

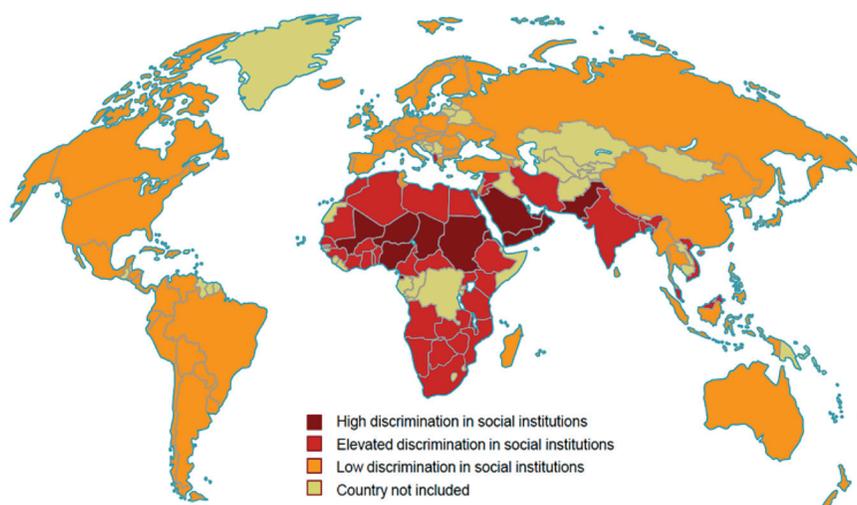
To add to the disincentives, working women face the highest unemployment rates. The factor that spikes the total unemployment rate in the Arab region is the high female unemployment rate of 17.4 per cent (ILO, 2012). Arab women are on average twice as likely as men to be unemployed. Also, ironically, the younger and the more highly educated, the higher the unemployment rate amongst women.

INCREASING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION CAN CHANGE ARAB ECONOMIES

A rough calculation indicates that if female labour force participation rates were at the same level as in the OECD (60 per cent), the MENA region could drastically increase GDP by 20-25 per cent. We could achieve a near doubling in growth rates if women participated at similar rates as men. The fastest growth rates would be achieved by those countries with the lowest female participation rates. Iraq and Saudi Arabia could grow at eight to nine per cent per annum by 2030 and Jordan by seven to eight per cent. The economic performance and landscape of the Arab world would be transformed through the contribution of the skills, talent, labour and entrepreneurship of women. However, this will not happen through the wave of a magic wand. We need to invest and do things differently. We have to change laws, institutions and regulations that marginalise and discriminate against women and youth.

CHANGE LAWS AND REGULATIONS

In national vision documents and national development policy documents, Arab governments usually make reference to the importance of women's empowerment and their increased role in the economy as necessary for equitable local and regional development. However, gender discrimination in MENA is typically codified in law, frequently in discriminatory family laws or civil codes, restrictions on resources and entitlements, son biases and restricted civil liberties. In many countries, women must obtain permission from a male relative, usually a husband, father or brother, before seeking employment, requesting a loan, starting a business,



Source: World Bank

or even travelling. Social institutions in the Arab countries embody some of the highest levels of discrimination in the world. As is clear from the map and the examples of Turkey, Malaysia and Indonesia, this is not a matter of Islam, but a matter of culture. It will take time and effort to change mind sets.

Similarly, the World Bank's important survey on 'Women, Business & the Law' highlights that MENA is the region where women face the highest number of

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restrictions in their capacity to act. It also found that the greater the lack of legal parity is associated with lower labour force participation by women and lower levels of women entrepreneurship.

WHAT NEXT?

The waste and underutilisation of female human capital and capacity is a major drag on the performance and growth prospects of Arab economies. Post-Arab firestorm, empowerment of women should be a major priority on the region's transformational and reform agenda. Making greater use of women workers increases growth and productivity, not only because women jobseekers typically have higher than average education, but also because this can increase mobility across sectors and jobs. The priority should be for an affirmative action programme that actively promotes women and reverses marginalisation and discrimination. We need corrective policies, laws and quotas. Reforms are necessary in the legal framework to support women's rights, including property, access to finance and mobility. Removing the barriers to women's economic participation can be a game changer for the region. This period of transformation requires the contribution of women towards nation building: their increased participation in politics, parliament, and cabinets and even simply as voters can bring about a dramatic change in the way our civil societies are structured. 