

March 2012 – Number 60



MENA Knowledge and Learning

Quick Notes Series



OPENING DOORS: GENDER EQUALITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Tara Vishwanath¹

Introduction: Many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are undergoing a profound transformation. From Morocco to Yemen, popular movements have called for reforms to make government more inclusive and more accountable, extend social and economic freedoms, and boost employment opportunities. Young men and women have been at the forefront of these calls for change, reflecting their desire to participate actively in the political sphere. As new governments are being formed in Tunisia and Egypt, and elections are underway elsewhere in the region, people continue to demonstrate for meaningful change. It is now clear that the rapid transformation that seemed so close at the start of the Arab Spring is in fact likely to be a process of gradual change that will take months, if not years.

An Uncertain but Hopeful Future: How the region's societies will change in the wake of these revolutions of varying degrees remains an open question. Facing popular pressure to be more open and inclusive, transition governments in Tunisia and Egypt are considering electoral and constitutional reforms to deepen democracy. These reforms present an opportunity to enhance women's economic, social and political inclusion. However, the outlook remains uncertain. Tunisia mandated that an equal number of men and women run as candidates on the electoral list, and women have secured a quarter of the seats in the constituent assembly. In Egypt,

millions of women turned out to vote in the recent parliamentary elections but eventually made up

Box 1 – The Younger generation is full of Aspirations

Rahma* comes from a region of Yemen where it is often said that "to educate a woman is wrong because she has no place but her husband's house." But over the objections of her neighbors and community leaders, Rahma became the first female in her town to complete high school. She was also the first to take a job at a private medical clinic, and the first to participate in a one-year healthcare training program in Sana'a. Rahma has since returned to her town, married, and now delivers babies from a special room added to her house. The community has grown to admire and respect her, and other girls are following in her footsteps. Rahma's younger sister is now attending the Health Institute in nearby Ibb City.

Very few women currently work for pay in Rahma's mountainside town. Yet, when asked in a focus group what they hoped to be doing when they were 25 years old, adolescent girls declared: "A teacher. A lawyer. An engineer. A broadcaster." The girls also plan to marry and raise families, but many aspired to work in a professional setting where they can apply their "hard work, diligence, excellence [and] morals, with confidence and with education and responsibility." Similarly, in their focus group, the boys hoped to "get married, make my wife happy, and find a good job," and they also expected to have to "work hard and persevere" to realize their dreams.

In a neighborhood in Gaza, a 24 year-old who graduated from university says she wants to continue on for "a Master's degree and then open a private enterprise with my friend," while a young man from that community reports, "I want to be an architect."

¹ Tara Vishwanath is a Lead Economist in the MENA region's PREM unit and the TTL of this report. This Quick Note was cleared by Bernard Funck, Sector Manager, Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Department, Middle east and North Africa Region (MNSPR), The World Bank.

only two percent of the lower house of parliament. Throughout the region, there is a concern that efforts to advance women's rights may be halted, and even reversed, as new governments come to power. In this context, it will become increasingly important to safeguard the gains from past reforms, at the very least. At the same time, the world has acknowledged the power of Arab women as catalysts of change, recognizing Tawakel Karman with the Nobel Peace prize. She is the first Yemeni, the first Arab woman, and the youngest recipient of this honor.

This Quick note is based on a report which complements the 2012 World Development Report (WDR) on Gender Equality and Development, focusing on challenges and reform priorities for gender equality in the MENA region. Following the approach of the WDR 2012, the report draws on economic analysis of quantitative data from countries in the region, qualitative research and other international evidence.

Across the region, young men and women are full of aspirations (Box I-1). Education is seen as a pathway to a meaningful career, through which young people can contribute to their communities and build an identity. Through work, young men and women alike aspire to achieve great things and in turn inspire their peers. But these stories also demonstrate that success in economic and political life does not need to come at the cost of family life and traditional values.

The Paradox of Gender Inequality in the MENA Region: This report will argue that there is a paradox in gender equality in the MENA region: while, for the most part, MENA countries have made admirable progress in closing gender gaps in education and health outcomes, these investments in human development have not yet translated into commensurately higher rates of female participation in economic and political life.

Women and Employment Issues: With higher levels of education and lower fertility rates, women in the region are increasingly looking for work. The public sector has long been the dominant source of employment, especially for women in the region, who typically earn significantly more than they would in the private sector. And women's fields of study are geared towards employment in the public sector. Not only has this dependence on the public

sector as a source of jobs resulted in higher levels of unemployment and lower productivity for the region, its further expansion is increasingly fiscally unsustainable, especially in the labor abundant, oil-poor countries.

Moreover, job creation in the private sector has so far been too limited on its own to absorb the large and growing number of young job-seekers. Even within that limited sphere, women are unable to compete on an equal footing due to several interrelated factors. Women in the region continue to face significant restrictions on mobility and agency; these are underpinned by the legal framework, social and cultural norms, and regulations that restrict work and political participation. There are persistent obstacles related to the quality of education and critical skill mismatches between what is studied in school and what the private sector demands. Finally, employers often perceive women as more costly and less productive, while women have concerns about reputation and safety in private sector jobs. This report places primacy on these incentives and constraints generated by the economic and institutional structures that prevail in the countries in the region.

The time for change is now. Given the growing labor, demographic and fiscal constraints, and the changing aspirations in the region, policy reforms are urgently needed to boost job creation for all. But this alone will not address the myriad constraints to women's participation in the workforce. Arguably, greater economic empowerment can stimulate a virtuous circle for broader empowerment. Therefore, targeted and coordinated efforts are needed on multiple fronts to increase women's participation in the public sphere, and these must be specific to country context. These include policies to secure women's equality under the law, address the remaining human development challenges, redress the skills mismatch, and promote women's civic and political participation. Mere changes in laws will do little if there is an insufficient number of jobs or if few women possess the requisite skills that jobs demand. Neither will a continuation of policies that increase subsidies, public sector pay and benefits or employment help. On the contrary, it will further distort the incentives for private sector job creation and for women to seek work outside the public sector. In consultations held across the region, women affirmed their desire to work and the lack of

job opportunities, reiterating the constraints posed by the legal and regulatory framework and conservative social norms. Grave concern about regression in the women's rights and in laws that govern women's ability to exercise choice, move freely, and exploit opportunity was a recurrent theme in these discussions. In the face of this popular sentiment, the countries of the MENA region can no longer be complacent. This opportunity to improve productivity and social cohesion by giving women the chance to participate fully in the public sphere cannot be missed.

Contact MNA K&L:

Laura Tuck, Director, Strategy and Operations.
MENA Region, The World Bank

Regional Quick Notes Team:

Omer Karasapan, and Roby Fields
Tel #: (202) 473 8177

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