

## Policy brief series

The contribution of development indices in closing the gender gap and advancing social and economic development



Shared Prosperity Dignified Life



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### Brief No.1

## Women's economic participation in the Arab region: recent accomplishments and remaining barriers



## Introduction

Patriarchy, which has existed in society for thousands of years, is a system of relationships, beliefs and values. It assigns people concrete roles, values and attributes based on their sex. Under patriarchy, women are designated to manage the “private” sphere, encompassing the home and family, while men assume control over the “public” domain, including working outside the home, earning money, and amassing political and economic power. By making generalizations and locking people into concrete social roles, this entrenched division not only severely narrows the range of choices people can make in life, but also often places women at a subordinate position to men, limiting their agency and freedom. Additionally, it is harmful to society, as

it prevents individuals from reaching their full potential and contributing to their communities.

The systemic manifestation of patriarchy is evident in the unequal representation of women within the public sphere, particularly in the workforce. According to estimates by the International Labor Organization (ILO), in 2022, 73 per cent of men against only 48 per cent of women globally were engaged in the labour market. Historically, the average of the Arab region has been even lower; according to ILO's estimates, only 20 per cent of women in the region participated in the labour market in 2022, versus 70 per cent of men. However, change can be seen

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in some countries of the region where over 40 per cent of women (both migrants and nationals) are now estimated to be working, including in Qatar (64 per cent), the United Arab Emirates (54 per cent) and Kuwait (47 per cent). In others, the rate has remained significantly lower, including in Egypt (16 per cent), Jordan (14 per cent) and Morocco (20 per cent).<sup>1</sup>

Creating an enabling environment for women's economic participation means removing many of the barriers that hold them back from joining the workforce. It is not only a matter of social justice, but an investment in a country's economic development and prosperity. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), "empirical evidence shows that women's economic empowerment and the closing of gender gaps in key

areas [are] associated with [...] higher economic growth, lower inequality, increased productivity, better financial sector outcomes and greater financial stability".<sup>2</sup> In addition, when women gain economic power, it not only increases their own well-being, but the well-being of their families and communities as well, as they often prioritize spending their income on education, health and related social services.<sup>3</sup>

These positive ripple effects mean that improving women's economic participation helps countries achieve many of their sustainable development goals (SDGs) – including, but not limited to, SDG5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) and SDG8 (Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all).

Around the world, women face various active legal, structural and cultural barriers when trying to join the workforce. The following section looks into these barriers, explores how their presence and intensity are reflected in the ranking and score of member States on various international development indices<sup>4</sup>, and how certain countries in the region have removed these barriers and created an environment that enables women to join the labour market, rather than discourages them from doing so.

Examples from the region of countries that made such changes - and subsequently improved their scores and rankings on the indices - will also be demonstrated, as well as a simulation (using ESCWA's index simulator for policymakers (ISPAR) tool) of how other countries can achieve similar results by making similar reforms.

## 1. Legal Barriers – pay, mobility and workplace

Globally, over 2.7 billion women encounter legal barriers or are outright excluded from pursuing some careers that are available to men.<sup>5</sup> In some countries, women are not allowed by law to work outside the home without the permission of male guardians or relatives, and in others they are rarely employed in certain sectors (such as energy, construction or security). In other countries, there are no legal provisions that prohibit employers from discriminating based on sex or gender.

The World Bank's women, business and the law (WBL) index focuses on these legal barriers and other provisions that hinder women's ability to join the workforce or start their own business. According to the 2023 report, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan,

Kuwait, the State of Palestine, Qatar, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen still have various legal restrictions on a woman's legal capacity to get a job or pursue a trade or profession.

The United Arab Emirates, for example, has reformed many of its discriminatory laws. Its superior position on the WBL index is visualized in the graph above. It is the only country that ranks higher than the WBL's worldwide median average, with a 2023 score of 82.5 and rank of 79<sup>th</sup> in the world.

The higher position of the United Arab Emirates on the WBL index is due to the fact that women have full legal equality with men to choose where they can live, work

and travel outside the home. United Arab Emirates law prohibits discrimination in employment based on gender, and legislation addresses domestic violence and sexual harassment in employment. The law mandates equal remuneration and, like men, women can work in both

industrial jobs and in jobs that are deemed as “hazardous” by relevant authorities. These reforms helped increase the score of the United Arab Emirates on the WBL index from 29.38 in 2019 (ranked 186<sup>th</sup> out of 187 economies) to a score of 82.5 in 2023 (ranked 79<sup>th</sup> out of 185 economies).



Country	Current rank	Current status	Proposed reform	New proposed rank if reform measures applied (simulated)
Qatar	<p><b>Women, business and the law index</b></p> <p>Main index - 187<sup>th</sup>, Score 29.38</p> <p>Workplace sub-index - 188<sup>th</sup>, Score 0</p> <p>Pay sub-index - 120<sup>th</sup>, Score 50</p>	<p><b>Mobility:</b></p> <p>Can a woman travel outside her home in the same way as a man? <b>No</b></p> <p><b>Workplace:</b></p> <p>Can a woman get a job in the same way as a man? <b>No</b></p> <p>Does the law prohibit discrimination based on gender? <b>No</b></p> <p>Is there legislation on sexual harassment in employment? <b>No</b></p> <p>-----</p> <p><b>Pay:</b></p> <p>Does the law mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value? <b>No</b></p> <p>Can a woman work in a job deemed dangerous in the same way as a man? <b>No</b></p>	<p><b>Mobility:</b></p> <p>Can a woman travel outside her home in the same way as a man? <b>Yes</b></p> <p><b>Workplace:</b></p> <p>Can a woman get a job in the same way as a man? <b>Yes</b></p> <p>Does the law prohibit discrimination based on gender? <b>Yes</b></p> <p>Is there legislation on sexual harassment in employment? <b>Yes</b></p> <p>-----</p> <p><b>Pay:</b></p> <p>Does the law mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value? <b>Yes</b></p> <p>Can a woman work in a job deemed dangerous in the same way as a man? <b>Yes</b></p>	<p><b>Women, business and the law index</b></p> <p>Overall: <b>172nd</b>, Score 53.75</p> <p>Workplace sub-index- <b>1st</b>, Score 100</p> <p>Pay sub-index - <b>74th</b>, Score 75</p>

<sup>a</sup> Equal to other countries scoring 100 on this sub-index.

The “index simulator for policymakers in the Arab region” (ISPAR) data analysis tool, developed by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA), shows users how member States can improve their rank and score on various development indices if they make specific legal

reforms and reach indicator benchmarks. For example, if Qatar enact the legal reforms listed below, its WBL index score would increase from 35.62 to 54.38 (with a rank increase from 185<sup>th</sup> to 172<sup>nd</sup>).

## 2. Structural Barriers - safety and infrastructure

The perception of safety can be a significant barrier for women seeking to join the workforce. In areas where women are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence, harassment or discrimination, many may feel unsafe in public spaces or while commuting to work. This fear can prevent women from seeking employment and can be especially discouraging to women from lower-income backgrounds and among those who rely on public transport.<sup>6</sup> The hindering effects of sexual harassment in the workplace on women’s employment has been noted by both independent academic scholars and the World Bank.<sup>7</sup>

Member States can pass strict laws against gender-based violence and sexual harassment, ensure their implementation, train law enforcement and prosecutors on the relevant laws and on gender issues and raise awareness by collaborating with civil society organizations (including women’s groups and neighbourhood associations). They can also improve street lighting, expand the coverage of safe public transportation options, hire more female police officers and expand police coverage, which may help enhance women’s perception of safety in their neighbourhoods and during commutes.

The Women, peace and security (WPS) index, developed by Georgetown University, has several indicators related to women’s perception of safety and justice, including the percentage of females aged 15 years and older who responded that they felt safe walking alone at night in the area where they lived.

In the Arab region, the percentage of women reporting that they feel safe walking home at night is higher than

80 per cent in Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, and lower than 60 per cent in Yemen, Algeria, Djibouti, Morocco, Libya and the Syrian Arab Republic. Kuwait’s percentage of 96 per cent is one of the highest in the world.

Safety at the workplace is also an important factor that enables women to join the workforce. According to the WBL’s 2023 report, six (Jordan, Libya, Qatar, the Syrian Arab Republic, the State of Palestine and Yemen) out of 18 Arab countries still lack comprehensive legislation against sexual harassment at the workplace – which not only explicitly outlaws harassment but also establishes criminal sanctions against perpetrators and avenues for victims to seek redress and compensation in civil courts.

The presence of such legislation would create a safer and more supportive environment for women in the workforce, increasing their confidence and willingness to participate in employment. Examples of countries which recently passed such legislation in the region include Lebanon (Anti-Sexual Harassment Law No. 205, passed in 2020) and Saudi Arabia (Anti-Harassment Law, approved in 2018). These changes helped them raise their scores on the WBL’s “Workplace” sub-index from 50 and 25 in 2018 to 100 in 2024.

Taking Mauritania as an example, if the Government is to enact similar legislation, and if the percentage of surveyed women who reported that they felt safe walking alone at night rose from 49 per cent to 75 per cent, its rank on the WBL index would increase from 178 to 172, with a score increase from 48 to 54. Its rank on the WPS security sub-index would also rise from 151 to 147.



Country	Current rank	Current status	Proposed reform	New proposed rank if reform measures were applied (simulated)
Mauritania	<p><b>Women, business and the law index</b> – 178<sup>th</sup>, 48.12</p> <p><b>Women Peace and Security</b> – 151<sup>st</sup>, 0.51</p>	<p>Is there legislation on sexual harassment in employment? <b>No</b></p> <p>Are there criminal penalties or civil remedies for sexual harassment in employment? <b>No</b></p> <p>---</p> <p>WPS community safety indicator – 49 per cent</p>	<p>Is there legislation on sexual harassment in employment? <b>Yes</b></p> <p>Are there criminal penalties or civil remedies for sexual harassment in employment? <b>Yes</b></p> <p>---</p> <p>WPS community safety indicator – 75 per cent</p>	<p><b>Women, business and the law index</b> – 172<sup>nd</sup>, 54.38</p> <p><b>Women peace and security index</b> – 147<sup>th</sup>, 0.52</p>

### 3. Cultural barriers - care expectations and discriminatory norms

Many women face both explicit and implicit pressure to abstain from working outside the home. This could reflect a cultural expectation that they should be the primary (or sole) caregivers of children and other family members, which according to the World Bank often results in them “staying at home, working part-time or temporarily pausing their careers to fulfill these caregiving duties, in contrast to men”.<sup>8</sup>

Changing people’s beliefs on this matter could take a long time and concentrated efforts from multiple stakeholders. But there are policies that member States can enact to help lessen the impact of these discriminatory norms. For example, policies that can help redistribute the burden of unpaid care provided by women, and therefore make it easier for them to join the labour market, include establishing subsidized child and elderly care centres, implementing paid parental leave policies and promoting flexible working arrangements.

The WBL index measures the presence of laws that can help redistribute the care burden under its parenthood sub-index. These include granting (at least) 14 weeks of paid leave to mothers, providing paid parental leave to both mothers and fathers, and fully paying for or administering maternity leave benefits (as opposed to the cost being partially or wholly borne by the employer, which may act as a disincentive to hiring women).

A good example of a country that enacted such legal reforms in recent years is Oman, where the Government introduced in 2023 a seven-day paternity leave and a one-year unpaid childcare leave for female employees, and increased the duration of existing maternity, sick and bereavement

leaves.<sup>9</sup> These reforms saw it increase its score on the WBL parenthood sub-index from 0 in 2022 to 60 in 2024.

Opposition to women working outside the home can sometimes be explicit. A 2021 ESCWA study on the cost of domestic violence in the State of Palestine found that 22,193 women in the country were prevented from working or forced to quit work by their husbands, and that wage employment would have increased by 50 per cent if these women had joined or stayed in the workforce.

Policies aimed at eliminating or reducing the incidence of domestic violence – passing strict laws against domestic violence, ensuring that perpetrators are prosecuted, and strengthening coordination between law enforcement, social services, healthcare providers and community organizations to offer holistic support to victims – may therefore have an additional benefit of enabling more women to join the labour market.

The WBL’s “marriage” sub-index includes indicators on whether legislation specifically addresses domestic violence. As of 2024, according to the WBL, Iraq, Libya, Mauritania, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen have no legislation specifically addressing domestic violence. Egypt (Ministerial Decree No. 827/2021) and Kuwait (Law on Protection from Domestic Violence) have introduced legislation addressing domestic violence in the last five years, increasing their score on the WBL marriage sub-index in the process.

Another legal issue the WBL measures is the presence of legal provisions stating that a woman may be at risk of losing of her right to receive financial support [often termed as “maintenance”] from her husband if she does not seek his permission for certain actions, such as working or travelling outside the home. As of 2024, 12 countries of the region still have such policies in their legal codes.<sup>10</sup>

For example, articles 91 – 95 of Sudan’s Personal Status Law (1991) states as follows:

“A wife shall obey her husband...where the wife refrains

from obeying her husband, her right to maintenance shall lapse during the period of refraining”.<sup>11</sup>

Currently, Sudan does not grant parental leave, grants less than 14 weeks of paid leave to mothers, and imposes the aforementioned provisions on obedience in marriage. By enacting reforms in these three legal areas, it would increase its rank on the WBL arethood sub-index from 149<sup>th</sup> to 77<sup>th</sup>, on the marriage sub-index from 186<sup>th</sup> to 174<sup>th</sup>, its score on the mobility sub-index from 182<sup>nd</sup> to 136<sup>th</sup> and its score on the WBL main index from 186<sup>th</sup> to 174<sup>th</sup>.

Country	Current rank	Current status	Proposed reform	New proposed rank if reform measures were applied (simulated)
Sudan	<b>Women, business and the law</b> Main index – 186 <sup>th</sup> , Score 50.62 Parenthood sub-index – 149 <sup>th</sup> , Score 20	Can a woman choose where to live, travel outside her home, and get a job in the same way as a man? <b>No</b> Is there no legal provision that requires a married woman to obey her husband? <sup>a</sup> <b>No</b> Is there legislation specifically addressing domestic violence? <b>No</b> Is there paid parental leave AND at least 14 weeks of paid maternal leave? <b>No</b>	Can a woman choose where to live, travel outside her home, and get a job in the same way as a man? <b>Yes</b> Is there no legal provision that requires a married woman to obey her husband? <b>Yes</b> Is there legislation specifically addressing domestic violence? <b>Yes</b> Is there paid parental leave AND at least 14 weeks of paid maternal leave? <b>Yes</b>	<b>Women, business and the law</b> Main index – 174 <sup>th</sup> , Score 55.62 Parenthood sub-index – 77 <sup>th</sup> , Score 60

<sup>a</sup> Wording of this question/indicator is taken from the women, business and the law index, 2024.

## Conclusion

Despite the many challenges and barriers in place, there are positive examples of countries in the region that have implemented the needed reforms to create an enabling environment for women. In doing so, they have not only increased their rankings on the aforementioned development indices, but also saw an increase in female labour force participation and employment rates. From 2008 to 2023, the percentage of women over 25 who were either working or looking for work in Saudi Arabia increased from 23 per cent to 33 per cent, in the United Arab Emirates from 46 per cent to 60 per cent and in Lebanon from 22 per cent to 30 per cent.<sup>12</sup> [According to the Saudi Arabia Central Authority for Statistics, the 2023 labour force participation rate for female nationals only was similarly high, at 35.90 per cent].

the 2023 labour force participation rate for Saudi female nationals was high, at

**35.9%**

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates also increased their rankings on the WBL and WPS indices during this time – the WBL score of the United Arab Emirates increased from 26.9 in 2008 to 82.5 in 2024 (increasing its rank from 183<sup>rd</sup> out of 190 economies to 85<sup>th</sup>). Saudi Arabia’s 2008 WBL score was 26.3 (ranked 186<sup>th</sup> out of 190 economies) in 2008 but 71.3 (137<sup>th</sup>) in 2024. This implies a correlation between a rise in labour force participation rates and passing legal reforms that help to create a more enabling environment for women to join the labour market.

These two countries also increased their rankings and score on the UNDP’s global gender gap index (GGI).<sup>13</sup> In 2008, Saudi Arabia’s ranking was 128<sup>th</sup> out of the 130 countries measured, with a score of 0.55; the United Arab Emirates was 105<sup>th</sup> with a score of 0.62. In 2023, the score of the United Arab Emirates increased to 0.712, ranking it 71<sup>st</sup> out

of 146 countries, with an increase of 34 ranks over its old position. Saudi Arabia improved its score to 0.637, now ranking 131<sup>st</sup> out of 146 countries. The GGI is comprised of four main development factors, namely education, health and survival, political empowerment, as well as economic participation and opportunity. The index recognizes, through the weight given to the economic participation and opportunity sub-index, how the participation of women in the workforce is central to a country’s development at large.

While many Arab countries have made commendable gains in educating both male and female children and ensuring women’s health in recent years, they further propel their development trajectories by prioritizing initiatives aimed at increasing women’s participation in the labour force and fostering more inclusive economies that give all residents, male and female, an equal opportunity to participate in the economy.

Country	2008 Labour Force Participation Rate (F) <sup>a</sup>	2008 global gender gap ranking	2023 global gender gap ranking	2023 labor force participation rate (F)
<b>United Arab Emirates</b>	46 per cent	Main index – rank 105, score 0.62 Economic participation and opportunity sub-index – rank 121, score 0.42	Main index – rank <b>71</b> , score <b>0.71</b> Economic participation and opportunity sub-index – rank 128, <b>score 0.5</b>	<b>60 per cent</b>
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	23 per cent	Main index – rank 128, score 0.55 Economic participation and opportunity sub-index – rank 129, score 0.25	Main index – rank 131, score <b>0.63</b> Economic participation and opportunity sub-index – rank 130, score <b>0.521</b>	<b>33 per cent</b>

<sup>a</sup> World Bank (2023). Labour force participation rate, female percentage of female population aged 15+) (modeled ILO estimate). These estimates are for all women in a country (both national and migrant), working in both the private and public sectors. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FM.ZS?locations=1A>.

# Endnotes

- 1 World Bank (2023). Labour force participation rate, female (percentage of female population aged 15+) (modeled ILO estimates). These estimates are for all female inhabitants aged 15+ of a country (both national and migrant), working in both the private and public sectors. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FM.ZS?locations=1A>.
- 2 Christopherson, K., Yiadom, A., Johnson, J., Fernando, F., Yazid, H. andThiemann, C. (2022). Tackling legal impediments to women's economic empowerment. International Monetary Fund. Pg 3.
- 3 International Monetary Fund (2020). Women in the labor force: The role of fiscal policies. Strategy, Policy and Review Department.
- 4 International research and development organizations have developed indices that measure the progress countries make towards creating equitable and prosperous societies and sharing the benefits of sustainable growth amongst the entire population. These indices take data that is collected from countries on various aspects, such as employment, health, laws, quality of life and GDP per capita. They are intended to reflect a country's relative global performance, but also the quality of life, struggles and opportunities its citizens encounter on a day-to-day basis. Some of these indices specifically focus on gender inequality, including the gap in labour force participation between men and women (UNDP's global gender gap index), or include indicators reflecting the structural, cultural and legal barriers women face when attempting to join the workforce (the World Bank's women, business and the law index and Georgetown University's women, peace and security index).
- 5 UN Women (2024). "Facts and figures: economic empowerment". Accessed at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures>.
- 6 According to a World Bank report on Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon, "harassment in the workplace and on public transportation is common, preventing many women from accessing economic opportunities. Poorer women are often disproportionately affected because they are the most reliant on public transport. About 1 in 3 women in the three countries has ever been verbally harassed in public; 1 in 5 women in Iraq and Lebanon and 1 in 10 women in Jordan have been physically harassed. A recent survey in Jordan found that 81 per cent of women think economic participation would be improved through better and safer public transportation, and 47 per cent said they had refused to take a job because this was lacking". – Source: [World Bank, Women's economic participation in Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, 2020 \(pg.17\)](#).
- 7 Jody Heymann, Gonzalo Moreno, Amy Raub and Aleta Sprague (2023). Progress towards ending sexual harassment at work? A comparison of sexual harassment policy in 192 countries. Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice. Elefante, Marina et al. World Bank (2023). Accelerating gender equality through reforming legal frameworks.
- 8 World Bank Blogs, 2023. [Childcare regulation and women's participation in the labor force](#).
- 9 Lockton Global Compliance (2023). Oman expands parental leave entitlements and introduces an omanization requirement. Accessed at <https://globalnews.lockton.com/oman-expands-parental-leave-entitlements-and-introduces-an-omanization-requirement/>.
- 10 Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Mauritania, Qatar, the State of Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan and Yemen.
- 11 The conditions for which she must normally obey her husband are mentioned in article 75 of the Personal Status Law; these include "leaving the matrimonial home" or "working outside the home". The Muslims (Personal Status) Act, 1991 (24/7/1991), as quoted by the women, business and the law index 2024. English translation retrieved from: <http://jafbase.fr/afrique#soudan>.
- 12 World Bank (2023). Labour force participation rate, female (percentage of female population aged 15+) (modeled ILO estimate). These estimates are for all women in a country (both national and migrant) working in both the private and public sectors. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FM.ZS?locations=1A>.
- 13 The global gender gap index measures the gap in human development indicators between a country's male and female residents.



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