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Female Educational Enrollment in the Middle East and North Africa: A Question of Poverty or Culture?

by Stephen P. Heyneman and Simel Esim

*Concerns about
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Low female primary and secondary school enrollments are a worldwide problem. In many developing countries girls are less likely than boys to attend school. The benefits to girls' education are often perceived not to be large enough to compensate for the direct or the opportunity costs of education. Parents may also not evaluate the nonmarket gains to their daughters' education. Cultural, family, and demographic factors as well as poverty tend to influence girls' enrollment in schools more adversely than boys.¹

As in other regions, female enrollment ratios in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region lag behind males. Besides the basic similarities across regions, many characteristics of women's status and roles, labor force participation, family obligations, fertility, and health issues in MENA differ from other regions.

Many studies show lags in female enrollment ratios for countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, even compared to other developing countries; it is not uncommon to infer that particular cultural factors may account for this.² Concerns about the safety, modesty, and reputation of girls while attending school may influence both Christian and Muslim families' decisions to send their daughters to school. Females,

often viewed as "homemakers," may therefore demand less formal education. The question has been left partly unanswered: do these cultural views, which indeed characterize many countries in the MENA region, explain female under-enrollment, or are there alternative explanations? Is the lack of female enrollment particular to MENA, or Muslim cultures in general, compared to other countries?

As recently pointed out by Lawrence Summers, it is hard to deny culture's role in explaining differences in gender ratios, because there seem to be large differences in female enrollments between nations with significant religious and cultural similarities.³ For example, in 1990 primary and secondary gross female enrollment ratios for Egypt were 89 percent and 71 percent respectively, whereas those for Pakistan were 27 percent and 12 percent. Egypt's gross national product (GNP) per capita is 60 percent higher. The question is if these differences arise because one country has more resources to expand educational opportunity. If so, is it possible that the lower female enrollments in MENA are influenced more by comparative poverty than by culture?

Data

We have drawn upon enrollment

data from United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and economic and social data from the World Bank to make international and regional comparisons. GNP per capita figures and female enrollment ratios from 1965, 1975, and 1988 have been noted. Of the 144 countries listed in the UNESCO data set, those countries missing more than half their female enrollment data were discarded. The final data set, therefore, consists of 65 countries (Table 1).

We have used GNP per capita as our particular indicator of a nation's level of economic development, knowing quite well that there are many different views of its adequacy. We described countries with low GNPs per capita as being "poor" in this study. We assumed that the wealthier countries have in general less poverty, though we are well aware that earnings and poverty are distributed within countries very differently. By taking the country as our unit of analysis, we bypass other interesting and perhaps compelling explanations of female enrollment on the provincial, municipal, or family levels.

Is Female Underenrollment More Serious or More Protracted in MENA?

We have tried to address this question in two steps. First, we assigned values to different categories of countries. To MENA borrowers (as of 1992) and Islamic countries that belong to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (Table 2), we assigned a value of 1; to other developing countries, we assigned a value of 0. Second, we correlated the tendency for different categories of countries to be associated with lower levels of primary and secondary female enrollment at three different times: 1965, 1975, and 1988.

MENA Countries and Female Enrollment, 1965-88*				
MENA	GNP/capita	Gross Primary Female Enrollment Ratio	Gross Secondary Female Enrollment Ratio	Net Primary Female Enrollment Ratio
1965 (n = 18)	-.089	-.117	-.165	-.116
1975 (n = 15)	.162	-.105	-.079	-.339
1988 (n = 29)	-.043	.047	-.042	.151
* P < .05 (one-tailed) ** p < .01 (two-tailed) * Coded as MENA=1; Other=0				

Table 1

Islamic Countries and Female Enrollment, 1965-88*				
	GNP/capita	Gross Primary Female Enrollment Ratio	Gross Secondary Female Enrollment Ratio	Net Primary Female Enrollment Ratio
1965 (n = 18)	-.320*	-.477**	-.470**	-.384
1975 (n = 15)	-.193	-.495**	-.404**	-.745**
1988 (n = 29)	-.202	-.455**	.428**	.346
* P < .05 (one-tailed) ** p < .01 (two-tailed) * Coded as Islam=1; Other=0				

Table 2

The results suggest that MENA countries are associated with lower levels of female enrollment in both primary and in secondary education (Table 1). This association declines between 1965 and 1975, and again between 1975 and 1988. However, none of these results is statistically significant (most probably because of the low sample size).

We then asked the same question for Islamic countries where the sample size was larger; in other words, was there any association between a country's membership in the Organization of Islamic Conference and female enrollment, and did the association persist over time (Table 2)? A strong negative asso-

ciation exists between a country's membership in the Organization of Islamic Conference and female enrollments, both at primary and secondary levels, and at each date. This suggests an association, but it is not clear why. Is it because Islamic countries tend to be more impoverished than other developing countries ($r = -.32$; $p < .05$)? Or is it because gender roles and educational opportunities within cultures tend to be more conservative?

We approached this second question by placing controls on GNP per capita each date for both primary and secondary education. The results of these partial correlations are clearer than the prior correlations

(Tables 3 and 4). After controlling for a country's GNP per capita, associations between its regional affiliation and rates of female enrollment appear weaker. Most significantly, they disappear after 1975, the year after the petroleum price rise and the significant change in national incomes in the Persian Gulf, in Indonesia, and in many non-petroleum-producing Middle East countries that benefited from migrant workers' remittances. The most significant figure is the MENA gross secondary enrollment between 1975 and 1988, which falls from $r = -.448$ ($p < .01$) to $-.078$ ($p = n.s.$). This fall suggests that the

relationships between MENA or Organization of Islamic Conference countries and female educational enrollment tend to be income dependent. Thus, relationships disappear when countries have enough resources to increase educational opportunities for all, including females.

This link with national income might best be visualized by a few examples. In Kuwait, where 1990 GNP per capita was \$16,150, a female has a better chance of being educated than a Moroccan male, where GNP per capita equals \$950 (Table 5). Yemen and Mauritania, with similar GNP per capita levels,

demonstrate similar increases in female enrollment in the past thirty years. After 1975 the rate of change in the female enrollment ratio was more rapid in MENA than in any region except Africa, which started from a lower base (Table 6).

Conclusions

Numerous gender role issues in MENA deserve attention. However, it cannot be said that female enrollment ratios in primary or secondary education in MENA countries are different from other parts of the world with similar levels of GNP per capita. Therefore, conceptions of gender roles are not the only variables explaining differences in enrollment ratios, nor is culture the only or necessarily the most important explanation of the gender gap.

If current trends in MENA continue, and female enrollment ratios increase by more than 4.5 percent in primary schools and by more than 7 percent in secondary schools in the 1990s, as they did during the 1980s, female under-enrollment can be expected to ease as a significant regional problem within this generation. The fact that the increase in female enrollment ratios in the post-1975 period is higher in MENA than in other regions suggests that national income growth can explain a significant portion of the differences in enrollment. There is much to be done to further female enrollments even within countries with low GNPs per capita and many other competing priorities. However, the more relevant issue in MENA may be the quality of the educational experience once entry into a classroom has been obtained. The quality of educational experience in the MENA region, regardless of gender and culture, would benefit from increased attention. [eH]

**MENA Countries and Female Enrollment,
Controlling for GNP/capita, 1965-88***

MENA	Gross Primary Female Enrollment Ratio	Gross Secondary Female Enrollment Ratio	Net Primary Female Enrollment Ratio
1965 (n = 18)	-.323	-.137	-.071
1975 (n = 15)	-.368	-.448**	-.31
1988 (n = 29)	.053	-.078	-.15

* P < .05 (one-tailed) ** p < .01 (two-tailed) * Coded as MENA=1; Other=0

Table 3

**Islamic Countries and Female Enrollment,
Controlling for GNP/capita, 1965-88***

	Gross Primary Female Enrollment Ratio	Gross Secondary Female Enrollment Ratio	Net Primary Female Enrollment Ratio
1965 (n=18)	-.723**	-.607**	-.691*
1975 (n=15)	-.523*	-.254*	-.328
1988 (n=29)	-.305	-.213*	-.275

* P < .05 (one-tailed) ** p < .01 (two-tailed) * Coded as Islam=1; Other=0

Table 4

Female Enrollment in Kuwait and Male Enrollment in Morocco, 1965-88

	KUWAIT Gross Primary Female Enrollment Ratio	KUWAIT Gross Secondary Female Enrollment Ratio	MOROCCO Gross Primary Male Enrollment Ratio	MOROCCO Gross Secondary Male Enrollment Ratio
1965	103%	43%	78%	6%
1975	85%	61%	78%	21%
1988	91%	87%	80%	3%

Source: UNESCO Statistical Year Book 1990, 1978-79, 1969 (Table 3.2)

Table 5

Changes in Gross Female Enrollment Ratios by Region, 1960-88

	1960-70	1970-75	1975-80	1980-88
AFRICA*				
-Primary	6.7%	6.2%	.1%	2.7%
-Secondary	11.6%	15.0%	13.4%	6.4%
MENA				
-Primary	6.6%	6.4%	6.0%	4.5%
-Secondary	11.9%	12.4%	10.9%	7.1%
LATIN AMERICA				
-Primary	5.3%	5.2%	2.9%	1.4%
-Secondary	10.5%	4.1%	7.6%	4.0%
ASIA*				
-Primary	5.5%	3.9%	1.1%	0.9%
-Secondary	4.9%	3.4%	5.3%	3.1%
WORLD TOTAL				
-Primary	3.5%	2.1%	1.6%	1.1%
-Secondary	6.4%	4.4%	3.5%	2.2%

Source: UNESCO Statistical Year Book 1990, 1978-79, 1969 (Table 2.4)

* Excluding MENA countries

Table 6

1. George Psacharopoulos and Maureen Woodhall, *Education for Development: An Analysis of Investment Choices* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1991), 112-114.

2. The question of culture excludes the formal dictates of Islamic law and the formal ruling of Islamic courts, for on the issue of female education the evidence for nondiscrimination is clear. See Donna Lee Bowen, "Islamic Law and the Position of Women," Technical Department, World Bank, 14 March 1992.

3. Larry Summers, "Investing in All the People." This paper was prepared for the Quad-i-Azam Lecture at the Eighth Annual General Meeting of the Pakistan Society of Development Economists in Islamabad, Pakistan, in January 1992, 3-4.