

Female Education in the Middle East - Closing the Gap

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to review the available literature on women's education in the Middle East. In order to do this, open source articles from Google Scholar were used. An attempt was made to select recent studies that analyse the trends in education and especially those that assess the narrowing of the gender disparity in this region. Using a set of criteria, approximately 500 scholarly works were initially analysed and then reduced to a smaller number which were explored in detail. It was found that while governments in this region have made an effort to increase the enrolment and retention of girls in school across countries in the Middle East, however, a corresponding effort has not been made to invest in the quality of education being imparted. While it is encouraging to see that the increasing numbers of girls are being educated, there is a need felt for greater government investment to ensure that those who are educated are also employable.

Keywords: Female Education, Middle East, Gender Gap and School Enrolment

Introduction

The value of educating girls is seen in its potential for enhancing economic and social development. The United Nations, with its Millennium Development Goals and now Sustainable Development Goals, has emphasised on the role that educating women can play in improving issues of global development (World Bank, 2009). This has proved to be an impetus for countries across the world and especially for developing countries, to invest in educating girls (Kelly & Elliott, 1982). Some of the most reliable methods of testing improvements in education have been the enrolment and retention rates in schools. Over the years, governments have invested in encouraging an increase in the number of girls being sent to school across the levels of education. This is also seen in the Middle East. Over the past few decades, the region has recorded a steady increase in the enrolment and retention rates of girls in schools, with literacy nearly doubling in most countries between 1960 to 1995 (Akkari, 2004). While governments in this region focused on infrastructure development, such as in the case of Saudi Arabia, little emphasis has been on the quality of education being imparted. This review aims to explore the efforts that have been made to close the gap in the education of men and women, while also studying the disparities within the Middle East, and the impact of poor quality education for the region.

In the following sections, the search conducted will be explained followed by the findings of the review and what the various studies reveal about the education of women in the Middle East. This will be followed by a conclusion that will sum up the arguments and discuss the scope for future interventions and research.

Methodology

In order to find relevant research studies specific terms were used in Google Scholar. These were the following: Female education + Middle East, Middle East + School Education, Girl Education + Middle East + Improvements, Education in the Middle East, and Female literacy + Middle East.

For each individual search term, 100 results were considered, for a total of 500 results. For these, an initial examination was conducted, using only the most recent research studies (post 1990) that had analysed trends in education of women in the Middle East. This was so that the most recent data points were available for comparison and analysis. It should be mentioned here that the majority of the research studies concentrate on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as a whole, while very few focus only on the Middle East. There was also an attempt to find research papers that would provide case study examples to better understand the role of the government in improvising access to education for girls in this region.

Results

It has been widely recognised that female education plays an important role in furthering societies' economic and social development. Roudi-Fahimi and Moghadam (2006) argue that this is because the attainment of education has been linked with the ability to secure gainful employment and a skilled workforce plays a vital role in reducing poverty. Additionally, they argue that education also affects women's reproductive choices especially in the countries in the Middle East as women are expected to have children soon after marriage. Educated women, they state, prefer smaller families 'and make better use of reproductive health and family planning information and services in achieving their desired family size' while also having healthier families (2006:6).

Despite the evident advantages of educating women, Heyneman and Esim (1994) contend that the issue of low primary and secondary school enrolments for girls is found worldwide. However, the causes behind this are context specific. In the case of the Middle East, they found that there are two main contributing factors that may explain the gap - culture and poverty. They argue that while cultural norms and traditional gender roles play a role in determining whether girls are educated, an equally important factor is also the amount of investment made by the country in education. An example of this is found in the research conducted by Amani Hamdan (2005), who studied the challenges of women's education in Saudi Arabia. Hamdan's (2005) research found that while girls' education was 'under the Department of Religious Guidance until 2002', boys' education was under the Ministry of Education (2005:44). This, as highlighted by Hamdan (2005), was to 'ensure that women's education did not deviate from the original purpose of female education, which was to make women good wives and mothers, and to prepare them for 'acceptable' jobs such as teaching and nursing' (2005:44).

A similar case is found in post-revolutionary Iran. Although the country has seen a steady increase in women's education at every level, including in universities, is accompanied by a simultaneously 'explicit gender stereotyping in school textbooks, and guiding female students toward feminine specialisations deemed appropriate for women' (Mehran, 2003:270). Hence, it is asserted that in Iran, while there is 'the political will to increase female access to schooling and to reduce gender disparities in the educational sector', women are expected to be 'traditional and modern at the same time' (Mehran, 2003:270).

These trends cannot be studied devoid of context. The Middle East is a diverse region with multiple social classes, religious affiliation, ethnic groups and communities. These factors contribute to the outlook and attitude a society has towards education, especially the education of girls. It should also be mentioned here that studies have shown that patriarchy is viewed as an obstacle for equality in these countries (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2000). This is represented in the examples above of Saudi Arabia and Iran and highlights that while education is accessible to women, it is education that is in-keeping with the traditional nature of society in the countries of this region.

Heyneman and Esim's (1994) argument of context specific barriers to female education, therefore, rings true due to the variations within the Middle East region. Roudi-Fahimi and Moghadam's (2006) research echoes this as well, which found that 'countries that make political and financial commitments' towards the reduction of illiteracy and focus on improving education, such as in Jordan and Tunisia, 'generally see significant improvements in reducing illiteracy and narrowing the gender gap' (2006:10). On the other end of the spectrum and further highlighting the regional disparities, they also found that in Yemen, 'the illiteracy rate among young women (54 percent) is triple that of young men (17 percent)' (2006:10). On the other hand, 90 percent of women in countries such as Palestine, Qatar, Kuwait and Turkey were found to be literate (World Bank, 2009). Hence, it is evident that while there has been an overall increase in the enrolment of women in educational institutions, regional variations persist. In addition to this, even though enrolment rates may have increased in the various levels of education, it is the quality of education being imparted, that is now found as the reason for the poor female representation in the work force (Roudi-Fahimi & Moghadam, 2006). This was found to be the paradox in this region.

According to the 2002 Arab Human Development Report published by the United Nations Development Programme, the poor state of education in Arab states may be attributed to the lack of investment in education (Roudi-Fahimi & Moghadam, 2006). Over the years, while the education sector has been reformed, these reforms have focused on training teachers, infrastructure development and equipping schools with teachers (Chapman & Miric, 2009). Hence, while on the one hand the education institutes in this region have well trained teachers, the same is not reflected in the student achievement and student learning.

One of the encouraging trends, argues Hamdan (2005), is the role of technology. With the increasing access to the internet, women in these countries have access to more information and can learn from their counterparts in other countries. For instance, 'Saudi women see Omani women as ministers and ... that in Qatar women are deans at many universities' (Hamdan, 2005:56). This, Hamdan argues, could perhaps, lead to a demand for change. Although the countries in this region have been slow to adopt e-learning, it has been met with approval by students as well as teachers. In countries such as Saudi Arabia, access to e-learning is hindered by poor internet penetration. On the other hand, countries such as Oman are embracing e-learning by collaborating with providers 'of technology-enabled learning solutions' (Mirza and Al-Abdulkareem, 2011:88). This is pertinent for the Middle East region as a whole as while literacy levels among women have increased over the years, the same is not the case when it comes to their participation in the labour force. Adopting e-learning could perhaps provide a way to bridge the gap between the skills required in the labour market and those imparted through traditional education in this region (Mirza & Al-Abdulkareem, 2011).

Mehran (2003), similarly states that while ‘expansion of female education and the reduced gender gap in formal schooling have long been viewed as indicators of modernity in the literature on education’, when viewed in the context of Iran, (or even the Middle East as a whole) the emphasis is on employability. While women are increasingly enrolling in and completing their education from institutes of higher education, drop-out rates among men in Iran is found to be increasing. This is because of the realisation, Mehran (2003) argues, that a University degree no longer promises employment in this region (2003:281). This is echoed in the fact that the ‘Middle East has one of the largest proportion of youth (12-24 year olds), as well as the highest levels of youth unemployment in the world’ (Bouillon, 2007:7). This proportion is projected to increase in the coming years, imposing a corresponding demand on the governments of this region to invest in high quality education and not just focus on enrolment rates.

Discussion and Conclusion

The case of women’s education in the Middle East is unique and calls into question assumptions about the benefits of women’s education. While on the one hand, there has been an increase in women’s enrolment across all levels of education, there is a need to invest in the quality of education being imparted. This is because education is steeped in and is deeply influenced by culture. As in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is found that despite high levels of enrolment in educational institutions, women are still portrayed in more conservative roles and education has not resulted in a corresponding increase in their work force participation. In addition to this, it is found that governments spending and political will are prominent drivers in shaping the extent to which education can empower women. With Saudi Arabia’s example, an investment in teacher training has not resulted in ensuring that students are equipped with the skills necessary to enter the job market. This gap may be addressed by improving access to e-learning but is once again dependent on the political will of the government, as is seen in the case of Oman. Hence, while an increase in women’s enrolment in educational institutions is commendable, the need must now be to focus on improving the quality of education.

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