gender roles: insights of a teacher	16
4. Best practice: ILO and the equal pay initiative in Jordan	22
5. Good practice: towards achieving gender equality in employment opportunities and in the United Nations workplace.....	24

ABBREVIATIONS

ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ESCWA	Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
GAD	Gender and Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
HRMS	Human Resources Management Section
WID	Women in Development

Executive summary

In the region of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the rate of women's economic participation is lower than in any other region of the world, which has aroused genuine and deep concern. Why have improvements in women's attainment of education not led to improvements in their economic participation?

There are many barriers along the development spectrum that have hindered women's economic participation. The study recognizes the diversity of women's situations across the region, both between and within countries. Socioeconomic and political circumstances such as poverty, lack of rural development, armed conflicts, high illiteracy rates and early marriages, which are prevalent in some countries, are examples of such barriers. Social norms and expectations, especially regarding the role of women as wage earners, also play an important role and may be slow to evolve.

The main thrust of the study is to investigate structural barriers that interact at three levels and impede the transformation of women's educational gains into successful prospects for participation in the labour force. The barriers are the following:

1. Policy framework.
2. Socialization.
3. Regulatory and organizational measures.

First, the issue of women's economic participation needs to be disconnected from past trends and paradigms that have failed to deal with it in a sustainable and strategic fashion. Whether at the national or regional level, concerted efforts need to be made to develop a strategic vision and a coherent policy framework for action. While there are no easy answers, there are ample opportunities to correctly diagnose the problem and start building a multidimensional framework based on a gender perspective and a rights-based approach to foster women's employment.

Second, the study contests the oft-repeated argument that the mismatch between women's skills and the needs of the market accounts for low economic participation among women. Challenges to that argument arise from the educational achievements that women have made over the last two decades or so. Furthermore, a close examination of the subjects women study and the skills they develop reveals that women have specialized in a variety of fields, including the sciences. Thus, their skills are not the primary barrier to economic participation.

The present study advocates that the process of socialization in education lacks an engendered learning environment. Indeed, an empowering learning environment can provide women with life skills and transform their educational gains and capabilities into successful prospects for decent employability.

Moreover, the study argues that adequate early years education makes a significant contribution to women's economic empowerment, although it is often neglected in the region. The low enrolment rate is cause for concern, as is the fact that most early years education is provided by the private sector. This means that children in poor families are very likely excluded from critical child developmental services. Those children, boys and girls, are missing important learning opportunities that would help them develop a positive image of both genders. Women are also missing valuable support for their dual role at home and at work.

Third, elements of discriminatory legislation remain in force in the region which deprive women of some economic opportunities. However, the most serious challenge is the lack of adequate regulatory measures to protect the needs of women in the world of work. Compared to other regions of the world, the Arab region has weak maternity protection measures. The region also lacks anti-discrimination laws, and in

their absence employers in the public or private sector can discriminate against the employment of women with impunity.

Gender equality is a long-term objective which cannot be realized without putting the right policies and measures in place to offer practical support to women and promote work-life balance for all employees. The study presents aspects of the United Nations Human Resources Management Section to illustrate good practice in supporting male and female workers. Through strict implementation of policy measures and accountability, the situation and status of women working in the organization has improved over time.

The study concludes by highlighting the need for gender-sensitive economic and educational policies that are compatible with women's rights. Efforts to foster women's employment must serve the overall goal of their empowerment in all fields.

Introduction

The current transitions taking place across the Arab region carry with them significant uncertainty, particularly on the status of women. At the core of those transitions is the question of participation, in its interrelated civil, political, economic, social and cultural dimensions. New priorities are emerging and old priorities are being revisited as realities change.

One long-standing priority on the policy agenda of all countries in the region, regardless of political circumstances or the level of economic development, is women's economic participation.¹ Despite official commitments, the Middle East and North Africa have the lowest rate of women's economic participation in the world, with roughly one economically active woman in every five women of working age.²

Their persistently low rate contrasts with the progress achieved in the region with respect to women's education and health indicators. Debates are ongoing among policymakers, researchers and women's rights advocates as to why those achievements have not led to improvements in women's economic participation. The question carries intrinsic value for women and for society as a whole. At a time when investments in health and education are often justified in terms of their economic returns, false interpretations of the data may lead decision-makers to question or curtail such investments. Therefore, an accurate understanding of barriers to women's economic participation is more important than ever to defend investments in women's health and education.

The apparent paradox between investments in women and their low economic activity is the subject of the present study. It examines explanations of women's limited economic participation and argues that the policy framework is a barrier which includes gender-blind economic policies that have failed to foster women's employment.

In the member countries of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA),³ socialization and cultural norms are another barrier. Such norms have long encouraged men towards productive roles, namely, economically active roles, while women have been confined to the reproductive role. Thus, men are viewed as the principle breadwinner in the family, and women are viewed as the principle homemaker. Those gender roles in society have not been radically challenged. Women who work outside the home are expected to do so in addition to their tasks as homemakers, often without additional support.

A third barrier exists within legislation, where employment policies and organizational measures do not credibly support women in the world of work. The region has one of the poorest levels of protection for working women; such protection ranges from paid maternity leave to flexible work arrangements that would facilitate women's entry and retention in the workforce and help women balance life and work responsibilities.

The study demonstrates that gaps in educational structures and learning environments rather than access to education contribute to the low economic participation of women. Furthermore, shortcomings and gender-biased legislation, including regulatory measures in the world of work, have fallen short of facilitating and supporting women's access to employment.

¹ The present study uses the concepts of 'economic participation' and 'labour-force participation' synonymously and interchangeably.

² ILO (2012), p. 96.

³ ESCWA member countries are Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

In addition to legal and social barriers, women's participation in the labour force is impacted by the wider context of regional economic challenges. Principle difficulties include the following: unemployment is persistently high, especially among the youth and women; globalization has reduced job opportunities in the public sector, upon which women heavily depend; foreign direct investment is low; and living costs are rising.

The high level of unemployment among young women is a pressing issue with the potential of evolving into a crisis. Should governments and markets fail to transform long-term educational gains into real job opportunities, the labour-force participation of women may drop even further. There is a strong precedent for the role of government in support of the economic participation of women. For example, in Europe and the United States of America, women were encouraged to work in factories in times of war.

In addition to economic constraints, many countries in the region suffer from rising poverty and high illiteracy rates. As a result of war, instability and the migration of men into urban areas or immigration to other countries, the number of female heads of household has increased. Such forces push vulnerable women towards the fringes of society and the perils of the unsustainable, insecure work in the informal sector.

To the extent possible, the study covers all ESCWA member countries and highlights selected experiences and good practice. The present study was conducted using a qualitative methodology to review primary and secondary data encompassing United Nations reports and studies, Government data on women's economic participation and studies conducted by scholars working in the field. Primary and secondary data cover the historical and current status of women's economic participation and the main factors that hinder their full participation in the labour market.

The study presents an in-depth analysis of data and statistics to assess three main types of barriers: (1) policy framework: examining existing policies that define the nature of the problem in order to prescribe strategic remedies to empower women; (2) socialization and skills: examining imbalanced gender power relations and how they impact the division of labour; and (3) regulatory and organizational measures: examining the adherence to international labour standards that provide a basis for empowering women and enabling all workers to balance work-life responsibilities.

To ensure that the data and analytical framework were valid and well-adapted to yield the desired policy recommendations, a draft of the study was reviewed during an expert group meeting in Beirut on 26 and 27 June 2012. Fourteen experts from many fields provided comments and substantive feedback that were integrated into the study. The external review process was followed by an internal peer review and a technical review by the Statistics Division and the Economic Development and Globalization Division.

I. MOVING TOWARDS SOUND POLICY FRAMEWORKS FOR WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

A. DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Discussions of women's economic participation in the Arab region may carry analytical assumptions that undermine the ability of States to overcome challenges to it. One set of assumptions emphasizes the cultural determinants of the region as the main explanation for women's low economic participation. Another set of assumptions emphasizes the resource endowment of countries, such as oil and arable land, as the main explanation. While cultural and material factors are important to understand the complexity of factors affecting women's economic participation, both assumptions imply that women's economic prospects in the Arab region are determined by the intrinsic characteristics of the region.

Nevertheless, an inadequate policy framework in ESCWA member countries constrains effort to increase women's economic participation. This issue must be approached from a historical perspective to account for the changing position of women and the role of the State in shaping the quantity and quality of employment opportunities. The evolution of policies and institutions affecting women's employment is closely related to the overall socioeconomic development paradigm of different countries at different points in time. Changes in dominant development discourses at the international level are evident in the policies and paradigms that prevailed in ESCWA member countries.

In the mid-twentieth century, women's productive role in society was an integral element of the modernity and progress discourse of newly independent States such as Iraq, Egypt, the Syrian Arab Republic and South Yemen. Those States initiated changes affecting women's opportunities for education and health care and improved women's access to employment. Accordingly, women's organizations were closely linked with or were part of the ruling political party structures and their main role was to mobilize women around the goals and tasks set by the party and the State.⁴

In the 1970s, with the changing global development agenda, women's issues, including women's economic participation, reclaimed the attention of policymakers, who sought solutions and action plans to advance the situation of women at all levels. Development paradigms and economic policies were coined, and to a large extent they dictated the direction of the advancement of women. The most prominent and popular of these was the Women in Development (WID) approach, which targeted women to improve their economic status and assumed that women's economic participation would stimulate economic growth.

There were several problems with the WID approach. First, it focused on small-scale productive activities exclusively for women, which had the effect of excluding them from mainstream development activities. Another major problem with the approach was that it did not take gender power relations into consideration. Economic policies were geared towards profitability and material growth and were disconnected from the concerns, experiences and needs of women. The focus was on providing women with financial means, which increased the popularity of microfinance targeted to them without measuring the impact and leverage power of such policies to improve the overall economic status of women.

Gender and Development (GAD) emerged in the 1980s as an alternative approach, which aimed to address gender needs and expose the roots of inequality by asserting that development cannot take place without empowering women. This perspective coincides with another approach: "feminist economics". Proponents of that perspective argue that existing macroeconomic policies typically ignore the unpaid care economy in which women do most of the work, in subsistence production, care for family and voluntary community work. Orthodox economists typically consider women's unpaid work as 'social roles' rather than productive activities that ought to be reflected in national economic statistics.⁵

⁴ Joseph and Slyomovics (2000), p. 26.

⁵ Elson (2002), pp. 1-3.

This important debate on women's unpaid work has started to emerge in the Arab region, as indicated by the growing literature on the subject and the production of statistics, such as time use surveys that measure the activities of both women and men. Although it is too early to predict whether feminist economics will succeed in transforming macroeconomic policies, it nevertheless highlights significant shortcomings in current economic policies that lack gender perspective. Like GAD, it seeks to investigate women's employment issues in their entirety.

The concept of women's unpaid and undervalued work is very relevant to the Arab region, not only because of the extensive time and resources that household and care work represents, but also because informal employment constitutes a major challenge. More and more vulnerable women are drawn into such labour without knowing the extent of the threats it poses. Poverty and low levels of education remain major factors that prevent vulnerable groups of women from accessing decent work.

B. RECOGNITION OF ALL TYPES OF WORK

Women's employment policies have often focused on tackling the situation of national women in formal employment. However, such approaches should also deal with the expanding informal economy and aim to formalize informal employment.

Women have diverse experiences in the informal economy. A large share of the informal economy is composed of female domestic workers, typically migrants, whose work and living conditions are seldom acknowledged. Domestic workers are often denied opportunities and entitlements that are guaranteed to other workers.

Many women are also engaged in various economic activities in the agricultural sector. Agriculture remains a major sector in the economies of many ESCWA member countries, and far more women than men are engaged in related activities that are either unpaid or underpaid. Female agricultural workers are a major group in populous, low-middle income ESCWA member countries with substantial agricultural activities. Table 1 lists rates of female employment in the agricultural sector in countries such as Yemen (87.8 per cent), Morocco (59.2 per cent), Iraq (50.7 per cent), Egypt (45.6 per cent), Palestine (27.5 per cent) and the Syrian Arab Republic (23.8 per cent).

TABLE 1. EMPLOYMENT BY SECTOR
(Percentage)

Country	Year	Agriculture		Industry		Services	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Bahrain	2004	1.0	0.1	18.2	3.0	80.8	96.9
Egypt	2008	28.2	45.6	27.3	5.6	44.4	48.8
Iraq	2008	17.1	50.7	21.6	3.7	61.3	45.6
Jordan	2010	2.2	1.0	20.5	9.3	77.2	89.7
Morocco	2008	34.2	59.2	24.0	15.4	41.6	25.2
Oman	2000	6.6	5.4	10.7	14.0	82.4	80.3
Palestine	2008	10.1	27.5	29.0	11.3	60.9	61.2
Qatar	2007	2.7	0.0	58.3	4.8	38.9	94.9
Saudi Arabia	2009	4.7	0.2	23.3	1.5	72.0	98.4
Syrian Arab Republic	2010	13.6	23.8	35.8	9.3	50.7	66.9
United Arab Emirates	2008	5.2	0.2	28.3	7.1	66.3	92.5
Yemen	1999	43.1	87.8	13.8	2.9	43.0	9.3

Source: ILO, key indicators of the labour market (KILM). <http://kilm.ilo.org/KILMnet/>.

Note: Table comprises the latest data available.

C. READING STATISTICS WITH A CRITICAL EYE

The concept of women's economic activities has expanded over time to include a wider range of contributions to the world of work, yet current statistics and data in the region remain primarily concerned with labour-force participation, which often captures a limited portion of workers in the informal economy, particularly women. The accuracy of these statistics may vary depending on the source (type of survey, survey methodology, time period covered and so on), but they are nevertheless indicative of women's low participation rate in the labour force across the region.

Table 2 presents the percentage of labour force participation by sex and age group which highlights the gap in labour participation between youth and older workers and between men and women.

TABLE 2. LABOUR-FORCE PARTICIPATION, 2010
(Percentage)

Country	Age 15+		Age 15-24	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Bahrain	87.2	39.2	55.3	32.7
Egypt	74.2	23.5	47.6	19.9
Iraq	69.3	14.3	48.6	8.1
Jordan	65.4	15.3	42.0	11.2
Kuwait	82.2	43.3	44.2	24.8
Lebanon	70.8	22.5	41.0	17.6
Libya	76.9	30.4	50.0	24.2
Morocco	74.7	25.9	53.0	19.0
Oman	79.9	28.0	52.7	24.0
Palestine	66.3	14.7	41.7	8.1
Qatar	95.2	52.1	78.5	35.7
Saudi Arabia	74.2	17.4	25.3	6.8
The Sudan	76.5	30.8	43.3	26.9
Syrian Arab Republic	71.6	12.9	49.0	9.0
Tunisia	69.7	25.3	43.8	21.8
United Arab Emirates	92.0	43.7	62.0	32.0
Yemen	71.7	24.8	52.1	21.2

Source: <http://kilm.ilo.org/KILMnet/>.

As seen in table 2, the participation rate in the labour force is particularly low among females age 15+ in the following countries: Syrian Arab Republic (12.9 per cent), Iraq (14.3 per cent), Palestine (14.7 per cent), Jordan (15.3 per cent), Saudi Arabia (17.4 per cent), Lebanon (22.5 per cent), Egypt (23.5 per cent) and Yemen (24.8 per cent). Young women age 15-24 have an even lower rate of labour-force participation in every country of the region without exception. The following countries have the lowest participation rates for female youth: Saudi Arabia (6.8 per cent), Palestine and Iraq (each 8.1 per cent), Syrian Arab Republic (9.0 per cent), Jordan (11.2 per cent), Morocco (19.0 per cent) and Egypt (19.9 per cent).

All Gulf countries except for Saudi Arabia have relatively high labour-force participation rates for females age 15+; Qatar (52.1 per cent), United Arab Emirates (43.7 per cent), Kuwait (43.3 per cent), Bahrain (39.2 per cent) and Oman (28 per cent). In those countries, the public sector can provide as much as 30-40 per cent of total employment, or even more than 50 per cent.⁶

⁶ ILO (2009).

There is a concern, however, that statistics on female labour-force participation may include foreign domestic workers, and are thus not indicative of the participation of national women. The same may also be true of male employment in the Gulf countries where figures of employment were reportedly as high as 99.9 per cent in Qatar in 2009 and 97.5 per cent in the United Arab Emirates in 2005.⁷

Although women's labour-force participation in the region is low, data from the past two decades shows that the rate has increased slightly in most ESCWA member countries (see table 3). The exception to this trend is Egypt, where women's labour-force participation fell from 26.8 per cent in 1990 to 23.5 per cent in 2010. As a subregion, the Gulf has witnessed the largest advances because women are mainly employed in the public sector. In the Arab region overall, the largest increases in female labour-force participation were made in the United Arab Emirates, Libya and Qatar, followed by Kuwait, Jordan, Oman and Saudi Arabia.

Palestine also made a sizeable increase in female labour-force participation, with rates rising from a mere 11.1 per cent in 1990 to 14.7 per cent in 2010. The rate has also increased in Iraq from 10.9 per cent in 1990 to 14.3 per cent in 2010. However, the impact of conflict on labour-force participation must be noted. Women living in conflict-affected countries are more vulnerable to increased household poverty and employment prospects become more fragile in insecure conditions. This is important when evaluating labour-force statistics. Women's increased participation could be a reflection of greater opportunity or it could be a reflection of greater need. To identify the true cause, an analysis is needed of the terms and conditions of employment among various groups of workers.

TABLE 3. FEMALE ADULT LABOUR-FORCE PARTICIPATION
(Percentage)

Country	1990	2000	2010
Bahrain	28.2	33.8	39.2
Egypt	26.8	23.8	23.5
Iraq	10.9	12.6	14.3
Jordan	15.2	21.6	15.3
Kuwait	36.0	44.3	43.3
Lebanon	19.8	20.0	22.5
Libya	15.3	22.7	30.4
Morocco	24.5	27.5	25.9
Oman	18.7	23.4	28.0
Palestine	11.1	10.5	14.7
Qatar	40.4	36.9	52.1
Saudi Arabia	15.0	17.6	17.4
The Sudan	27.4	28.9	30.8
Syrian Arab Republic	18.1	20.3	12.9
Tunisia	20.8	23.8	25.3
United Arab Emirates	25.1	34.2	43.7
Yemen	15.9	17.2	24.8

Source: <http://kilm.ilo.org/KILMnet/>.

Over the past 20 years the rate of female youth employment changed very little in many ESCWA member countries (see table 4). A few increased the rate of female youth employment (notably Qatar, with a 12.7 per cent increase), but the rate declined most in the Syrian Arab Republic, followed by Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt.

⁷ ESCWA (2011a), pp. 49 and 51.

TABLE 4. FEMALE YOUTH (AGE 15-24) EMPLOYMENT TO POPULATION
(Percentage)

Country	1991	2000	2009
Bahrain	15.5	18.2	15.5
Egypt	14.1	13.6	10.6
Iraq	3.4	3.4	3.2
Jordan	2.0	4.2	4.7
Kuwait	21.1	24.0	21.0
Lebanon	14.8	14.1	13.8
Libya	12.8	12.8	12.5
Morocco	22.4	23.5	18.2
Oman	13.7	15.6	15.9
Palestine	4.1	4.7	5.8
Qatar	15.4	13.9	28.1
Saudi Arabia	4.3	5.5	5.2
The Sudan	17.4	18.7	17.5
Syrian Arab Republic	16.3	13.3	11.9
Tunisia	19.0	17.4	15.3
United Arab Emirates	14.9	21.4	20.8
Yemen	8.3	8.3	9.1

Source: ESCWA (2011b), table 9F.

Unemployment among women age 15+ is another area of mounting concern. Although the latest data are not comparable across years, they nevertheless indicate that women have a much higher rate of unemployment than men (see table 5). The countries with the highest female unemployment are Yemen, Palestine, Jordan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Iraq and Egypt. High unemployment figures also indicate that women are actively seeking jobs.

TABLE 5. UNEMPLOYMENT, AGE 15+
(Percentage)

Country	Year	Unemployment	Men	Women
Bahrain	2007	2.6	0.4	9.8
Egypt	2008	8.7	5.6	19.3
Iraq*	2008	15.3	14.3	19.6
Jordan	2009	12.9	10.3	24.0
Kuwait	2007	1.5	1.0	3.0
Lebanon	2007	9.0	8.6	10.1
Oman	--	--	--	--
Palestine	2009	24.5	24.1	26.4
Qatar	2009	0.3	0.1	1.9
Saudi Arabia	2009	5.4	3.5	15.9
The Sudan	2007	18.9	--	--
Syrian Arab Republic	2009	8.1	5.7	22.3
United Arab Emirates	2005	3.1	2.5	7.1
Yemen	2009	14.6	11.3	40.2

Source: ESCWA (2011a), pp. 45-51. The publication predates the accession of Libya, Morocco and Tunisia to ESCWA.

Note: Table comprises the latest data available.

* Data for Iraq pertain to age 15-24 only.

Unemployment among youth in general, and among young women in particular, poses real challenges to societies and may result from both the level and quality of education. Among less educated workers, unemployment reflects the need to increase the reach of education, while unemployment among the educated reflects a failure to transform educational gains into economic empowerment. With more women attaining education today, the untapped reservoir of knowledge and skills that are not used in the job market is not

only a waste for women, but also for society and the economy. If Governments do not tackle job creation or full employment as a priority in national economic and development policies, the problem will only grow deeper given the large share of youth in the Arab region. As the growing youth population reaches working age, countries in the region will be under even more pressure to create jobs.

In that regard, the diverse economic endowments of ESCWA member countries require that each country adapt employment policies to their unique characteristics. As noted by one researcher, “poor economies should focus on maintaining and developing better jobs in the agriculture sector . . . and at the same time promoting non-agriculture employment in the rural areas . . . resource rich Arab economies, that rely on public sector employment . . . should focus on diversifying their economies and promoting entrepreneurship and innovation.”⁸

Therefore, clear and concise policy formulation is needed to support job creation and it is critical to identify the framework that defines the parameter of such policies. For example, some policies aim to foster women’s employment without empowering them and without removing barriers to their participation in the mainstream economy. Such a policy has recently been adopted in Saudi Arabia (see box 1), and there is concern that the initiative reflects the same thinking as the WID approach instead of a more sustainable approach that is rights-based and has a gender perspective.

Box 1. Policy coherence challenges: addressing women’s unemployment in Saudi Arabia

During the past few years, Saudi Arabia has taken various national initiatives in an attempt to increase women’s participation rate in the labour force which, according to the latest statistics stands at 17.4 per cent for women age 15+ and 6.8 per cent for women age 15-24. To increase the percentage of Saudi nationals in the workforce, provisions were made to allow women to work in certain retail shops for the first time in the country’s history and to work in pharmaceutical firms.

More recently, Saudi Arabia has taken an unprecedented step in the region to foster women’s employment through creating an exclusive industrial city for females only. It is anticipated that the project will generate some 5,000 jobs for women. In addition, similar exclusive cities are being planned.

However, creating exclusive workplaces for women reinforces the negative social belief that women cannot be part of mainstream work opportunities, which contradicts the Employment Policy Convention, 1964 (No. 122) of the International Labour Organization on employment policies, which stresses the right of workers to freedom of choice in employment. In Article 1, Member States should ensure that “...there is freedom of choice of employment and the fullest possible opportunity for each worker to qualify for, and to use his skills and endowments in, a job for which he is well suited, irrespective of race, color, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin”.

Saudi Arabia has not signed Convention No. 122.

Although the project will create more employment for women, it will also strengthen gender stereotypes. Policies that respond to unemployment challenges must be gender sensitive without being gender blind or discriminatory.

Sources: Data on female labour-force participation is available from <http://kilm.ilo.org/KILMnet/>. More information on Saudi Arabian employment initiatives are available from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-1641220> and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/12/saudi-arabia-city-women-workers>.

D. POLICY FRAMEWORK COHERENCE

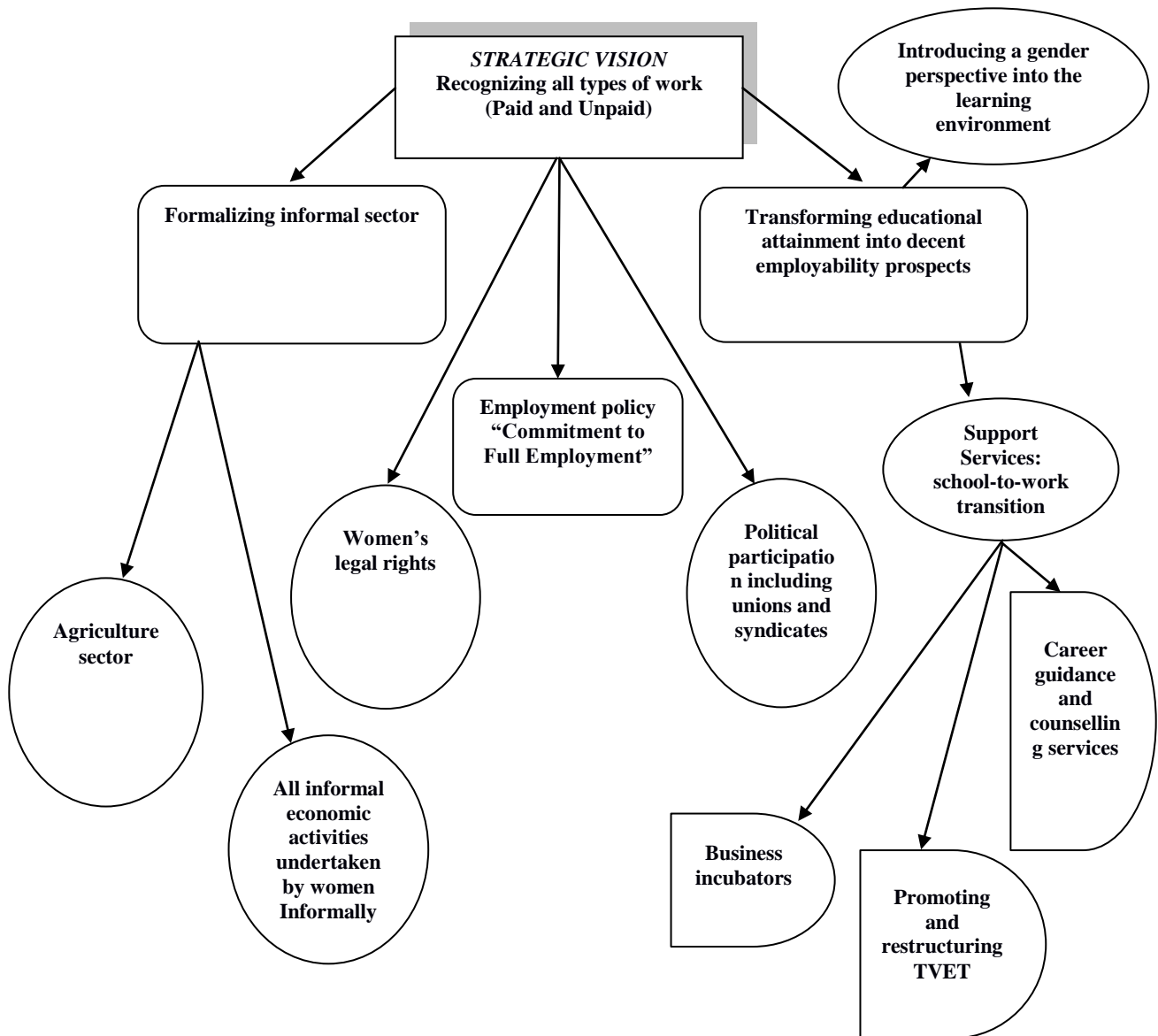
Given that there are many barriers to women’s economic participation in the Arab region and that barriers intersect with many development and empowerment issues, it is imperative that the empowerment of

⁸ Chaaban (2010), p. 34.

women is the ultimate goal of the policy framework, which must take an integrated, coherent view of their participation in the labour force. Policy coherence involves the systematic promotion of mutually reinforcing policy actions across governments, departments and agencies creating synergies towards achieving the defined objective.⁹

When this concept is applied to women’s employment policy, it transforms women’s work into economic empowerment by recognizing all types of work, paid and unpaid. The strategic vision for recognizing all types of work can be represented in a structural form (see figure).

Coherent policy framework structure



Formalizing the informal sector, especially agricultural and rural activities undertaken by women, remains a significant concern for ESCWA member countries, since more women than men work in this productive sector, and they are usually underpaid or unpaid. Furthermore, they are also excluded from the benefits and protection measures that have been guaranteed by legislation to workers in the formal sector.

⁹ Den Hertog and Stross (2011).

Women in this category of work are also in need of training to enhance their skills and increase their productivity. Formalizing the sector will not only protect the interests of women; it will add value to the economy as well.

Fostering and encouraging women to participate in the labour force requires that the concerned ministries and bodies adopt sound employment policies. Commitment to full employment as stipulated in the Employment Policy Convention, 1964 (No. 122) of the International Labour Organization (ILO) is a strategic choice to create jobs in the market. Therefore, investment and trade policies in the region that do not secure ample job opportunities must be reviewed with the target of creating opportunities for women.

Alongside employment policies, legislation that respects and recognizes women's needs in the workplace is paramount to encourage women to participate in the labour force. Traditionally, women in the Arab region have been drawn into the public sector because it provides them with better incentives for work-life balance. In that regard, ILO Conventions on gender equality serve as a foundation for engendering the workplace.

Another core aspect of the coherent policy framework structure addresses the need to restructure educational policies so that they are geared towards providing women with a high-quality education and enhancing their ability to compete in the marketplace. Intervention in education must be initiated during the early years stage with a commitment to engender the learning environment at all levels. The problem is not merely a matter of access to education; the process through which girls and women receive their education is of equal importance.

Mechanisms are needed to facilitate the transition of women from school to work, such as career guidance and counselling, and those must be linked to the market. Initiatives from the private sector to create business incubators can help women obtain waged employment, where they will benefit from on-the-job training. In fact, a key message of the recent United Nations World Youth Report explores school-to-work transition at a global level and calls for more and better linkages between learning institutions and employers.¹⁰

The last two aspects that feed into any meaningful plan to foster women's employment have to do with the legal rights of women and their political participation. While women are legally allowed to work in all countries in the region, many women are subject to social controls, and may not attempt to seek employment if their fathers, brothers, husbands, or even mothers-in-law do not consent informally to the idea. There is little reliable data on the extent and trends of economic violence against women. Research into that area generally falls outside the borders of conventional statistics, but greater attention must be given to that issue to overcome those social practices at the household level and find ways to protect women.

Women in ESCWA member countries have gained many rights over time and many member countries have been exemplary in their efforts to comply with the comprehensive women's bill of rights promoted by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. However, in some countries, women are still denied basic rights, such as freedom of movement, a minimum marriage age of 18 years, the right to give nationality to children and have custody of children after divorce, to mention but a few. According full legal rights to women enhances their capacity to act as individuals and will eventually overcome social controls that have limited their freedom.

Lastly, women's political participation is an area of legitimate concern because it represents the voice of women in decision-making. In the Arab region, economic policies have been based to a large extent on the intellectual foundations of neoclassical economic thought. This model has been challenged in theory and in

¹⁰ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2012), p. 2.

practice by the economic policies that developed countries have pursued and by the failure of mainstream economics to foresee the current global economic crisis.

Given the dire economic problems in the Arab region, there is a genuine need to cultivate alternative economic thinking and foster economic talent. Women's participation in the economy will be stronger if they understand how economies function and use political processes to have their say in economic decisions and policies ranging from structural adjustment policies to the right to form unions and syndicates. There is a need to engage with various institutional networks, particularly those relevant to policy research in other developing regions.

However, as seen in table 6, some countries have very low female representation in parliaments. In some highly conservative, high-income societies, women's successful integration into public life is a greater struggle than in other societies.

TABLE 6. WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION, 2012

Country	Suffrage rights	Women in parliament (percentage)	Female quota
Bahrain	1973	10	No
Egypt	1956	1.97	Abolished
Iraq	1980	25.23	Yes
Jordan	1974	10.83	Yes
Kuwait	2005	6.35	No
Lebanon	1952	3.13	No
Libya	1964	16.50	
Morocco	1963	16.96	Yes
Oman	2003	1.19	No
Palestine	1996	12.8	Yes
Qatar	1999	0	No
Saudi Arabia	2015*	0	No
The Sudan	1964	24.58	Yes
Syrian Arab Republic	1949-53	12.00	No
Tunisia	1959	26.73	Yes
United Arab Emirates	2006	17.50	No
Yemen	1970	0.33	No

Source: www.ipu.org.

* On 25 September 2011, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia announced voting rights for women that will take effect in 2015.

Integrating women into the public sphere has progressed asymmetrically across the region. While ESCWA member countries have long articulated an agenda to advance the status of women and expressed numerous commitments to do so, not all countries have succeeded. Women who participate in the economy will earn income, pay taxes and build the economy of their nations. The participation of women in the power structure will strengthen their representation in the labour force and economic empowerment.

A multidimensional approach to women's economic participation enables States to translate policies into concrete measures to improve women's position in an engendered world of work.

II. THE POWER AND LIMITATIONS OF EDUCATION

A. SOLVING THE RIDDLE: IS THERE A MISMATCH BETWEEN WOMEN'S SKILLS AND THE LABOUR MARKET?

One oft-cited explanation of women's low rate of participation in the labour force has to do with a mismatch between women's skills and the demands of the labour market. However, in view of the many advances that women in the Arab region have achieved in education at all levels, that claim holds limited validity.

In fact, women in the Arab region have gained significant ground, achieving parity or near-parity in many countries of the region. The Global Education Digest 2010 reported that "after decades of strong growth in female participation, two regions reached gender parity (in tertiary education): the Arab States, and East Asia and the Pacific".¹¹ The Arab region has also made significant progress towards gender parity in primary and secondary education. Gender disaggregated data is not available in the same year for all countries, however, the latest available data of secondary gross enrolment rate for each country in the Arab region are set out in table 7.

TABLE 7. SECONDARY GROSS ENROLMENT
(Percentage)

Country	Year	Male	Female
Bahrain	2002	95	103
Egypt	2010	74	71
Iraq	2002	47	29
Jordan	2010	85	89
Kuwait	2002	97	102
Lebanon	2010	77	86
Libya	2002	107	114
Morocco	2002	46	37
Oman	2002	82	80
Palestine	2010	83	89
Qatar	2010	86	104
Saudi Arabia	2010	103	98
The Sudan	2002	30	28
Syrian Arab Republic	2010	72	73
Tunisia	2002	79	80
United Arab Emirates	2002	78	85
Yemen	2010	54	34

Source: http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=198&IF_Language=eng.

Note: Percentages above 100 indicate that students younger or older than the official age for a given level of education are enrolled in that level.

The above table shows that the female enrolment rate in secondary education is higher than the male enrolment rate in ten out of seventeen countries. With the exception of Iraq, Morocco and Yemen, the gender gap is narrow across the region.

Despite improvement in the female secondary gross enrolment rate, the percentage of female literacy remains low in some countries (see table 8).

¹¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2010), p. 68.

TABLE 8. LITERACY, AGE 15+
(Percentage)

Country	Year	Male	Female
Bahrain	2010	92.8	90.2
Egypt	2006	74.6	57.8
Iraq	2010	86.0	70.6
Jordan	2007	95.5	88.9
Kuwait	2008	95.0	91.8
Lebanon	2007	93.4	86.0
Libya	2010	95.6	82.7
Morocco	2009	68.9	43.9
Oman	2008	90.0	80.9
Palestine	2009	97.4	91.7
Qatar	2009	95.1	92.9
Saudi Arabia	2010	90.4	81.3
The Sudan	2010	80.1	62.0
Syrian Arab Republic	2010	89.9	76.9
Tunisia	2008	86.4	71.0
United Arab Emirates	2005	89.5	91.5
Yemen	2010	81.2	46.8

Source: http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=198&IF_Language=eng.

The lowest female literacy rates are found in Morocco, Yemen and Egypt. In every country except the United Arab Emirates, men have a higher rate of literacy, and the greatest literacy gap between men and women is found in Yemen, followed by Morocco and the Sudan. Female illiteracy remains a major challenge and carries with it multiple forms of exclusion, including exclusion from the prospects of obtaining decent work. However, illiteracy does not necessarily exclude women from labour-force participation, as illustrated in rural areas by the large number of workers who contribute to various agricultural activities.

Notwithstanding the female literacy rates, the female tertiary education enrolment rates reveal striking over-representation (see table 9). The data suggest that women in ESCWA member countries have exceeded men in attaining tertiary education except in Egypt, Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. The most recent statistics from the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen are from 1991, and it is possible that the trend has shifted since then. In 1999, the Sudan appeared to achieve parity between men and women in tertiary education, but significant changes in the country since that time have likely impacted those figures.

The Global Education Digest 2010 attempted to explain high rates of female representation in tertiary education and noted that the statistics are “not necessarily the results of affirmative action ... since this type of legislation is rare. They partly reflect the changing values and attitudes related to the role and aspirations of women in society”.¹² In the Arab region, social attitudes towards women’s attainment of education have changed dramatically and girls are more likely to be encouraged to pursue higher education.

Furthermore, the Global Education Digest 2010 suggested that national statistics on male and female enrolment in higher education may not account for students who pursue higher education abroad. They presented data that showed that “women in the Arab States are . . . more likely to remain in their countries of origin, accounting for 46 per cent of the regional student population compared to 34 per cent of the region’s share of mobile students.”¹³ Thus, women in the Arab region may appear to be overrepresented in tertiary education because they are less likely to study abroad, and men may appear to be underrepresented because they are more likely to study abroad.

¹² Ibid., p. 71.

¹³ Ibid., p. 72. The data account only for mobile students who studied in Australia, Canada, France, South Africa and the United Kingdom.

TABLE 9. TERTIARY GROSS ENROLMENT
(Percentage)

Country	Year	Male	Female
Bahrain	1999	16	28
Egypt	2010	34	31
Iraq	2002	13	16
Jordan	2010	35	41
Kuwait	2002	16	32
Lebanon	2010	49	59
Libya	2002	51	56
Morocco	2002	12	9
Oman	2010	21	29
Palestine	2010	43	58
Qatar	2010	5	26
Saudi Arabia	2010	35	39
The Sudan	1999	6	6
Syrian Arab Republic	1991	22	14
Tunisia	2002	21	25
United Arab Emirates	2002	12	40
Yemen	1991	16	4

Source: http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=198&IF_Language=eng.

The argument that women's economic participation is low because they lack skills is challenged by data on the fields of study of recent graduates in the Arab region. Available data show that women are pursuing tertiary education in a range of fields. In line with global trends, there is a high concentration of Arab women in fields such as education. The Global Education Digest 2010 reported that "in 62 out of 80 countries with data, women are more likely to graduate in the field of education."¹⁴ However, women are not limited to that field. Contrary to past assumptions that women avoid scientific fields in the Arab region, women represent 51 per cent of graduates in the sciences in general and 73 per cent of graduates in life sciences, 61 per cent of graduates in physical sciences, 59 per cent of graduates in mathematics and statistics and 33 per cent of graduates in computing.¹⁵ Box 2 shows that Arab States are ranked second after Central Asia in the percentage of female graduates in computing.

**Box 2. Women in computing
(percentage of female graduates)**

Region	Percentage
Arab States	33
Central and Eastern Europe	29
Central Asia	39
East Asia and the Pacific	29
Latin America and the Caribbean	31
North America and Western Europe	21

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2010), p. 76.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 76.

Today, more and more women have become educated and in some countries they have achieved higher levels of education than men. Unlike foregoing generations of women that lived without the basic skills of reading and writing, the present generation of young women go to school and continue on to institutions of higher education. More importantly, many of them are also familiar with basic information technology and take advantage of the Internet in their search for a job. The world has transformed enormously and, to some extent, women have kept abreast of those rapid changes.

Yet, social attitudes as to what women should do with their skills and education have not dramatically shifted: regardless of their education attainment, women are still not perceived as breadwinners. Furthermore, the labour market may not have any demand for the skills they worked to achieve. In effect, labour market demand in the Arab region is heavily biased in favour of economic activities that do not require education, as reflected in the occupational structure of employment across the region. That is more visibly reflected in the main occupations of migrant workforce, which is typically engaged in such activities as construction and domestic and agricultural work.

One solution to the low demand for educated workers would be allowing educational attainment to be determined by labour market needs, however that would mean that people, particularly women, should be studying less. It is dangerous to justify the education of girls and women only on the basis of economic returns, as support could be withdrawn in times of limited economic progress. The alternative that could break this vicious cycle would be to adopt and implement explicit employment policies in line with international labour standards. Such policies are needed for education, insofar as it is concerned with improving employment prospects, to ensure that education responds to long-term development requirements as determined by national policy, rather than short-term labour market demands.

The Global Education Digest 2010 also noted that “female-over-representation in higher education has yet to translate into proportional representation in the labour market or access to leadership and decision-making positions.”¹⁶ As has been shown, women lack neither education nor skills for successful labour-force participation. Thus, the underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions and in the labour force is a symptom of a deeper issue. This study argues that the socialization process that defines boys and girls differently, and holds different expectations of their pursuit of education, is a significant barrier to the economic participation of women. Such barriers, created early on, are replicated in the media, in the world of work and in the household.

An important barrier to the economic participation of women lies in the way that educational systems shape gender norms. From that perspective, the failure of women’s educational gains to result in greater female participation in the labour force has less to do with access to education and more to do with access to an enabling learning environment in schools and universities. Educational institutions must strive to educate men and women on an equal basis and also educate them to equally value men and women in society. Furthermore, support services are needed to facilitate the transition of women from school to work. Among such provisions are career guidance, counselling and promoting technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programmes. In fact, enormous innovations in technology, information and knowledge areas make TVET even more relevant for supplying skills to meet today’s development challenges. However, those institutions are perceived to be predominantly for men as indicated by the low enrolment rates of women. Encouraging women to pursue vocational training remains a challenge.

Gender equality in education goes beyond removing gender biases from curricula and text books. The adoption of competent teaching methods that are based on learning and not indoctrination is a matter of great importance in the Arab region, and there is a great need to restructure and modernize its anachronistic educational policies and programmes. There is also a need to ensure that teachers are well qualified and well trained to bring gender equality into learning environments. There is no better way to address this issue than starting at the very beginning of the learning process.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 71.

B. ENGENDERING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: DISMANTLING BARRIERS AT THE BEGINNING

Little attention has been paid to the importance of early stages in education, which can have a direct impact in helping boys and girls equally value the contributions of men and women, and in supporting women's ability to access employment.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has articulated many benefits of Early Child Care and Education (ECCE). Its positive impact on gender equality has been characterized as follows:

1. ECCE has a beneficial effect on later schooling and leads to higher school enrolment, particularly for girls.
2. ECCE in the form of reliable child care provides essential support for working parents, particularly mothers.
3. ECCE has positive effects on female labour force participation and older siblings' schooling.
4. ECCE can lay the foundation for a transformative society leading to the realization of gender equality.¹⁷

Box 3. Effects of early education on shaping gender roles: insights of a teacher

A quality early years' education plays an integral role in helping children shape their ideas about gender. Supporting all children to develop their fullest range of abilities and skills is one of the key principles of the early childhood education field. Children are careful observers, and begin noticing and identifying with gender at a very young age. They enter school with ideas about gender that have already been imprinted by familiar adults, child-parent interactions, role modelling, advertisements, toys, and television. Children will make theories about what it means to be a boy or girl based on their observations of familiar adults and their surroundings. It is not uncommon for a child who sees his mother as the primary caretaker to assume that all mothers fulfil this role, or that only dads can fix things. Young children are particularly likely to form gender stereotypes. These limiting gender roles hurt children in all developmental areas.

When children enter school, they continue to develop theories of gender. Since young children primarily form beliefs based on observations, one role of an early years' education is to expose young children to many different representations of gender that will widen their definitions of what it means to be male and female. This variety not only broadens their exposure, but satisfies a child's right to accurate information in order to construct meaning about the world. Providing a wide variety of gender representations at an early age will help children avoid stereotypes and remain open to all learning materials.

Teachers can challenge children's theories about gender in several key ways. They should begin with self-observation and awareness. Teachers need to understand the depth and challenges of gender stereotyping (boys are better at math, or only girls like to play with dolls), and reflect on the verbal and nonverbal messages they send children about gender. Without this essential awareness, teachers are likely to send messages about gender roles without realizing it. When an early childhood teacher is educated and reflective on these issues, he or she can help lay the foundation for children to form a healthy gender identity.

Ideas for supporting a gender-equitable classroom environment:

- *Adopt a play-based approach in early childhood classrooms (such as the Reggio Emilia approach). Children learn and express themselves through play. Allowing children to play will help them explore a variety of roles. As they play, make suggestions and ask questions.*

¹⁷ This list was synthesized from UNESCO (2010), p. 18, and the UNESCO website available from <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/advocacy/global-action-week/gaw-2012/why-invest-in-ecce/>.

Box 3 (continued)

- *Emphasize that everything in the classroom is for everyone. All materials, from pink markers to dolls to footballs, are for everybody to play with freely.*
- *Eliminate traditional fairytales in which girls are often portrayed as passive victims or valued primarily for their beauty. Choose a variety of literature that represents men and women in a variety of roles. If this is not the case, teachers should comment about the information (example: “This book makes me mad because all the workers are men. Do you know women who work?”). Having such conversations with a caring and educated adult will shape young children’s ideas about gender roles.*
- *Expose children to models of people in non-traditional gender roles. Invite “experts” in various fields to support project work.*
- *Challenge incorrect assumptions. When children say, “Pink is a girls’ color” or “Only boys can be basketball players,” they’re using their observations to try and make meaning of the surrounding world. Do not hesitate to say, “Girls play basketball, too,” or “Boys wear pink,” and show them evidence to back it up.*

The key is to provide many new ways of thinking and acting, and to challenge children’s theories to help them develop a greater understanding of who they are and what they are capable of achieving. Equitable early years education helps to build a strong foundation for all children to reach their full potentials and to help achieve a society that is free of gender bias.

Source: While formulating this text, the author drew upon Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010).

Although ECCE has the potential to have a positive impact on gender equality in the region, there are challenges to its implementation. The major concern is the low rate of enrolment of children whether boys or girls. Data on pre-primary enrolment indicates that gender parity has been achieved at this level of learning, although the enrolment rate in the Arab region is low, estimated at 32 per cent (see table 10).

TABLE 10. PRE-PRIMARY GROSS ENROLMENT
(Percentage)

Country	Year	Male	Female
Bahrain	2002	44	41
Egypt	2002	14	13
Iraq	1999	5	5
Jordan	2010	33	31
Kuwait	2002	86	87
Lebanon	2010	82	81
Libya	2002	8	8
Morocco	2010	65	50
Oman	2010	45	45
Palestine	2010	40	39
Qatar	2002	35	33
Saudi Arabia	2011	-----	11
The Sudan	2002	17	17
Syrian Arab Republic	2010	10	9
Tunisia	2002	21	20
United Arab Emirates	2002	67	69
Yemen	2010	1	1

Source: http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=198&IF_Language=eng.

Children who are not exposed to ECCE are dependent upon the informal institution of the family and on the world around them to inform their perception of gender roles. In addition, mothers who may wish to become employed cannot always do so. They have to care for their children until they are enrolled in formal education, which does not officially commence before grade one, when the child is six years of age.

Additionally, in the Arab region, the majority of ECCE institutions are run by the private sector. The lack of public support restricts the access of many low-income women to ECCE and prevents them from benefiting from day-care centres and nurseries.

The need to create powerful education approaches that can transform women's skills and capabilities into successful prospects for employability is paramount. However, this in itself is not enough to enable women to participate and remain in the labour force, as already discussed. Enabling legislation is needed to facilitate women's transition into the world of work. Regulatory measures must be implemented at different levels to support them.

III. LEGISLATION TO ADDRESS GENDER NEEDS IN THE WORLD OF WORK

“A sustained and long-term commitment is essential so that women and men can work together for themselves, for their children and for society to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century”¹⁸

A general overview of legislation on women’s employment in the region reveals that all labour laws in ESCWA member countries have made provisions for employed women. There are, however, two major concerns with existing legislation. Firstly, some of the provisions regarding women’s employment are discriminatory and more importantly, other legal measures fall short of addressing important needs and concerns of women in the world of work, hence discouraging women from joining and remaining in the labour force.

A. DISCRIMINATORY LEGISLATION

Labour laws are not drafted in a social vacuum. They reflect the prevailing norms and expectations of the time. While legislation in the Arab region upholds the principle of equality between men and women on the one hand, it regards employed women as meriting “special protection” on the other hand, to prevent their work from conflicting with cultural practices and social expectations. Such “special protection” can amount to discriminatory measures, particularly in connection with the following three issues: hazardous and dangerous working conditions, night work and retirement age.

Working in hazardous and dangerous conditions may be the smallest legal barrier hindering the participation of women in the labour force. Those measures were once universal and they were initially taken to protect pregnant women at the workplace. However, apart from that legitimate concern, there should be no discrimination between men and women when it comes to certain occupations and protective measures should be implemented to ensure the safety of all workers.

The second issue of night work bears relatively more significance. All Arab countries have placed restrictions on women’s work at night, with the exception of women working in the medical profession. In some countries exceptions to women’s work at night are lifted during the fasting month of Ramadan where retail shops open until late hours.

The economic structures of many countries in the region depend heavily on tourism, a booming sector that generates many potential job opportunities. Measures that restrict the employment of women at night need to be reviewed to enable women and men to benefit equally from the economic prospects of that sector. What women need more urgently are laws and organizational measures that protect their well-being and safety in the workplace. In the absence of protective legislation, the prospects for women in the region to work at night will remain dim. Harassment and violence against women must be penalized so that women can safely and affordably travel to and from their place of work. Furthermore, the social stigma attached to women’s night work is indeed overpowering. Appropriate legislation in this context is an essential step to help challenge and modify biased attitudes in society about the nature of women’s employment.

The third issue, where there is longstanding discrimination between men and women in labour legislation, is the age of retirement. This policy measure directly affects the situation of working women and constitutes a very clear breach of the principle of equality enshrined in Arab constitutions.

¹⁸ Beijing Platform for Action, chapter I: Mission Statement, para. 1.

TABLE 11. STATUTORY PENSIONABLE AGE

Country	Men	Women
Bahrain	60	55
Egypt	60	60
Iraq	-	-
Jordan	60	55
Kuwait	50	50
Lebanon	64	64
Libya	65	60
Morocco	60	60
Oman	60	55
Palestine	-	-
Qatar	-	-
Saudi Arabia	60	55
The Sudan	60	60
Syrian Arab Republic	60	55
Tunisia	60	60
United Arab Emirates	-	-
Yemen	60	55

Source: ILO (2010a), pp. 208-211.

As seen in table 11, most ESCWA member countries maintain a 5 year gap in retirement age with women retiring five years earlier than men. Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, the Sudan, and Tunisia have amended the policy in favour of a united retirement age. To date, Kuwait has the lowest retirement age for both men and women, set at 50 years of age for both men and women. Some countries have raised the retirement age without removing the gap between men and women. Differences between the retirement age of men and women are not unique to the Arab region. Countries in Europe such as Italy and Greece maintain a 5 year gap in the pension age, as do some other countries across the world.¹⁹

The result of retiring earlier can be quite negative for women, in part because women generally outlive men in the Arab region. Early retirement may prevent women from earning a pension that provides sufficient financial resources. This problem is exacerbated if women enter the labour force later in life, after raising children, when they are in a better position to balance the demands of home and work. That concern is of special importance to single mothers or female heads of household who cannot rely on any other source of income.

B. ADDRESSING GENDER NEEDS IN THE WORLD OF WORK

There are four principle Conventions that represent ILO efforts to ensure equality in the world of work: the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100); the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111); the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156); and the Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183).

As seen in table 12, most ESCWA member countries have ratified Convention No. 100 and Convention No. 111. Only Yemen has ratified Convention No. 156 and only Morocco has ratified Convention No. 183.

¹⁹ ILO (2010a), pp. 208-215.

TABLE 12. RATIFICATION OF KEY ILO CONVENTIONS ON GENDER EQUALITY
IN THE WORLD OF WORK

Country	No. 100	No. 111	No. 156	No. 183
Bahrain		2000		
Egypt	1960	1995		
Iraq	1963	1959		
Jordan	1966	1963		
Kuwait		1966		
Lebanon	1977	1977		
Libya	1962			
Morocco	1979	1963		2011
Oman				
Palestine*				
Qatar		1976		
Saudi Arabia	1978	1978		
The Sudan	1970	1970		
Syrian Arab Republic	1957	1960		
Tunisia	1968	1959		
United Arab Emirates	1997	2001		
Yemen	1976	1969	1989	

Source: ILO Normlex database <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:20020:0::NO:::>

* Palestine has not ratified ILO Conventions because of its observer status.

Equal pay is a fundamental commitment to reward men and women equally for work of the same value. Currently, 12 ESCWA member countries have ratified Convention No. 100, but Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar have not; Palestine has an observer status with ILO. Wage gaps between men and women persist in the region, however, no adequate statistical data is available to further illuminate the issue. To date, Jordan, in partnership with ILO, is the only country in the Arab region that has taken a national initiative to address wage discrimination, starting with the private education sector (see box 4).

All ESCWA member countries have ratified Convention No. 111 with the exception of Libya and Oman. However, a review of labour laws across the region shows that certain groups of women, in particular farmers, domestic workers and foreign workers, are exempted from some benefits that are granted to nationals.

Convention No. 156 concerns workers with family responsibilities and so far, Yemen is the only ESCWA member country that has ratified it. Ratifying and implementing this convention reflects the degree of State commitment in extending legal support for employed women to achieve and enjoy work-life balance.

Finally, Convention No. 183 is of utmost importance in protecting women in the workplace and so far, Morocco is the only ESCWA member country that has ratified it. The convention aims to enable women to successfully combine their reproductive and productive roles, and prevent unequal treatment in employment due to the reproductive role of women. The lack of support for this important convention indicates that while labour legislation permits the employment of women, legislation does not adequately address women's needs.

Another protection measure that could advance or hinder the participation of women in the labour force are policies related to maternity leave. The percentage of wages women receive during maternity leave impacts women's participation in the labour market. Table 13 highlights the national maternity protection provisions of Arab countries.

Box 4. Best practice: ILO and the equal pay initiative in Jordan

Equal pay is one of many tools ILO has employed to promote gender equality in the world of work. To date, Jordan is the only country in the Arab region that has worked in close collaboration with ILO to promote equal pay for work of equal value with the wider aim of increasing women's participation in the labour market. Wage gaps in Jordan are perceived to be a contributing factor to the low participation rate of women in the labour force, accounting in 2010 for 15.3 per cent for adult females, and only 11.2 per cent for women aged 15-24 years. According to ILO sources, almost half of employed women are professionals who earn 33 per cent less than men.

In cooperation with ILO, the Ministry of Labour and the Jordanian National Commission for Women created a National Steering Committee for Pay Equity in July 2011. The Committee consists of two subcommittees, one entrusted to review and make recommendations on policies and legislation for equal pay, and the other to undertake in-depth research on wage gaps in the private education sector. Training has been provided to the Committee by ILO to build their knowledge base on the principle of equal pay for work of equal value and on gender-neutral job evaluation methods.

This national initiative to promote pay equity and mainstream gender in the private education sector, can also be applied to other sectors to assess wage gaps and take action based on concrete evidence. Similar initiatives are needed across all ESCWA member countries.

Source: http://www.ilo.org/declaration/follow-up/tcprojects/eliminationofdiscrimination/WCMS_164947/lang--en/index.htm.

TABLE 13. KEY NATIONAL PROVISIONS FOR MATERNITY PROTECTION

Country	Duration*	Wages	Source of funding	Type of funding
Bahrain	60 days	full, first 45 days; unpaid thereafter	Employer 75% Social Security; 25% Employer	No information
Egypt	3 months	full	Social Security	Mandatory
Iraq	62 days	full	Employer	No information
Jordan	10 weeks	full	Employer	No information
Kuwait	70 days	full	Employer	No information
Lebanon	7 weeks	full	Employer	Mandatory
Libya ^{a/}	50 days	half	Employer	Mandatory
Morocco	14 weeks	full	Social Security	Mandatory
Qatar	50 days	full	Employer	No information
Saudi Arabia ^{b/}	10 weeks	half or full	Employer	Mandatory
The Sudan	8 weeks	full	Employer	Mandatory
Syrian Arab Republic ^{c/}	120 days	full	Employer	No information
Tunisia	30 days	two thirds	Social Security	Mandatory
United Arab Emirates	45 days	full	Employer	No information
Yemen	60 days	full	Employer	No information

Sources: Adapted from ILO (2010b), pp. 93-102.

* Days indicate working days.

Notes: ^{a/} Self-employed women receive full wages funded by Social Security.

^{b/} Percentage of wages depends on duration of employment.

^{c/} 120 days leave are granted for the first child.

According to table 13, maternity leave measures are incongruous across the region, with wide variations in the length of this entitlement for mothers. A good number of Arab countries provide very short periods of paid maternity leave, such as Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. The case of Tunisia is puzzling, because although legal rights for women in this country are among the most advanced, women receive only 30 days of paid

maternity leave. The only countries that provide adequate paid maternity leave are Egypt (3 months), Morocco (14 weeks), and the Syrian Arab Republic (120 days).

In its 2011 *Annual Report*, ESCWA raised the issue of the low rate of female participation in the labour force and asserted that “the lack of adequate social policies and maternity insurance puts high costs on employers and restricts women’s employability.”²⁰ Indeed, to incentivise workers and create jobs, one researcher recommended that the countries in the Arab region should give women “better options to combine work and family, for example through an improved system of maternity leave”.²¹ There is a need for incentives for women, as illustrated by a comparative analysis which revealed that Middle Eastern countries generally provide weak maternity protection measures.²²

Another important aspect of maternity protection policies is the source of funding. Table 13 shows that 11 ESCWA member countries do not pay for maternity leave, and it is the employer who is solely responsible. Given that firms are driven by making profits, employers are, therefore, discouraged from employing women as they do not want to incur extra costs. Only Egypt (liability shared equally between State and employer), Iraq, Morocco, and Tunisia have social security provisions for paid maternity leave.

The implications of a short maternity leave on the economic participation of women require greater attention. Surely surveys are the best tool to identify the impact of a short maternity leave on the decisions of women to remain at work after becoming mothers. However, it is reasonable to suppose that for a woman who is the breadwinner for her family, a short period of paid maternity leave would put pressure on her to take one of the following decisions:

1. Extend her leave at her own expense.
2. Find alternative care for her newborn when maternity leave expires and return to work.
3. Abandon work after childbearing and focus on her new demanding role.

A distinction must be made between first-time mothers who have no prior experience in child rearing and women who are already mothers. It is advisable to allocate more time and support to first-time mothers as they adjust to new and demanding family obligations. The policies of the Syrian Arab Republic include different maternity leave measures based on number of childbirths. With the majority of children in the region remaining without pre-schooling care and education, this enormous challenge and the burden borne by women rather than men must not be underestimated. Therefore, sound legislation for women’s employment is important and the lack of supporting legal measures can constrain the participation of women in the labour force.

Human resources policies and measures to promote and protect the needs and concerns of women at the enterprise level are equally important. Although there is no blueprint for an ideal human resources policy, there are some lessons to be learned from some leading organizations, such as the United Nations. The Human Resources Management Section (HRMS) of the United Nations has placed gender equality at the core of its policy and has dedicated adequate human and financial resources to implement its mandate (box 5).

Most enterprises in ESCWA member countries are small or medium-sized and may have low to moderate resources to implement advanced human resources systems. But whatever the size of the enterprise or firm, human resources policies should be based on gender equality, safeguard the rights of male and female workers and promote a culture of respect and accountability.

²⁰ ESCWA (2011c), p. 8.

²¹ Chaaban (2010), p. 36.

²² ILO (2010b), p. 27.

**Box 5. Good practice: towards achieving gender equality in employment opportunities
and in the United Nations workplace**

An illustrative example of how employment opportunities and the workplace environment can be structured to empower women and reflect the principle of gender equality can be found in HRMS. Over the years, HRMS has evolved and developed to become what it is today. It is a flexible system that has been modernized to ensure the welfare and meet the needs of employees in the twenty-first century.

Upon its inception in 1945, the United Nations enshrined the principle of equality between men and women in its Charter. Since then, HRMS policies reflected this value, as demonstrated by equal pay, equal retirement age (including early retirement) and equal entitlements and benefits. In addition, the organization has introduced a number of measures that directly support the wellbeing and interests of women in the workplace, as demonstrated by the following empowering entitlements and protections:

- Maternity leave of 4 months, exceeding ILO minimum standard of 14 weeks;
- Breastfeeding policy;
- Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation, abuse or harassment;
- Employment of spouses;
- Special leave without pay;
- Paternity leave;
- Flexible working arrangements to achieve work/life balance.

Furthermore, the United Nations has introduced measures designed to achieve gender parity within the organization. For some positions, particularly at the decision-making level, women are accorded priority in the selection and recruitment process. Vacancy announcements are written in gender neutral language and they clearly state if priority will be given to female candidates.

In parallel, HRMS is empowered by solid monitoring and implementing tools that ensure that progressive policy measures are correctly applied. The Human Resources Action Plan was formally introduced in 1999 to provide continuous support for the implementation of human resources policies that were mandated by the Secretary-General and the General Assembly.

Source: http://www.un.org/hr_handbook/English/.

IV. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A. CONCLUSION

The mere presence of women in the labour force, whether strong or weak, does not tell the whole story regarding women's economic status. Barriers to women's economic participation can be attributed to many interlinked factors. In principle, the main factor is the degree of empowerment women in the Arab region have achieved over time. The overall objective of empowerment is to bring qualitative change into women's lives and enhance their potential to enjoy a decent living.

Statistics indicate the activity of women in the sectors of the formal economy, but they miss an important segment of working women who do invisible or informal work every day. Thus, statistics alone do not offer a complete picture of the contribution of women to the world of work.

Another factor is that women are more attracted to employment in the public sector rather than the private sector, but with the rapid process of globalization, public job opportunities are expected to diminish. Women must prepare for that challenge and become equally active in the private sector.

In fact, there are overwhelming repercussions of an exploding youth population in the region. Women will have to compete very fiercely to secure a job in a society that still assumes that the role of men is to provide for the family. Today, women in all countries of the region have higher unemployment rates than men, and the situation is worse when it comes to youth unemployment rates.

Unrest and political instability in the region pose another important threat to both men and women. Governments may not see job creation or full employment as a priority and the problem is likely to worsen because the level of private and public investment is insufficient to generate work opportunities for the youth.

The concentration of women in care economies is another area of concern because it reinforces society's image of what women should or should not be doing and also reinforces women's image of themselves and what they are or are not capable of doing. Sound planning is needed to diversify women's employment across all sectors.

Taken together, it is clear that economic empowerment cannot be achieved in isolation from other pending issues that affect the overall empowerment of women. Women in the region still have much to do to become independent from various social controls, make their own decisions and take the lead in their lives.

The region has witnessed increasing living costs over the past few years, which has had a negative impact on the ability of low-middle income households to sustain themselves. This trend will lead to greater demand for financial resources, which will make women's employment even more relevant in the future.

Simply entering the labour force will not guarantee that women have full control over their income. To achieve economic empowerment, sound work policies to facilitate women's employment are not enough. Women also need to be able to take decisions as fully independent individuals. Economic violence, such as the husband confiscating the wife's salary, continues to deprive women of freedom and autonomy. Changes in both the private and public sphere are needed to overturn disempowering practices.

Today, women in the Arab region are more educated, skilled and informed than they were at any time in history. This dramatic change in women's lives implies that empowerment is taking place and eventually the education process itself will lead into building confidence among women.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Policy framework barriers*

Policy recommendations to overcome policy framework barriers include the following:

- Move beyond a restricted policy focus on economic participation by adopting the broader consideration of participation in productive activities including all forms of work, whether paid or unpaid, formal or informal;
- Support research on the gender dimension of macroeconomic policies including taxation, investment, finance and trade, to better understand the impacts of policies already in place and the potential effects of alternative policies;
- Adopt tools that enable gender-responsive policies, such as gender budgeting and participatory gender audits, and support them through the allocation of adequate material resources and the recognition of related efforts;
- Endorse a gender perspective in designing, implementing and monitoring coherent economic and employment policies and programmes to increase women's participation in the labour force;
- Integrate the objective of full employment and decent work into policy-coherent national development strategies, and ratify and implement related international labour standards, particularly the Employment Policy Convention, 1964 (No. 122);
- Strengthen statistical capabilities of Governments to ensure accurate, timely and regular collection of disaggregated data on wage employment, with special attention to collecting important data on wage gaps to aid policy formulation efforts;
- Promote synergy within and across related individual policies (social, educational and economic) with the overall objective of increasing the level of women's participation in the labour force;
- Increase women's representation in economic decision-making bodies and facilitate their access to unions and syndicates.

2. *Socialization barriers*

Policy recommendations to overcome socialization barriers in education include the following:

- Reform obsolete and archaic education systems and biased teaching methodologies to provide quality education based on gender equality that is in tune with the challenges of the twenty-first century;
- Invest in early years education with the aim of shaping positive and equally valued gender identity among boys and girls and increase the role of the State in providing public and affordable day care centres to facilitate support mechanisms for working mothers;
- Redouble efforts to remove gender biases from textbooks, curricula and programme offerings that are blatantly gender biased and penalize harassment and other forms of violence against girls and women in schools, TVET, universities and other learning environments;
- Institutionalize advisory programmes to facilitate young women's school-to-work transition at two levels: providing competent academic counselling at secondary level and facilitating career guidance and career fairs at tertiary level, including TVET;
- Promote partnerships with the private sector to provide mentorship and business incubators for recent female graduates;

- Mainstream gender equality in TVET and raise the awareness of young women and parents in a participatory manner about the value of TVET;
- Encourage women to diversify their fields of study, and encourage men to venture into new fields of learning, such as education, that are currently dominated by women;
- Address the academic interests and needs of women through providing relevant specialization with the aim of encouraging women to pursue career paths after completing their education;
- Encourage media to promote positive images of women's economic role in society.

3. *Regulatory and organizational barriers*

Policy recommendations to overcome regulatory and organizational barriers include the following:

- Review social security frameworks, particularly their underlying assumptions concerning the economic roles of women and men, and promote the extension of social security for all through such measures as national social protection floors;
- Ratify and implement core ILO Conventions on gender equality in the world of work: the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100); the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111); the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156) and the Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183);
- Increase the role of the State in financing paid maternity leave with the aim of presenting the private sector with incentives to support and facilitate women's employment;
- Endorse anti-discrimination legislation to hold employers in the private and public sector liable for any act of employment discrimination against women;
- Develop forums for the exchange of knowledge and experience on gender equality and the economy between Governments of the Arab region, with participation from women's national machineries, representatives of membership-based organizations such as trade unions, business associations, cooperative organizations and other non-governmental organizations;
- Support enterprises in developing gender-responsive workplaces and adopt all necessary organizational regulatory measures to enable women to achieve work-life balance;
- Encourage enterprises to provide on-the-job training for women with the aim of building their capacity.

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