

Snapshot

- > **The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has the largest gender disparity in the world**, across many indices, including political empowerment, economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival.
- > Regional progress for women and girls has been slow and uneven. On the current trajectory, **it will take over 140 years for MENA countries to reach equality between men and women** (a couple of decades longer than South Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa).
- > **Women are under-represented in formal politics in MENA.** Only 18.3% of parliamentary seats in MENA¹ are occupied by women, compared to a global average of 26%. Women's voices have been prominent in the available civic space, but often facing a backlash of online and physical harassment.
- > **For legal discrimination against women, the MENA region is the worst-performing globally.** Pervading socio-cultural gendered norms continue to be reflected in both structural discriminatory laws and patriarchal practices around gender-based violence, marriage, divorce, inheritance, custody and ability to pass nationality to children.
- > **The MENA region remains the region globally (with South Asia) where women are the most disadvantaged in the workforce.** Around two in five young women in MENA are unemployed.
- > **Women in the MENA region are subjected to high levels of violence and harassment.** According to UN Women, 37% of Arab women have experienced some form of gender-based violence in their lifetime; this figure is likely higher due to under-reporting and indirect impacts of COVID-19.
- > **Conflict, instability and insecurity leave women specifically vulnerable** to economic marginalisation and increased sexual and other forms of gender-based violence. The plethora of armed groups perpetuates harmful, and militarised, masculinities in the region. **Six of the 19 MENA countries were classified as fragile and conflict-affected states in 2020.** MENA hosts the largest refugee population in the world (particularly in Lebanon and Jordan).
- > **The MENA region is not on track to achieving UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality.** There are a few countries that are progressing ahead in the pace and type of change (e.g. UAE, Tunisia and Morocco), but there will need to be a seismic shift in approach to meet SDG targets on gender equality and health and wellbeing by the 2030 deadline.
- > Across all countries, **the intersecting issues** of poverty, ethnicity, sexuality, democratic deficit, age, and disability make certain marginalised groups, and especially women and girls, even more vulnerable to discrimination, exclusion, and abuse.

¹ Please note IPU data accessed September 2022 does not include Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs) as parliament was dissolved in 2018, and it does include Mauritania in addition to the 19 MENAD countries. It measures proportion of female parliamentary seats in lower chambers or single houses of parliament.

- > Cross-cutting issues including **conflict and climate change put many women and vulnerable populations in MENA at further risk**. COVID-19 has caused a 'shadow' pandemic of gender-based violence and accelerated the roll-back on civic space and women's rights movements.

Introduction

This report provides an evidence-based overview of gender equality and inclusion issues across the MENA region. It draws from extant analyses and statistics, rather than primary research (and was not designed to be an in-depth gender equality and social inclusion analysis). It was motivated by the authors working on gender issues in the MENA region together and wanting to summarise data and trends in one resource. We hope the regional overview can be used to inform gender equality and inclusion analyses, programming and policies in MENA.

This overview acknowledges the heterogeneity of the MENA region – and the maps and tables in the Annex illustrate the wide variety between the 19 countries. We have included all countries that geographically fall within the MENA region, cognisant that even those with relatively high GDP have issues of gender and inclusion that need specific consideration, and that in-country variances also warrant attention.

The overview covers issues related to gender equality within political and economic domains, education, gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health and rights. It also looks at domestic legislation, policies and frameworks, and provides cross-cutting perspectives on disability, LGBT+ equality, conflict and climate.

Political participation

While there has been some slow progress in women's political participation across the MENA region, women still face significant structural and social barriers, and are therefore consistently under-represented in formal political structures. On average, women make up 18.2% of representatives in lower chamber and single houses of parliament; while [this has increased from 3.3% in 1997](#), it is the lowest regional average, and significantly lower than the [global average of 26%](#).

In-country analyses reveal a patchy picture. Hard-won gains are fragile and subject to resistance (including both online and physical harassment). There are some examples of quotas opening up formal political representation (e.g. in Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, UAE and Egypt), although there are acknowledged challenges with gender quotas particularly around meaningful participation and intersections of class and ethnicity of elected women. In conflict-affected Yemen, the recently appointed government (December 2020) did not have a single woman represented; and neither Saudi Arabia nor Kuwait currently have female Ministers. In Iran, [only 5.6%](#) of parliamentary seats are held by women, 12% lower than the regional average. More encouraging examples of formal political representation include: Tunisia appointing the first female prime minister in MENA (2021); Libya currently has its first female foreign minister; and the quota in UAE more than doubled female representation in the Federal National Council (its consultative council equivalent to the parliamentary body now has 50% female representatives). Most MENA governments don't have public representation of many young women or women living with disabilities.

Women's influential leadership and participation is needed across both formal and informal spheres. All countries within MENA are classified by the [Civicus Monitor](#) as being 'closed, repressed, or obstructed' reflecting challenges to civic freedoms. Within this restrained context, there has been progress over time with women's voices increasingly being heard in public spaces. Women were active and visible in the 2011 Arab uprisings,

although this was followed by violence and harassment for many activists. [Women's movements were also active](#) more recently in uprisings in Algeria and Lebanon. In [Syria](#) and [Yemen](#), women have played a key role in brokering peace at the community level. There is also increased female public activism in MENA around gender-based violence (GBV). Recent feminist-led campaigns advocating for change publicly include cases from Egypt regarding the mass sexual assault of female protestors since 2011, and other Egyptian cases under the hashtag #endthesilence. In Kuwait, [an online campaign](#) (*Lan Asket* – “I will not be silent”), started in February 2021. Of note, the latter includes reference to the harassment of migrant non-nationals as well as Kuwaiti women. There is an active women's rights movement in Iran, campaigns such as [My Stealthy Freedom](#), for example, challenge the compulsory hijab laws, and have led to several other women's rights initiatives.

In Iran, women and activists in general for female rights (and broader human rights) are facing harassment by state actors and law enforcement, as the September 2022 tragic case of the death of Mahsa Amini has illustrated. **There has been specific state targeting of female activists (online and in person) reported in several MENA countries**, including high-profile cases in Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates over the last year. **MENA has also been the location for various radical groups with anti-women's empowerment stances** (e.g. Da'esh). The widespread distribution of weapons in many countries within the region intensifies militarised masculinities that are harmful to men and boys and [hinder women's mobility, voice and agency](#) (with a few exceptions in Israel and in the north of Iraq where women participate within the military).



Photo: [Protests in Bahrain](#). Sarah Hassan via [Al Jazeera English](#). [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic](#) license

Economic participation

The MENA region remains the region globally (with South Asia) where [women are the most disadvantaged in the workforce](#). The region's average labour force participation is [19.8%](#); 7 of the 19 countries in MENA (Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Syria, Iran, Iraq and Yemen) have less than 20% of women participating in the labour market, the lowest rates in the world. When labour force participation is restricted, equal outcomes on leadership/managerial positions, and wages, are even more elusive. MENA continues to suffer from discriminatory norms, with the [highest rates regionally](#) of the share of men who believe it is unacceptable for women to have a paid job outside of the home if they want one.

The MENA region is the worst performing region for [female economic participation and opportunity](#). Although some countries in the MENA region have [undergone economic growth](#) since the 1970s due to oil and natural gas production (Algeria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE), the growth is not uniform nor shared equally by women and men within the population. There are signs of the dependence of oil shifting to diversify economies, bringing with it some parallel modernisation of society. [Qatar has the highest GDP per capita](#) in the region. Regional, select economic growth has translated into wider economic and labour participation opportunities; however, it is not equal for women and men.

Even in countries with relatively high female workforce participation, the gender gap is pronounced and regionally it is the [highest in the world](#). The [percentage of women employed in the formal sector](#) is 50% in UAE and in Qatar is 58%, regional highs but still with stark gender gaps; the comparable figures for men are 92% and 96% of men respectively. In Jordan, [15.6% of women are in the labour force](#), a 77% gap. In conflict-affected Yemen, the gender gap is 91% with only 6.3% of women in the workforce.

Many women across MENA are highly educated, but these [qualifications are not being translated into paid employment and career progression through the corporate ranks](#). Roughly [four out of five women](#)² remain outside the paid labour force. Reasons for women not entering the workforce are multi-fold and often interrelated: discrimination; harassment on transport to work as well as in the work-place; and lack of flexibility and laws supporting women in their multiple roles in the home as well as the workforce, in the context of the underlying dire economic situation in many MENA countries. A recent ECSWA (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia) policy brief cites that MENA has [the highest rates of unpaid care in the world](#), with women spending 4.7 times more time on unpaid work than men. Even before the pandemic, it was estimated that 42% of working-age women were outside the paid labour force because of unpaid care responsibilities (compared to only 6% for men, as cited by the ILO in the Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/22). [Challenges](#) include access to childcare, and gender norms where the bulk of household activities are assigned to women. There are however a few positive trends to commend, including recent progress and regionally strong female formal employment in Bahrain, Israel, Qatar and UAE.

Women's ability to access equal opportunities in the workforce is further compounded by the stark overall inequities in MENA. According to the available data, the [Middle East is the most unequal region in the world](#). Resources are not evenly distributed across the region, and within countries. The top 10% of income-earners in the Middle East had income levels broadly comparable to their counterparts in high-income countries, but the 50% poorest individuals are left with much less income than their counterparts in other comparable countries. Countries in the Gulf depend on migrant workers, and societies are often stratified with disparities between local indigenous and migrant populations. Currently there are almost equal numbers of men (24.5%) and women (24.9%) in [vulnerable employment](#) across MENA.

Surveys conducted across four MENA countries (Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Palestine) show that the majority of [men believe it is their role to monitor and control the movements of women and girls in their households](#). Women are still defined as wives and mothers first, rather than by workplace or professional achievements. Decision-making both within the household and outside are predominantly made by men – men expect to control their wives' personal freedoms (including clothing and bodily autonomy around sexual relations).

2 Please note that regional figures from the World Bank sources on labour force participation are based on primary data from the region that includes Djibouti and Malta

Declining living conditions in addition to social tensions have recurrently [sparked and contributed to protests in the region](#) (Egypt September 2019, Lebanon October 2019, Iraq October 2019, and Tunisia July 2021). Neighbouring Sudan and Iran (ongoing in autumn 2022) are also affected. **COVID-19 has worsened the economic outlook for all MENA countries, and heightened existing inequalities including on gender.** The pandemic has rolled back economic opportunities previously open to women due to increased pressure on employment, whilst lockdowns have seen an increase in domestic roles women have had to take and a rise in unpaid care work.



Photo: [Woman at work in a call centre in Tunisia \(2017\)](#). By Chifa79. [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International](#) license.

Education

The MENA region has made notable progress in closing the educational gender gaps over the last two decades at both primary and secondary level. [World Bank data](#) from 1970s to 2019 (pre-pandemic) illustrate this attainment, although rates of primary and secondary school enrolment, especially for girls, is assumed to have decreased due to COVID-19 and known to have suffered in conflict-affected states. Women's rates in tertiary education are increasing and, in 13 of the 19 countries female enrolment at tertiary level exceeds male enrolment (further detailed in Annex). The main challenge in MENA is that relatively high levels of education do not translate into employment and career advancement, as already highlighted in the economic participation section.

Although women and girls in the MENA region are generally well educated, [out-of-school rates for girls \(18%\) are higher than that for boys \(12%\)](#). This is particularly exacerbated in conflict states. [Armed conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen directly affect a girl and boy's ability to attend primary school and secondary school](#). Rates of drop-out are higher for secondary education than for primary school education. Access to tertiary education is significantly more restricted for refugee youth (both female and male) in MENA often due to lack of legal status. Girls in conflict-affected states are more likely to be married young as a 'protection' and/or risk mitigation mechanism by their family to insecurity and poor economic contexts; and the earlier a girl is married the more likely she is to be taken out of school. For example, in Yemen over 65% of girls are now married under the age of 18 as compared to 50% before the conflict started, as cited in [UNFPA's State of](#)

[the World' Population Report 2021](#). There are currently [2 million girls and boys out of school in Yemen](#), more than double the amount in 2015 when there were 890,000 school-age children not in the classroom.

Even in countries with relatively high levels of girls' education, gender disparities intersect with poverty and the rural/urban divide to impede access; COVID-19 rollback has also threatened many gains. For example, in [Tunisia](#), girls are 30% more likely than boys to be out of school between the ages of 6 and 11, and 71% more likely than boys to have received no education at all. COVID-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities in education. In Iraq, only half (51.2%) of the female population [has access to internet](#) as compared to almost all men (98.3%). This [digital divide](#) left girls across the region behind throughout school closures and distance learning during the pandemic. This will hinder a generation of girls' achievement and opportunity moving forward.

Many young people in MENA are active advocates and agents of change. The ongoing (autumn 2022) uprisings in Iran clearly demonstrate this. For the demographic dividend to be realised however, [more inclusive policies are required](#). MENA's youth population (under 24 years old) account for [200 million](#), nearly half of MENA's population. Because of poor quality education and poor-performing economies, many youth surveyed by the 13th annual ASDA' A BCW Arab Youth Survey spoke about entrepreneurship as offering future potential.

Gender-based violence (GBV)

[More than a third of women and girls \(37%\) in MENA are estimated to have experienced gender-based violence over their lifetime.](#) True figures are most probably higher given high levels of stigma and suspected under reporting of violence, which masks the true size and scale. The COVID-19 pandemic also led to the emergence of what the UN Secretary General referred to as a '[shadow pandemic' of intimate partner violence](#). Restrictions have simultaneously [impeded girls' and women's access to GBV services](#) (such as safe spaces, shelters or medical services). When women had access to the internet during COVID-19, the spaces were generally not safe; the [prevalence of online violence against women](#) was alarming across the globe.

A recent WHO analysis illustrates that MENA is [one of the worst regions globally on measuring rates of, and supporting survivors of, intimate partner violence](#) (South East Asia fares marginally worse). Only 10% of WHO-classified Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMRO³) countries had a national health policy that addressed violence against women. EMRO was also the lowest performing region globally, with only 43% of countries having conducted at least one survey between 2000-2008 with data on prevalence of intimate partner violence (occurring in the past 12 months). A smaller study of intimate partner violence in 2021 (n=490) across 14 MENA countries found that [49% of women had been ever-exposed to intimate partner violence](#).

Women and girls living with disabilities are disproportionately affected. The latest UNFPA State of the World's Population (2021) cites that [girls and boys living with disabilities are three times as likely to be subjected to sexual violence](#), with girls at greatest risk. A UN report on [OPTs](#) found that disability is a principal cause of marginalisation resulting in GBV; and GBV survivors with disabilities in OPTs are the group most vulnerable to further abuse.

In many countries, harmful gendered social norms are used to 'justify' GBV, especially intimate partner violence. This compounds under-reporting. Traditional

3 WHO-classified EMRO countries are Afghanistan, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, UAE and Yemen.

patriarchal social norms can cast blame on women for leaving the home, and shame them when they are abused. There is heightened sensitivity on discussing domestic abuse, maintaining the attitude that it is 'a family matter'. For example, in [Algeria](#), nearly 60% of women believed that a husband had 'the right to beat his wife' (2013). The 1969 Penal Code in [Iraq](#) punishes assault but considers 'the punishment of a wife by her husband' to be a legal right, and there is no law against domestic violence. In a 2018 survey in [Kuwait](#), more than 80% of men and 20% of women believed that a woman should tolerate violence for the sake of the family and the marriage. In [OPTs](#), more than half (50%) of Palestinian women and 63% of Palestinian men agreed that a woman should tolerate violence to keep the family together (2018). So-called 'honour' killings remain a concern in MENA, with [over 5000 women being killed every year in MENA and South Asia by their family](#) based on judgement of their conduct (cited in UNFPA's State of the World's Population Report 2021, and assumed to be an under-estimate due to the challenges in reporting and investigating such crimes).

In 8 out of the 19 MENA countries, [there are no legal provisions against domestic violence](#). There are some notable examples in MENA where domestic violence is criminalised. This includes a 2017 landmark law in Tunisia which broadened the definition of violence; a 2018 law in Morocco that criminalised domestic violence and forced marriage; and a 2020 UAE domestic violence law that introduced restraining orders against abusers as well as shelters for victims of domestic violence. Kuwait passed its first law against domestic violence in 2020. However, there is progress to be made on all of these laws to protect victims fully.

A related issue is the 'marry your rapist' laws in MENA. In Tunisia, a 2017 landmark law abolished Article 227(a) of the Tunisian criminal code that allowed rapists to escape punishment if they married their victims. Similar articles within the penal codes of Lebanon, OPTs (West Bank only, not Gaza) and Jordan [were repealed in 2017](#). These positive steps were largely spearheaded by national women's rights movements.

The high rates of GBV in MENA include child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). These assaults pose an ongoing challenge to women and girls' safety, health, freedom of movement, and ability to exercise their rights in all spheres. A staggering [14% of women aged 20-24](#) living in MENA were married by age 18. This figure tends to increase during cycles of instability and conflict. [Increases in child marriage specifically due to conflict](#) has been reported in Yemen, among Syrian refugees in Lebanon and also those living in Jordanian refugee camps. When accounting for regional population, the Arab States is the region with the highest prevalence of [forced marriage](#) at 4.8 per thousand people. The MENA region includes [Egypt](#) with an exceptionally high rate of female genital mutilation/cutting FGM/C (estimated at 87%), despite recent progress. In addition to pervasive social and cultural norms on gender and sexuality, [FGM/C is linked to socio-economic status](#), with stronger prevalence amongst poorer households. There are also other specific sub-national reports of FGM/C in Yemen, Northern Iraq (7.4%), and Oman.

Female migrant workers are especially vulnerable to GBV. These women are migrant workers mostly in private homes or in other loosely or non-regulated environments making them particularly vulnerable to abuse. The 'kafala' system of sponsoring migrant workers, most commonly associated with the Gulf states, is interpreted and implemented in varying ways by different countries and is often criticised for its restrictive measures. Migrant workers are also excluded from the democratic process as they are not represented politically. Reports (e.g. from [Bahrain](#) and [Oman](#)) show how non-national women face significant risk to sexual violence and abuse.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

Many MENA countries have well developed health systems, **setting a good foundation for achieving more responsive and inclusive women’s sexual and reproductive health** outcomes concurrent with ambitions in SDG5 (Gender Equality) and SDG3 (Good Health and Wellbeing). **However, many taboos and socio-cultural barriers to SRHR persist.** Many women are actively denied bodily autonomy, with restricted or no ability to make decisions over their own bodies. There is limited available data on a woman’s ability to make autonomous decisions when it comes to sex with partners or husbands, contraception, or seeking healthcare; the 2021 UNFPA State of the World’s Population report suggests that about [half of women globally are denied bodily autonomy](#). Lack of agency and bodily autonomy can contribute to worst-off sexual and reproductive health indicators, as well as higher rates of mental health challenges including [depression](#).

Modern family planning methods seem [relatively well-available in MENA](#), although barriers to access remain including social conservatism, especially for girls between 15-19. This means [that average Arab fertility rates are higher than the global average](#) of 2.5. Western Asia⁴ averages at 55.8% of women having family planning needs satisfied by modern methods. The average for North Africa was higher at 71.3%. COVID-19 has led to a shortage of contraceptive supplies in some countries (e.g. Iraq), and movement restrictions and fear of contracting the virus in health facilities also posed barriers for women’s access to SRH. Iran had an established Family and Population Planning Programme which provided SRH services and information, but its funding ceased in 2012. The more recent crackdown on women’s right has particularly impacted SRHR; in 2021 Iran banned sterilisation and restricted women’s access to reproductive health services and free contraceptives. In only one MENA country (Tunisia) is abortion legally available on request. There are partial (six) or total (11) prohibitions in other countries (see Annex 2 for further details).

Access to services is dependent on many factors as well as availability, including a woman’s income, location (rural/urban), marital status and ethnicity. For example, a recent Human Rights Watch study showed that women in [Qatar](#) needed proof of marriage to access some sexual and reproductive health care. Although adolescent birth rate [has declined overall in the MENA region](#), mirroring global success (2015-2022), it varies at sub-national level within MENA countries. Women living in rural areas (for example, in [Egypt](#)) have a much higher adolescent fertility rate and subsequent natal complications. In [Lebanon](#), although menstrual products are tax exempt, 76% of women and girls struggle to afford menstrual products amidst the country’s current prolonged economic crisis.

Conflict has also eroded women’s basic rights to sexual and reproductive health. One clear indicator of this is [maternal mortality ratio](#) (MMR modelled estimate per 100,000 live births). Previously well-functioning health systems in Iraq and Libya have suffered from cycles of violence leading to increases in MMR (see Annex 2 for further details). In addition, conflict-affected areas are notorious for significant health data gaps, as is the case in OPTs, which [are not included in WHO’s World Health Statistics 2022](#).

The HIV/AIDS situation in MENA also warrants highlighting (reliable data on sexually transmitted diseases is harder to find than HIV/AIDS data). **Although the MENA region has overall low prevalence of HIV/AIDS, it has one of the fastest-growing rates of new infection** (7% rise in new infections over the past decade, as compared to a decline in Sub-Saharan Africa), as referenced by the UNAIDS MENA regional overview 2022⁵. The most vulnerable key populations (people who inject drugs, gay men and others who have sex with men, sex workers) and their sexual partners see the highest distribution of new infections. Current political will on HIV/AIDS appears low. The region’s response is

4 Including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey plus the MENA countries. Please note that Iran is included under the WHO South Asia region, and was 75.1%.

5 UNAIDS MENA Regional Overview, February 2022. This document was prepared by UNAIDS and circulated to select stakeholders

under-financed, reaching less than 5% of the 2020 funding target. Stigma and shame around the disease continues, and 40% of people living with HIV/AIDS in MENA are unaware of their status, and less than half (43%) on treatment. These statistics are even more stark for pregnant women and their children. Scale up of equitable access to prevention, diagnosis and treatment is much needed.



Photo: [Protest for Palestine Tunis Kassba 2021](#). Brahim Guedich. [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International](#) license

Disability

Persons with disabilities across the region face disadvantage and discrimination, although progress has been made particularly with regards to legislation. All countries apart from Lebanon have ratified the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and many have included articles on disability in their constitutions. As an example, many have legal provisions related to employment, such as quotas. In [Jordan](#), discrimination based on disability in the workplace is prohibited. [Morocco](#) has a 7% quota for people with disabilities in the public service, but it is not being met: the country reported that [87% of people with disabilities](#) are economically inactive.

Almost without exception, [girls and women with disabilities in rural areas](#) have the lowest rates of literacy, educational attainment and school attendance. [For example in Saudi Arabia](#), 58% of women with disabilities are illiterate compared to 11% of women without disabilities; the rates for men are 29% who live with disabilities and 3% for those without. Accurate gender-disaggregated data on persons with disabilities across the region is not often available. [Reported disability prevalence rates range from 0.2% in Qatar to 15% in Yemen \(WHO notes that about 15% of the general population globally currently experience disability\)](#). In some countries, such as the UAE and Qatar, low prevalence rates can be attributed to large populations of migrant workers (who are unlikely to report disability). The rate of literacy is considerably lower for persons with disabilities; they also have lower rates of educational attainment.

Being female and having a disability is a double disadvantage in the workplace; women overall are less likely than men to be in formal employment across the region, and women and girls living with disabilities are more likely to be subjected to gender-based violence, ability to access workplaces, and stigma and discrimination. In [Morocco](#), for instance, the employment rates for women with and without disabilities are 6.7% and 15.9% respectively. In conflict, women and girls with disabilities are at greater risk of experiencing violence and poverty. A UN report in [OPTs](#), for example, found that disability is a principal cause of marginalisation resulting in GBV; GBV survivors with disabilities are also the group most vulnerable to further violence and abuse, and less likely to access survivor services. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the measures put in place to contain it, [exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in OPTs](#), disproportionately affecting women and girls with disabilities.

LGBT+ Equality

LGBT+ communities suffer stigma across MENA from both their families and wider society. Many are subjected to [state-sponsored homophobia and societal harassment and discrimination](#). Members of the LGBT+ community are accused, often by both their families and by the state, of going against 'morality' or being 'too Western'. Members of the LGBT+ community are subjected to [digital targeting](#) by state-sponsored authorities to track, arrest and prosecute them. Apart from Israel, [same-sex sexual acts or gendered expression is classified](#) as illegal, or is de-facto criminalised (e.g. Egypt and Iraq). Iran, Saudi Arabia and Yemen are three out of six countries in the world where death penalty is the legally prescribed punishment for consensual same-sex acts. Oman is one of the two remaining countries in the world (Malaysia being the second) directly [criminalising non-normative gender expression](#); in early 2022 Kuwait [overturned the law that criminalised non-normative gender expression](#). There are also laws within various MENA countries including Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE to [deport HIV positive individuals](#) (foreign nationals), compounding the issue of access to HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment measures particularly for gay men.

MENA countries periodically witness increased state repression of LGBT+ communities, and there is virtually no forward movement on equality before the law. Lebanon – relatively one of the more tolerant societies in MENA – cancelled the opening event for the 2019 Beirut Pride due to pressure from religious institutions and threats of violence. Human rights groups in Iraq have documented increased number of cases of sexual and physical violence against gay men perpetrated by security forces, as well as so-called 'honour' killings by relatives. [Violent extremist groups also target the LGBT+ community](#), particularly gay men and transgender women, in Iraq – as reported by a UK House of Commons Library 2022 report. Qatar considered banning LGBT+ migrants from working in the region (a proposal first initiated by Kuwait). However, this policy did not get implemented, possibly due to international scrutiny and a potential boycott of the 2022 World Cup. Interviews with members of the LGBT+ communities in [Egypt demonstrated how all had suffered from blackmail](#), social disclosure, humiliation, and physical assault. Many had also faced targeted violence.

Domestic Gender Frameworks and Machinery

The MENA region is the [worst-performing globally](#) for legal discrimination against women. Gender inequality in MENA encompasses structural as well as interpersonal

dimensions where male privilege is maintained across informal (family, household, religious, community) and formal institutions, including within formal government structures and legislation (gender machinery). Within the region, OPTs is assessed the worst, with the UAE scoring highest (still, with progress needed particularly on women's access to assets, inheritance and custody, and with the implementation of the guardianship system).

Legal structures are harder to shift, but socio-cultural gendered norms can, and have, changed over time – albeit in a limited and non-linear fashion (see sections on political and economic participation). Despite progress, MENA countries have the [highest percentage of biased men](#) toward gender equality and women's empowerment in the world. These norms in MENA were also emphasised during COVID-19 where significantly more women than men perceived childcare and housework to [have increased](#) in their communities.

Although constitutions of select MENA countries speak about equality between men and women, in practice, rules governing matters of family law – particularly those covering marriage, divorce, inheritance and custody of children – are based on religious jurisprudence. [Islamic law \(the most prominent one used\) is not gender-neutral](#).

In almost half of MENA countries (Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, OPTs, and Syria), a woman cannot pass on her nationality to her children. More details are included in Annex 2. This can leave many children potentially stateless and/or disenfranchised, unable to access basic services. There is an online movement led by civil society in [Bahrain](#) to change this, due to come to parliament imminently (2022). In [Iran](#), a 2019 reform allowed women to pass their nationality to their children through an application process. Similarly, in the [UAE](#), Emirati women married to foreigners can only pass nationality to their children on a case by case basis, and only through a complicated timely process when the child turns 18 and applies themselves or after Emirati residency for six years. Regionally, [a declaration by the Tunisian presidency of the Arab League](#) urged all Member States to achieve equal nationality rights for women and men in 2018. However, progress has been slow.

Although there is progress on women's legal status, it is often limited and poorly implemented. For example, women's rights in Saudi Arabia have improved in the last five years particularly relating to legal changes around guardianship laws and public movement, but freedom of expression and civil society space have simultaneously deteriorated since 2018. In Egypt, a draft personal status law proposed to the parliament received sharp criticism from women's organisations, as it contained gender-repressive changes to marriage, divorce and children guardianship. Any further debates have been postponed due to public pressure.

A positive highlight in MENA is Tunisia, which has been at the forefront of promoting women's rights in the region. It is particularly known for its progressive 1959 Code of Personal Status, which banned polygamy, raised the marriage age and enshrined divorce rights. Equal voting rights and the right to stand for election were granted in the same year. **Morocco also stands out for having one of the most liberal and gender-progressive frameworks in the region.** In 2004, the government introduced a new family code (the *Moudawana*), that expanded women's rights in areas of marriage, divorce and child custody. Stronger implementation is needed – for example under tribal law (a third of the country's land is collectively owned by tribes), women don't have the rights to occupy and use those lands.

Many MENA countries are becoming more involved in international dialogue, presenting both opportunities and challenges for achieving gender equity. Annex 3 contains an overview of the main international human rights treaties and when they were ratified by each MENA country. Several studies indicate that there has been a [backlash against women's rights in international fora](#), particularly in UN spaces, such as the Commission on the Status of Women and the Human Rights Council. This has included

'watering down' of existing language; and conservatism in negotiations and success in pushing through regressive language. Key controversial issues are around sexual and reproductive health and rights, various forms of GBV and sexual identity and orientation. For example, in March 2020, during its third UN Universal Periodic Review, Egypt rejected recommendations to end arrests and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Pressure typically comes from alliances of states from different regions; Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iraq for example have often allied with similarly conservative countries. For example, in October 2020, Egypt backed a US-launched [anti-abortion joint statement](#) at the World Health Assembly. Conversely, we have seen examples of countries being constructive partners; for example, the UK and UAE worked together to achieve [a landmark resolution](#) at the UN Human Rights Council in July 2021, committing countries to ensure 12 years of quality education for all girls for the first time in a UN document.



Photo: 8th edition of the Women's Film Week (8-12 March 2020) in commemoration of International Women's Day in Jordan. UN Women. [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic](#).

Conflict

Gender equality correlates strongly with peace and stability; societies that are more equal experience less inter- and intra-state conflict, and less intense conflict when it does occur. **Women and girls are disproportionately affected by conflict and crisis.** It increases their likelihood of experiencing sexual and gender-based violence, widens the gap in education, impedes access to sexual and reproductive health services, and hinders women's political and economic participation. These issues are overlapping, for example, there is a documented systematic correlation between the rise in [conflict and sexual violence](#), [intimate partner violence](#), and women's reduced participation in politics. There is specific documentation of this in [various FCAS MENA Countries, including in Iraq and Syria](#).

Six of the 18 MENA countries were classified as fragile and conflict-affected states in 2020. Lebanon is now classified as [ranking as one of the top three](#) economic and financial crises since the nineteenth century. [MENA hosts 15.8 million 'people of concern'](#),

as cited by UNHCR 2020, including refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced populations, returnees, and stateless persons. This makes up 17% of the world's total.

Women and girls form the vast majority of households in humanitarian crises, and conflict also results in large amounts of widows and women-headed households. **MENA hosts the largest refugee population in the world**. Refugees and internally-displaced people (IDPs) – particularly women and girls - are at increased risk of all forms of violence, trafficking and modern slavery. Specifically, Lebanon has the highest per capita proportion of refugees in the world, and hosts 1 in 8 of the world's refugees (including more than 1.5 million Syrians). Jordan is another MENA country that has historically hosted large numbers of refugees (primarily from Palestine, Iraq and Syria). Living in a conflict zone are exposed to higher levels of traumatic experiences, with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression the most common mental disorders in the aftermath of war for both adults and children. For example, Palestinians are at particularly high risk given the protracted and prolonged exposure to violence and displacement. Although data is patchy, research suggests that women suffer a higher mental health burden across the region.

Women remain under-represented in formal conflict resolution and peace negotiations, despite international efforts to encourage more active participation. There is evidence that mediation efforts, conflict prevention and negotiations are broadly more successful when they are inclusive – when women meaningfully participate in peace processes, the resulting agreement is 64% less likely to fail, and 35% more likely to last for at least 15 years. In Yemen, despite an inclusion quota in all governmental positions of 30%, women are still struggling to get their voices heard at the negotiating table. There are examples of positive informal participation at community in conflict resolutions from OPTs, Libya, Syria and Yemen. A number of countries do have Women, Peace and Security (WPS) national action plans – Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia and UAE – and Egypt will publish their WPS national action plans in 2021.

Climate

The most marginalised are disproportionately exposed and sensitive to climate change impacts, including women and girls, refugee populations, and people living with disabilities. Notably, women and children account for most (75%) of refugees and displaced populations. In addition, women often constitute the poorest and least politically enfranchised. In the MENA region, those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change are the elderly and children (especially women and girls respectively). Conversely, inclusion of these marginalised populations open opportunities for more sustainable and wide-reaching climate mitigation and resilience strategies.

The MENA region is highly exposed and vulnerable to climate change; it hosts many low-lying coastal cities and has mostly arid climates with high temperatures, which are now 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. In the MENA region, climate change interacts with other environmental issues caused by urbanisation, land use change, overfishing, pollution, biodiversity loss and degradation of land and marine ecosystems.

The increased scarcity of natural resources will intensify competition over unequally distributed resources, which might lead to conflict. Water scarcity is one driver of the region's reliance on food imports, and it poses a significant challenge: 41 million people have no access to basic drinking water services in the region, and nine out of ten girls and boys live in areas of high or extremely high water stress. Access to water exacerbates already existing gender inequalities.

Higher temperatures as a result of climate change processes may reduce economic activity linked to agriculture in MENA, potentially impacting women's income and food security. In Jordan and Egypt, water supply is extremely unstable, and

women play a substantial role in the rural economy, particularly agriculture ([in MENA, 27% of women involved in economic activity work in the agricultural sector](#)). Jordanian women are legally allowed to own land, but norms favour male inheritance; in [Egypt](#), half of the agricultural labour force are women, although most female farmers do not own land.

While women bear the brunt of climate change, the gendered aspects of climate change processes do not only concern women. **Declines in food security and livelihoods could increase stress and cause mental health issues for men and boys**, as they have been traditionally the economic providers in the household. In addition, men and boys are less likely to seek support for mental health issues, which is relevant in the context of post-traumatic stress disorder and trauma deriving from experiences of disasters and conflict. Moreover, men and boys must be meaningfully involved to prevent domestic violence and abuse, which are expected to increase as an indirect consequence of climate change.

There are also gendered vulnerabilities in [disasters and post-disasters scenarios](#), which will intensify and become more frequent as a result of climate change in MENA. **Women and children are particularly vulnerable to disasters: they are 14 times more likely to die during a disaster than men**. In addition, data suggests that women and girls are more likely to suffer domestic and sexual violence after a climate change-related disaster.

Despite women and girls being extremely exposed to climate change impacts, they are more likely to be absent from decision-making processes at the household, community, national and international levels. As a result, policies still show significant gaps in gender-responsive approaches to climate change adaptation and mitigation. In MENA, [Morocco has led the path regionally on climate policy](#), and yet its national climate plans only briefly touch upon the gendered aspects of climate change.



Photo: [Iraqi women shuck corn for bread in the village of Al Kahn in Kirkuk, Iraq](#). James (Jim) Gordon. [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic](#) license.

Looking ahead

On the current trajectory, the data demonstrate that MENA is not on the path to achieve gender equality. Even those countries where progress is being made on Sustainable Development Goal 5 are having to grapple between tradition and modernity. If SDG 5 on gender equality is not reached, the country is unlikely to achieve other goals of sustainable development.

The main challenge is the entrenched patriarchal social norms that persist, affecting in particular women's legal rights and economic participation opportunities. The continued conflict and fragility of the region also disproportionately affect women and the most marginalised; understanding and addressing the gendered drivers as well as impacts of conflict, and working alongside women peacebuilders is needed. Other challenges including needing to consider and mitigate the gendered aspects of climate change; and the COVID-19 rollback especially in education and gender-based violence.

Recommendations are beyond the remit of this regional overview which was motivated to be a compilation of data and trends. The evidence highlights opportunities for change that governments, civil society and the private sector could utilise. Opportunities include building on strong achievements in women's education in MENA; harnessing the informal participation of women activists and youth advocating for modernity and change; and the attempts to diversify economies that often come in parallel to socio-cultural reforms. There is also positive evidence of women-led activism against GBV and for wider and progressive social change, spearheaded by women's rights organisations and networks.



Photos: Photo ID: [1536781367](#), Nabatieh, South Government / Lebanon - 10 20 2019: Lebanese young protester in Lebanon revolution protests against the government (left, above); and Photo ID [1412810165](#), Doha, Qatar - 11 April 2019: A Qatari woman in a long black dress called abayha walks around The National Museum of Qatar (right, below).

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For any questions or comments about this gender and inclusion overview, please contact Rolla Khadduri at rolla.khadduri@mansiondaniels.com. Rolla is the Head of Gender and Social Development at MannionDaniels. Nicole Haegeman, Adela Briansó and Alana Tomlin are independent gender consultants. We would like to thank all others who commented and inputted into this work.

Annex: Key general and gender indicators, MENA

1. Background

Below are two maps illustrating the diversity of the MENA region. The maps include data on [Gross Domestic Product](#) (GDP) per capita of each of the 18 countries in US dollars, approximate population size for comparison. The maps also illustrate individual country ranking on the [UN Gender Inequality Index](#) globally, and the percentage of female representation in parliament.

Figure 1: Middle East map with general comparison of GDP, population and indices

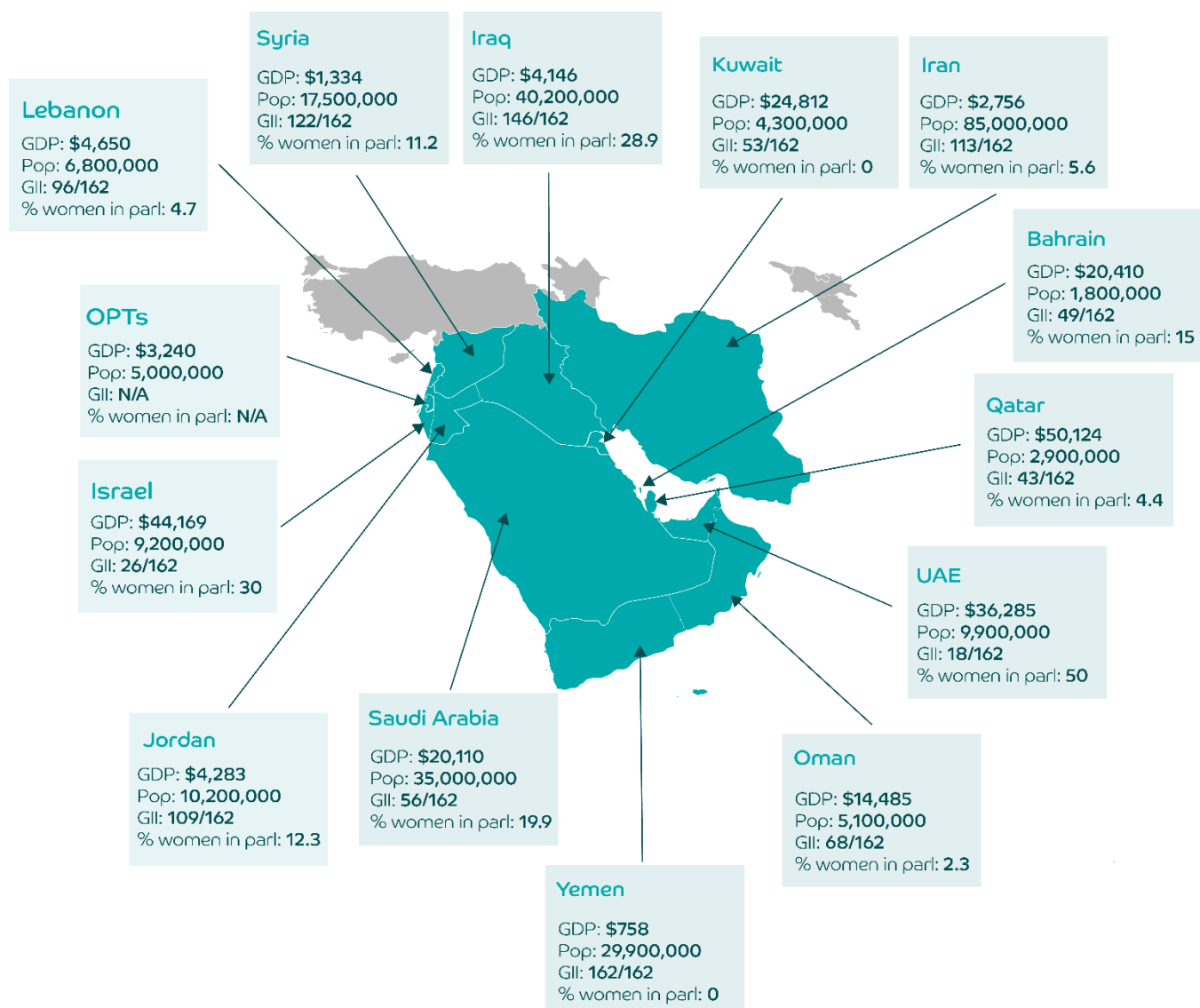
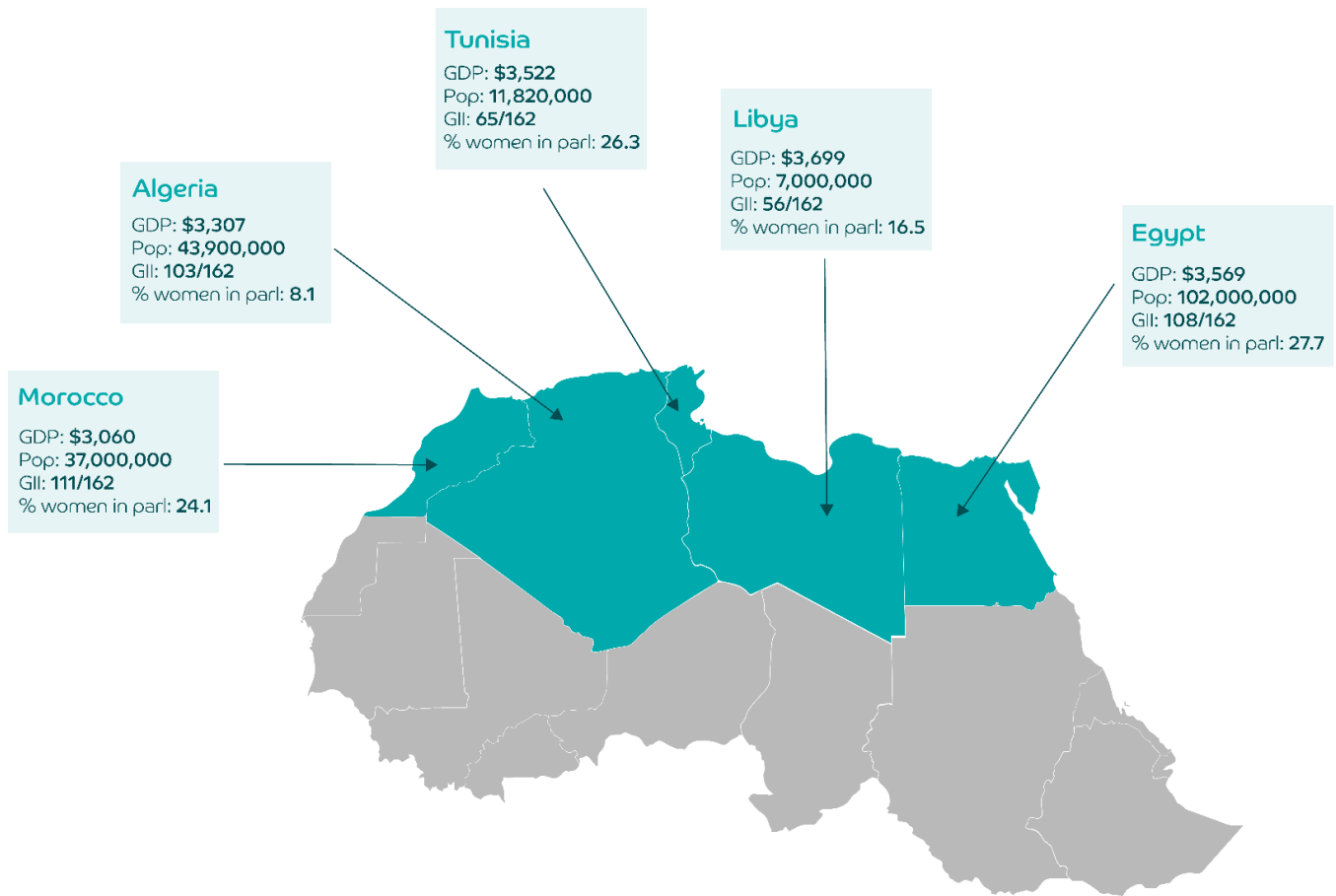


Figure 2: North Africa map with general comparison of GDP, population and indices



Key

GDP: Gross Domestic Product per capita US dollar

Source: [World Bank \(2020\)](#)

Pop: Approximate population size

Source: [World Bank \(2020\)](#)

GII: UN Gender Inequality Index Ranking

Source: [UNDP GII](#)

% women in parl: Parliamentary representation (Percentage of women in the lower or single house in national parliaments)

Source: [IPU \(January 2022\)](#)

OPTs: Occupied Palestinian Territories

UAE: United Arab Emirates

Figure 3: Proportion of female population as percentage of total

The table below illustrates the proportion of population who are female in MENA countries. This is normally about 50%, although there are exceptions in MENA. A female share of the population below 49% (shaded) is mostly due to a high proportion of male migrants in those countries. All data from [World Bank](#), except for OPTs ([Our World in Data](#)).

Country	Population, female (% of total population)
Algeria	49.5%
Bahrain	35.3%
Egypt	49.5%
Iran	49.5%
Iraq	49.4%
Israel	50.2%
Jordan	49.4%
Kuwait	38.8%
Lebanon	49.7%
Libya	49.5%
Morocco	50.4%
Oman	34%
OPTs	49.3%
Qatar	24.8%
Saudi Arabia	42.2%
Syria	49.9%
Tunisia	50.4%
UAE	30.9%
Yemen	49.6%

Figure 4: MENA ranking for Women, Peace and Security

Source: [Women, Peace and Security Index 2021](#)

Regional Ranking (1-17)	Country	General ranking
1	UAE	24/170
2	Israel	27/170
3	Bahrain	97/170
3	Qatar	97/170
4	Saudi Arabia	102/170
5	Oman	110/170
6	Tunisia	117/170
7	Kuwait	123/170
8	Iran	125/170
9	Jordan	127/170
10	Lebanon	132/170
11	Egypt	136/170
12	Morocco	138/170
13	Algeria	141/170
14	Libya	150/170
15	OPTs	160/170
16	Iraq	166/170
17	Yemen	168/170
18	Syria	169/170

Figure 5: Definition of indices (UN Gender Inequality Index, Women Peace and Security Index (GIWPS), and Global Gender Gap Index from WEF)

Please note the different indices are composed of different indicators.

<p>UN 2019 Gender Inequality Index</p>	<p>The GII measures gender inequalities in three aspects of human development: reproductive health (measured by maternal mortality ratio and adolescent birth rates); empowerment (measured by proportion of parliamentary seats occupied by females and proportion of adult females and males aged 25 years and older with at least some secondary education) and economic status (measured by labour market participation and measured by labour force participation rate of female and male populations aged 15 years and older).</p>
<p>GIWPS 2021 Women, Peace and Security Index</p>	<p>The index captures and quantifies three dimensions: women’s inclusion (education, financial inclusion, employment, cell-phone use, parliamentary representation), justice (absence of legal discrimination, son bias, discriminatory norms), and security (Intimate Partner Violence, community safety, organized violence). You can read more about each of the indicators in the latest WPS 2021 report.</p>
<p>World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index 2021 (not included in the country profiles but added here in case useful)</p>	<p>The Global Gender Gap Index benchmarks the evolution of gender-based gaps among four key dimensions: economic participation and opportunity (labour force participation rate; wage equality for similar work; earned income; legislators; senior officials; and managers); educational attainment (literacy rate, females to males ratio; enrolment in primary education; enrolment in secondary education; enrolment in tertiary education); health and survival (sex ratio at birth; healthy life expectancy in years); and political empowerment (women’s parliamentary representation; women in ministerial positions; years with female head of states). The index also tracks progress towards closing these gaps over time.</p>

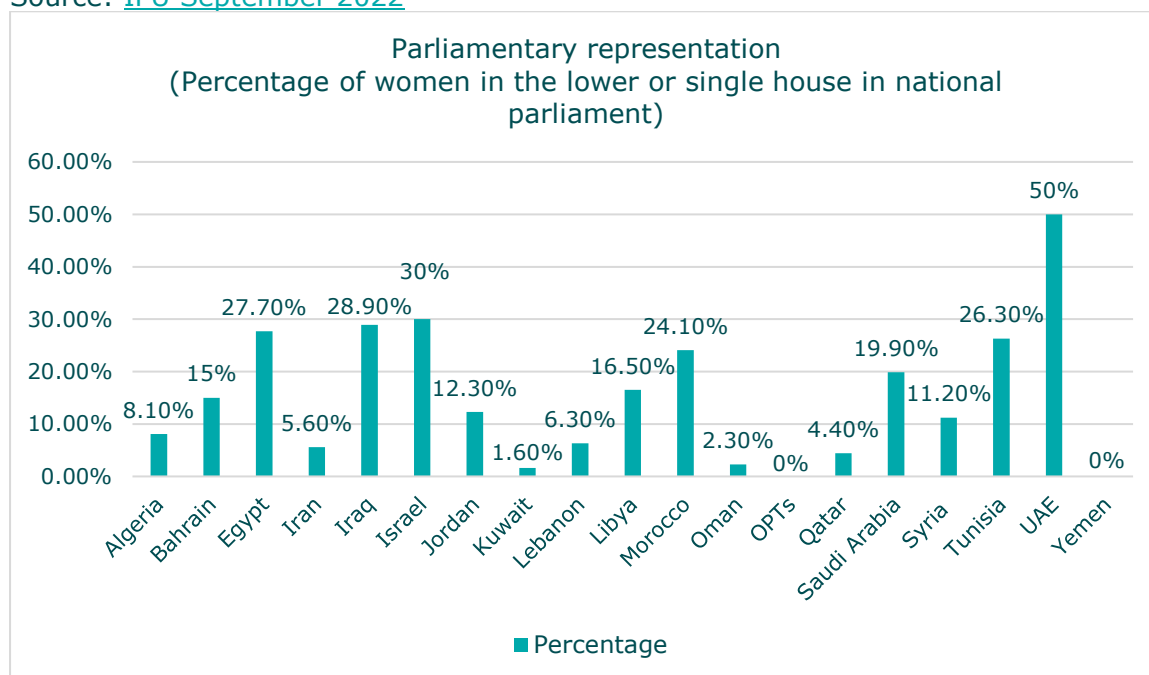
Figure 6: MENA performance against Sustainable Development Goal 5

Source: [SDG Index, Ranking](#)

Country	SDG5 Performance
Algeria	Medium, no progress
Bahrain	Bad, no progress
Egypt	Bad, no progress
Iran	Bad, no progress
Iraq	Bad, no progress
Israel	Medium, no progress
Jordan	Bad, no progress
Kuwait	Medium, no progress
Lebanon	Bad, no progress
Libya	Bad, no progress
Morocco	Bad, no progress
Oman	Bad, some progress
OPTs	No information
Qatar	Medium, no progress
Saudi Arabia	Bad, no progress
Syria	Bad, no progress
Tunisia	Medium, deterioration
UAE	Medium, some progress
Yemen	Bad, no progress

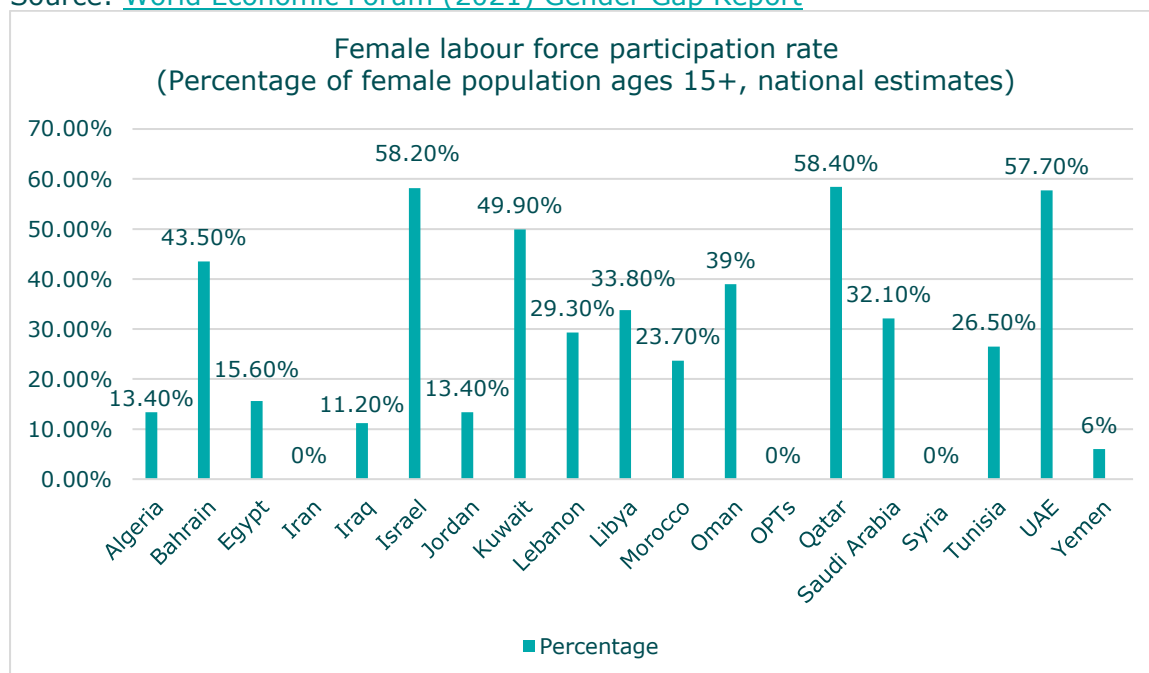
2. Political participation

Figure 7: Percentage of women in the lower or single houses in national parliaments
Source: [IPU September 2022](#)



3. Economic participation

Figure 8: MENA comparison of female labour force participation
Source: [World Economic Forum \(2021\) Gender Gap Report](#)



4. Education

Figure 9: MENA comparison of countries where female enrolment exceeds male, tertiary education

Only countries where female enrolment exceeds male enrolment included below. All data from [WEF Global Gender Gap Report 2021](#), except for Libya and UAE ([World Bank Data](#)) and OPTs (CEMOFPSC).

Country	Enrolment in tertiary education	
	Female	Male
Algeria	64.4%	38.8%
Bahrain	67.8%	37%
Egypt	35.8%	34.6%
Iran	62.9%	73.3%
Israel	72.7%	52.8%
Jordan	37.4%	31.5%
Kuwait	76.1%	35.8%
Lebanon	No data (latest from 1985)	
Libya	No recent data (World Bank 2003 data: 63.3% female; 57% male)	
Oman	55.6%	26.4%
OPTs	50.9% (2007)	41.6% (2007)*
Qatar	54.9%	7%**
Saudi Arabia	69.9%	66.3%
Syria	42.8%	37.5%
Tunisia	41.2%	22.8%
UAE	66.3%	46.3%

*There is [UNESCO data](#) showing 41.3% enrolment in tertiary education for OPTs in 2020, but it is not gender disaggregated.

**Presumed low because large proportion of Qatari males prefer to work or go abroad for tertiary education.

5. Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Figure 10: Comparison of Maternal Mortality Ratio over time to illustrate the effect of conflict and instability Source: [modelled estimate per 100,000 live births, World Bank statistics](#)

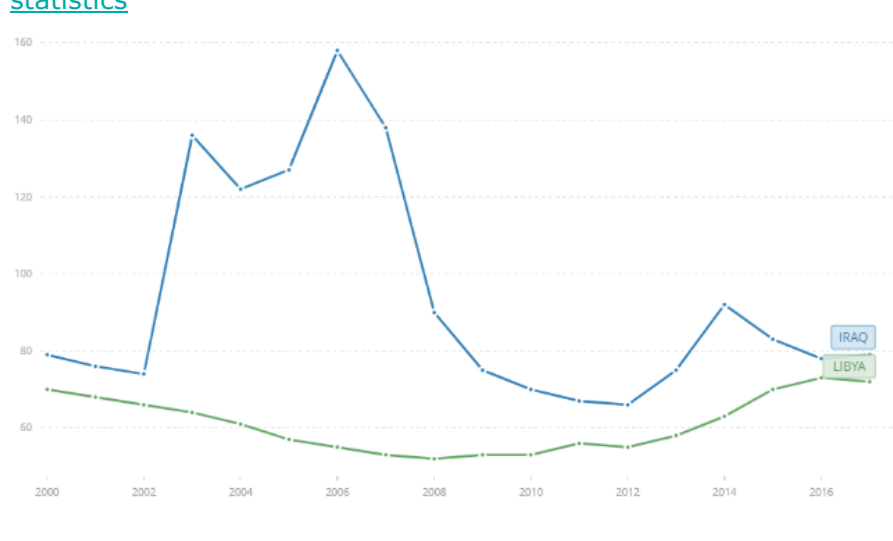


Figure 11: Legal status of abortion in MENA regions Source: [Center for Reproductive Rights](#)

Country	Legal status of abortion
Algeria	Partially prohibited - allowed to preserve health
Bahrain	Partially prohibited - allowed to save the woman's life
Egypt	Prohibited altogether
Iran	Partially prohibited - allowed to save the woman's life. Also permitted in cases of foetal impairment.
Iraq	Prohibited altogether
Israel	Partially prohibited - allowed to preserve the woman's health
Jordan	Partially prohibited - allowed to preserve health
Kuwait	Partially prohibited - allowed to preserve the woman's health
Lebanon	partially prohibited - allowed to save the woman's life
Libya	Partially prohibited - allowed to save the woman's life
Morocco	Partially prohibited - allowed to save the woman's life (spousal authorisation required)
Oman	Partially prohibited - allowed to save the woman's life
OPTs	Partially prohibited - allowed to save the woman's life
Qatar	Partially prohibited - allowed to preserve the woman's health
Saudi Arabia	Partially prohibited - allowed to preserve the woman's health. Spousal/parental authorisation required
Syria	Partially prohibited - allowed to save the woman's life (spousal/parental authorisation required)
Tunisia	On Request (gestational limit of 90 days)
UAE	Partially prohibited - allowed to save the woman's life and in cases of foetal impairment. Spousal/parental authorisation required
Yemen	Partially prohibited - allowed to save the woman's life (spousal authorisation required)

6. Gender machinery

Figure 12: MENA comparison for [criminalisation of marital rape](#)

Source: [UNDP](#), except for [Iran](#), [Israel](#), [Kuwait](#) and [UAE](#)

Country	Marital rape criminalised
Algeria	No
Bahrain	No
Egypt	No
Iran	No
Iraq	No
Israel	Yes
Jordan	No
Kuwait	No
Lebanon	No
Libya	No
Morocco	No
Oman	No
OPTs	No

Qatar	No
Saudi Arabia	No
Syria	No
Tunisia	Not explicitly, but 2017 law on domestic violence
UAE	No
Yemen	No

Figure 13: MENA comparison of whether women can pass nationality to their children
Source: [UNDP](#), except for [Iran](#), [Israel](#), [Kuwait](#), [OPTs](#), and [UAE](#)

Country	Women can pass nationality to their children
Algeria	Yes
Bahrain	No
Egypt	Yes
Iran	Yes*
Iraq	Yes
Israel	Yes
Jordan	No
Kuwait	No
Lebanon	No
Libya	No
Morocco	Yes
Oman	No
OPTs	No
Qatar	No
Saudi Arabia	No
Syria	No
Tunisia	Yes
UAE	No**
Yemen	Yes

*A 2019 reform allowed women to pass their nationality to their children, but mother or adult child must apply for it, and a security check is required ([Human Rights Watch 2019](#)).

**In the UAE, Emirati women married to foreigners can pass nationality to their children on a case-by-case basis only, and it reportedly involves a long and protracted process ([Human Rights Watch 2021](#)).