

## Chapter 4

# The new dynamics in the inclusion and empowerment of young women

This chapter assesses the varying degrees to which young women in Arab countries are empowered or disempowered, included or excluded. Setting aside the stereotypes of subordination, it presents a nuanced picture of the changing circumstanc-

es of young women today, the struggle against injustice and the triumphs over injustice. The chapter shows how a new generation of young feminists is challenging the considerable barriers creatively and with determination.

# 4.1

## The challenges facing young women in Arab countries

Various barriers restrict the freedoms of women in areas such as law, politics, education and employment in several countries, where discrimination often occurs in an environment of socially tolerated violence. However, across and within the Arab countries, the reach of injustice can vary sharply.

### Legal barriers to equality

Young women across the region face legal barriers to gender equality. Among the Arab countries, the constitutions of 15 explicitly recognize equality between men and women before the law or feature anti-discrimination clauses.<sup>2</sup> Among the Arab states, all but Somalia and Sudan have signed and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. However, Arab signatories have entered so many reservations to the Convention that they have undermined its significance in the region. Indeed, despite the constitutional recognition of equality, most Arab countries have no laws that directly ban gender discrimination. Further, while several constitutions explicitly refer to the state's commitment to protect women against all forms of violence, the commitment is often undone by the penal code, which is usually indulgent towards male perpetrators of crimes of violence against women, notably spousal violence, rape and so-called honour crimes.<sup>3</sup>

Laws on citizenship rights are important for their symbolic and practical significance: they offer insight into the link between gender norms and the construction of national identity. Most laws show glaring differences between men and women

*“ My resignation is a warning to the government and a protest against its inability to evaluate the needs of women. ”*

*Nawal Al-Samaraie, tendering her resignation as Minister of Women's Affairs, Iraq<sup>1</sup>*

in the eligibility for citizenship through marriage or through the birth of children. In 13 Arab countries, laws do not allow foreign spouses to gain citizenship through marriage to women who are citizens, and, in 10 countries, citizenship cannot be assigned to children through mothers only.<sup>4</sup> In some countries, children can gain citizenship through their mothers only in certain cases, for example if the father is unknown or has died or if there has been an irrevocable divorce. Women can apply for passports without the permission of their husbands or guardians in only 12 countries.<sup>5</sup> Many countries require women who are travelling to be accompanied by male guardians.<sup>6</sup>

Although family laws differ, they tend to enshrine gender inequality by limiting women's right to marry, divorce, obtain child custody and inherit. Family law or personal status codes remain a core source of symbolic and material inequality.<sup>7</sup> Personal status codes embody a patriarchal bias that is legitimized by religious institutions and are thus difficult to challenge. The legal basis of the codes in most Arab countries is Muslim Fiqh (jurisprudence), which is supposed to reflect Sharia Law, but, in reality, reflects patriarchal interpretations of Sharia Law. Personal status codes largely codify women's status in terms of male guardianship and authority. This framing of gender relations can sanction domestic violence, as a husband's violence towards his wife can be considered a form of ta'dib (correction or discipline). In some countries, family law conflates rape with adultery or premarital sex so that, if a woman cannot prove rape, she is liable to be tried for zina (fornication).

The past decade has witnessed some improvement in the legal rights of women. In Morocco and Tunisia, personal status codes have been amended to support more egalitarian gender relations, and progressive amendments to laws and codes have been passed recently in Algeria and Bahrain. Moreover, while personal

status codes are a grim indicator of the extent of gender discrimination, they do not necessarily reflect the realities of gender relations or the gains that women are making by manoeuvring within the system, and some are challenging the laws and codes by proposing alternative religious readings and their own visions of equality.

### Representation in formal politics

Limited improvements have been made in the past decade on women's electoral rights and political representation.<sup>8</sup> Globally, women account for 22.2 percent of national parliamentarians; the share in the Arab region was only 18.1 percent in 2014.<sup>9</sup> The share of seats held by women in parliamentary bodies across the region was below 4 percent in seven countries: Qatar (0 percent), Yemen (0.3 percent), Oman (1.2 percent), Kuwait (1.5 percent), Egypt (2.0 percent in 2012), Comoros (3.0 percent) and Lebanon (3.1 percent) (annex 2 table A.9).<sup>10</sup>

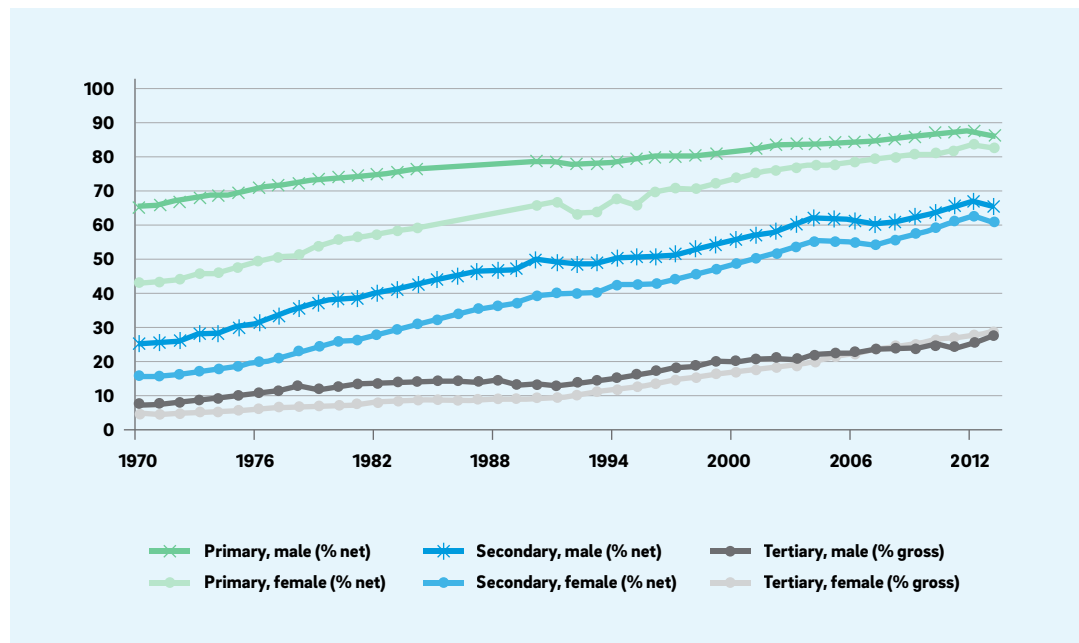
Quota systems in countries such as Iraq, Jordan and Palestine ensure the presence of women in representative assemblies from municipalities to parliament. After introducing a quota in 2012, Algeria became the first Arab country to surpass the 30 percent target for the parliamentary representation of women put forward in the Beijing Platform for Action and the

general recommendations for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.<sup>11</sup>

Women's presence in parliament does not necessarily signify an improved situation in the political realm, nor has it necessarily contributed to gains in political rights or women's rights in general. Numerical increases belie the complexities and conditions of women's entry into formal politics. In some places, the introduction of quotas has simply led to nepotism so that women relatives of sitting politicians are appointed. Women continue to suffer from unequal treatment and condescending attitudes. Women politicians do not yet enjoy the decision-making power of their male counterparts. In Iraq, for example, no women took part in negotiations to reach a compromise government after the parliamentary elections of 2010, and the Ministry of Women's Affairs is only a state's cabinet with no allocated budget.

Similarly, the inclusion of women in decision-making positions does not always lead to fresh measures to advance equality. Researchers and activists in Iraq and Palestine, for example, have observed that quotas have enabled women in conservative religious parties to enter parliament, where they often support laws and regulations that undermine women's rights.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 4.1** Female and male educational attainment in the Arab region, 1970–2013



Source: World Bank 2015b.

#### **Box 4.1 Aseel Alawadhi: Cancellation of the discriminatory admission policy at Kuwait University**

On 25 March 2012, the Administrative Court of Kuwait pronounced a judgement in favour of a female student at Kuwait University that was the first of its kind in the country. The judgement was followed, on 6 June that year, by three similar rulings for the benefit of other students. The judgements prevented the university from refusing to accept women students to certain departments based solely on the university's admission policy.

A group of women students had filed lawsuits against the university for rejecting their applications to the Department of Medicine even though they had scored higher averages than male students who were accepted. The female students had graduated with honours from high school and had finished the first academic year at the Center of Medical Sciences with distinction.

Kuwait University had for many years followed an acceptance policy in certain departments,

including medicine, distinguishing between men and women students. Men students were accepted with lower averages than women students.

The court affirmed that the principle of equality is among the general constitutional principles on which the rule of law is based. It indicated that equality, intrinsically, is equal treatment between people in similar situations or positions and unequal treatment between people in different situations or positions. In the opinion of the court, the defendant—the university administrative body—had set the minimum average for acceptance by the Department of Medicine at 2,080 for Kuwaiti males and 3,020 for Kuwaiti females, although the two groups were in the same legal position of having passed the foundation year at the Center of Medical Sciences. Considering this to be in violation of the principle of equality stipulated in Article 29 of the Constitution, the court voided the acceptance policy based on gender discrimination.

*Note: Aseel Alawadhi is visiting researcher, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, assistant professor, Kuwait University and former member of Parliament.*

#### **Education**

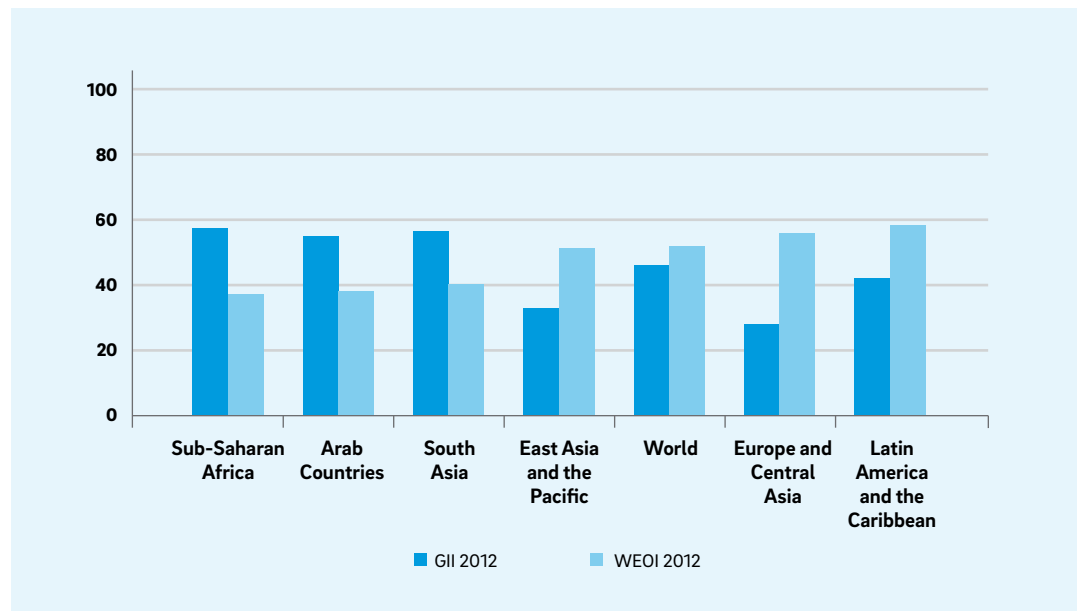
Young women's access to education has been improving, as most Arab countries have provided access to public and free education for most girls and boys (figure 4.1). Except for tertiary education, educational attainment among women has been expanding since 1970. Enrollment in primary education in developing regions reached 90 percent in 2010, up from 82 percent in 1999.<sup>13</sup> In 2013, net enrollment among girls in primary education reached nearly 83 percent in the region, against a world average of 88.3 percent. The ratio of female-to-male primary enrollment in the region was 96 percent in 2013, against 98.3 percent worldwide.<sup>14</sup> Literacy rates among adults and youth are rising, and gender gaps are narrowing. In 1990, there were 90 literate young women for every 100 literate young men; by 2010, the ratio had narrowed to 95 women for every 100 men.<sup>15</sup>

The access of young people to education varies by country. In 2011, the number of female children of primary school age who were out of school ranged from 2,500 in Qatar and Syria to 597,200 in Yemen,

while, for male children, the corresponding numbers ranged from around 2,200 in Oman and Qatar to 351,750 in Yemen. In some countries, particularly those in the GCC, young women's participation in education is rapidly outpacing men's.<sup>16</sup> Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have the highest female-to-male university enrollment ratios in the world. Even among extremely conservative families, young women's educational achievement is often encouraged and prized.

In situations of conflict or poverty, young women's educational opportunities are greatly reduced. The access to education among young women is less in rural and nomadic communities than in urban areas, owing, in some cases, to transport difficulties.<sup>17</sup> Poverty, conflict and rural residence often have a similar effect on young men's education. However, among women, these factors tend to intersect negatively with the characteristics of women's gender experience, such as the high prevalence of early marriage in Yemen or young women's burdensome caregiving roles when families are disrupted by war, as in Iraq and Syria. Among those women who have access to education, school quality

**Figure 4.2 Gender inequality and economic opportunities**



Source: UNDP 2013; Women's Economic Opportunity Index (WEOI); regional calculations based on EIU data 2012.

Note: The Gender Inequality Index (GII) is rated on a 0–1 scale, where a higher score indicates a more pro-gender stance. Here, GII scores are multiplied by 100 for ease of comparison. The WEOI is rated on a 0–100 scale, whereby higher values indicate better economic opportunities.

is sometimes an issue. For instance, young women's concentration in disciplines typically reserved almost exclusively for women, such as care-giving and certain services, can narrow women's future opportunities by excluding them from better paying employment in supposedly male professional preserves (box 4.1).

### Employment

In the past 30 years, the global economic situation has been marked by two interrelated phenomena that have contributed to the feminization of poverty.<sup>18</sup> First is the transition from state-led development to neoliberal economics, which has been accompanied by an international division of labour that is reliant on cheap female labour. Second is the emergence of temporary, part-time, casual home-based jobs, alongside the decline of the welfare state in developing countries.<sup>19</sup> Privatization and restructuring have in many places—notably Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia—led to layoffs that have affected women relatively more than men. Thus, like their peers elsewhere, young women in Arab countries must toil disproportionately to find meaningful, fulfilling and properly remunerated employment, especially in their first jobs after university.

The share of women who work outside the home has risen in all Arab countries in recent years, but especially where women have benefited from government policies that seek to nationalize the labour force and lower unemployment. Women are working mainly in the public sector. In Jordan, for example, 82 percent of women's positions are in the public sector.

Employed women face challenges in the region that are similar to those encountered elsewhere. They are often paid less than men for the same jobs, must carry the double burden of employment and domestic work, and must often struggle to be taken seriously or to acquire decision-making positions in the workplace. Many young women must also face prejudice and harassment at work. No Arab country has legislation prohibiting sexual harassment in the workplace. Young women in Arab countries, like all women, face discrimination in laws on pensions and benefits because men are considered the household breadwinners.

Statistics at a global level show that the higher the rate of gender equality, the more women have access to economic opportunities, that is, the more women are financially independent. In Arab countries, the high rates of gender inequality coincide with a lack of economic opportunities among women (figure 4.2).

#### Box 4.2 Hibaaq Osman: Girls in conflict

The instability and breakdown in law and order that accompany conflict make girls and young women particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence. The failure to protect them exposes an entire generation to damage, thwarting their dreams and pushing them to rethink their future.

In March 2015, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that Da'esh subjected Yazidi women in Iraq to sexual violence that may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, and that "the promise of sexual access to women and girls has been used in ISIL propaganda materials as part of its recruitment strategy".<sup>1</sup> Girls as young as 6 years of age were raped by captors who viewed them as "spoils of war".<sup>2</sup> They were "inspected . . . to evaluate their beauty" before being enslaved or traded and sold to fighters.<sup>3</sup>

According to UNICEF, sexual violence in conflict is "unbearably common".<sup>4</sup> Such atrocities are perhaps the most acute example of the traumas faced by girls and young women in conflict settings, but there are also chronic risks that are equally significant. Fleeing conflict does not mean young women are safe; displacement still leaves them at great risk of gender-based violence, including rape and forced marriage. UN Women finds that many of the gender-specific problems displaced young Syrian women and girls encounter stem from cultural values that prevent them from leaving the home unescorted. This has a devastating impact on their ability to access basic and specialized services in the midst of a humanitarian crisis, when the cumulative nature of such obstacles has even greater impact. UNICEF finds that the share of Syrian refugee child brides in Jordan increased from 12 percent in 2011 to 32 percent in the first quarter of 2014. Syrian child brides were also significantly more likely than counterparts in the Iraqi, Jordanian and Palestinian communities to marry men 15 or more years older than them. Access to physical and mental health treatment from such trauma in times of conflict is severely limited, while the stigma

around sexual violence in the Syrian refugee community makes it a taboo subject among victims, potentially preventing them from reporting incidents or seeking treatment. Such stigma can make access to justice a particular problem in the region.

UNDP has determined that women who are victims of gender-based violence in Libya tend to avoid formal, tribal and traditional justice systems, primarily for fear of being "publically shamed or blamed for the crime".<sup>5</sup> This and the "lack of confidentiality, specialized staff, and physical reporting outlets" mean that gender-based violence is underreported and widespread, creating additional barriers to agencies seeking to address the problem, assess its scale and respond appropriately.<sup>6</sup> In Yemen, before the latest conflict, literacy rates among girls of primary-school age were only 74 percent compared with 96 percent among boys. If young women are to participate fully in the country's future, then too many have already been excluded through lack of educational opportunity. Because of the ongoing conflict, youth displaced by violence now face huge disruptions in their education, and many will encounter barriers that will prevent them from returning to their studies.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 provides an important framework to understand what needs to be done to help young women at times of war and in pre- and post-war scenarios. However, the resolution itself has not prevented these atrocities. The recommendations of women leaders in the region, led by Karama, underscore that international organizations involved in peace processes, such as the United Nations and the League of Arab States, must make such processes inclusive, ensuring that women are adequately represented in at least 30 percent of decision making positions. The women, peace and security agenda should also be given some teeth through the establishment of a mechanism whereby member states can be held accountable if they fail to implement resolution 1325 and related resolutions.

*Note: Hibaaq Osman is founder and chief executive officer of Karama, <http://www.el-karama.org/>.*

1. UN News Centre 2015.

2. UNHRC 2015, p. 9.

3. UNHRC 2015, p. 9.

4. UNICEF n.d.

5. UNDP 2015, p. 4.

6. UNDP 2015, p. 5.



## Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence affects women across the region. Some forms—such as “honour killings” and female genital mutilation (FGM)—affect young women particularly. The so-called honour killings or femicide affect young women at higher rates than older women. In Jordan, for example, 81 percent of victims are under 30, and the largest subcategory of victims is aged 19–24.<sup>20</sup> The dangerous practice of FGM relates particularly to young women. Although usually carried out during childhood, it is entwined with ideas of sexual propriety and marriage prospects, which affect young women especially. Some Arab countries have set laws on gender-based violence, such as the 2014 law against domestic violence in Lebanon and the 2008 law on the protection against marital violence in Jordan. Draft laws on gender-based violence also exist in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, as well as sexual harassment laws in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia.<sup>21</sup> But these laws have yet to be passed, let alone enforced. Physical abuse is generally prohibited by law, but none of the Arab countries explicitly recognizes marital rape as a crime, and special protection against domestic violence is rare. Although repealed in Morocco in 2014, laws that allow rapists to escape punishment if they marry their victim remain on the books in various Arab countries, as in other parts of the world.<sup>22</sup>

All these forms of violence are associated with deprivation, poverty and personal insecurity. Poverty and rural residence usually correlate with FGM.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, among the victims of the so-called honour crimes, most are not only young, but also from impoverished families. A study in Jordan reveals a strong correlation between poverty and “honour crimes” among both victims and perpetrators.<sup>24</sup> The physical and economic insecurity caused by conflict can be a lead determinant in earlier or less-favourable marriages for young women (see chapter 6). Young women in conflict situations suffer from higher rates of gender-based violence. Such rates are usually even higher if the women also belong to a minority or marginalized group. No stratum of society is immune to gender-based violence; however, the ability to seek judicial redress or medical treatment or the opportunity to seek services to escape from gender-based violence depend heavily on a woman’s social standing and access to economic resources (box 4.2).

## The effects of social and political conservatism

Conservative social and political forces form a rigid, insidious alliance against the empowerment of young women in Arab countries. Their gender discourses are not new in the region, but are now flourishing in unstable times. Their dissemination across borders is being fuelled by new media technologies. Whether religious or secular, they tend to involve a rejection of Westernization and the promotion of an authentic national or regional and often religious culture. As these forces expand their political power base, they more closely police women’s movements, behaviour and dress and constrict women’s choices. Conservative Islamic parties promote a normative and discriminatory gender ideology, treat women as legal minors and insist that women’s bodies must be fully covered.

The patriarchal society is repressive of young women for reasons of both gender and age because it favours not only men, but also maturity and seniority.<sup>25</sup> Because of their use of social media, young women tend to be more globally well connected than older women, but this can lead them to be accused of turning away from the generation of their parents and becoming too Western. Changing fashions in clothing are common in global youth culture, but, in societies in which older women observe strict dress codes, such changes visibly separate young women and help target them for disapproval. Young women’s demographic position in a large youth population that is postponing marriage puts their sexuality under particular scrutiny.

# 4.2 Family, marriage and reproductive rights

## Changing family patterns

The Arab family is undergoing significant changes in many countries. In recent decades, patriarchy and family realities have encountered contradictions

**Table 4.1** Population and reproductive health indicators for selected Arab countries

Countries	Female population, aged 15–49			Women aged 20–24 who are currently married, %	Total fertility rate	Married women aged 15–49 using contraception, %		Lifetime risk of maternal death (1 in:)
	In million		% change			Any method	Modern method	
	2014	2025	2014–2025					
Egypt	21.3	25.2	18.2	53	2.7	60	58	490
Iraq	8.6	11.7	35.6	53	3.91	51	33	310
Jordan	2.0	2.2	11.2	36	3.12	59	42	470
Lebanon	1.4	1.4	-5.4	19	1.49	58	34	2,100
Libya	1.8	2.0	10.9	15	2.26	42	20	620
Morocco	9.2	9.5	2.6	37	2.71	67	57	400
Palestine <sup>a</sup>	2.4	3.4	43.3	40	6.36	53	40	330
Somalia	1.1	1.5	33.5	60	3.88	15	1	16
Sudan <sup>b</sup>	9.4	12.6	33.4	58	4.28	9	6	31
Syria	5.6	7.5	34.0	42	2.88	47	33	460
Tunisia	3.1	3.1	0.7	14	1.97	63	53	860
Yemen	6.3	8.5	35.8	57	3.83	23	13	90
Regional total <sup>c</sup>	95.9	114.4	19.3	41	3.23	46	40	...

Source: UN DESA 2009, 2013c, 2014; Haub and Caneda 2011; WHO 2012; Iraq Central Organization for Statistics & Information Technology and Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office 2007; PAPPAM 2014.

Note: ... = Data are not available. The total fertility rate is the average number of children a woman would have if current age-specific fertility rates remained constant throughout her childbearing years. Any method includes modern and traditional methods. Traditional methods include periodic abstinence, withdrawal, prolonged breastfeeding and folk methods. Modern methods include sterilization, IUD, the pill, injectable, implant, condom, foam/jelly and diaphragm.

a. Data for Palestine refer to the Arab population of Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

b. Population data refer to what is today Sudan (estimated at 80 percent of the total population of South Sudan and Sudan); other data refer to South Sudan and Sudan (that is, pre-partition).

c. Regional total includes all 22 members of the League of Arab States; those not shown are Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Kuwait, Mauritania, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.

and challenges linked to economic development, demographic transitions, legal reform and women's increasing educational attainment.<sup>26</sup> Declining fertility rates, changes in the structure of the family, widespread activism over women's rights and a conservative backlash are all signs of the questioning of patriarchy.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, marriage remains an integral institution in Arab societies. As in most countries, government institutions and laws enshrine marriage and reinforce its centrality to the social fabric. Nonetheless, the emergence of a new social group, the singles, is an important feature of the changes in the family. The mean age at first marriage among women has risen: 50 years ago it was around 18; now it is around 25 (annex 2 table A.10). The highest mean is in Libya (31), while Iraq, Palestine and Saudi Arabia are at the other end of the range (20).<sup>28</sup>

The greater educational attainment of young women is one of the main factors explaining the changes in the age of marriage. To pursue their studies, many educated young women are choosing to delay marriage until after graduation. Even in the oil-rich countries known for their conservative gender norms, the rise in the share of young, unmarried women is apparent; the average age of women's marriage in Qatar and United Arab Emirates is 25, but 20 in Saudi Arabia (annex 2 table A.10). The general trend towards delayed marriage is also closely related to the economic crisis and the high levels of unemployment, particularly unemployment among young men because men tend to bear the financial burden of marriage. Establishing a home for a new family is becoming increasingly difficult in the current economic climate.<sup>29</sup>



In most poorer and more rural economies, the age at first marriage has not risen as much as elsewhere.<sup>30</sup> Mean-based comparisons of this indicator in rural and urban settings within countries produce surprisingly small discrepancies. However, studies specifically measuring early marriage (under age 18) reveal that such marriages tend to take place in rural and impoverished settings; conflict and lack of education are also strong determinants.<sup>31</sup>

The legal marriage age is still below 18 years in nearly half the countries in the region (annex 2 table A.11). Moreover, in most countries, a woman needs a *waly* (male guardian) to marry, that is, women are not allowed to marry without the authorization of their father, elder brothers, or uncles. Activism for women's rights has made some encouraging advances. Morocco's reformed *Mudawana* (family law) in 2004 set the minimum age of marriage among both men and women at 18 years.<sup>32</sup> Jordan's campaign on the issue of marriage age and the reform of the Jordanian family law of 2010 also aimed to raise the marriage age among young women. (Nonetheless, in Jordan, the law still provides judges with the right to evaluate special cases and rule accordingly. The special cases are not defined in the law, and, so, the paradoxical effect of the reform is that a girl can be married at any age).<sup>33</sup>

### Reproductive rights and marriage as a norm

The sexual and reproductive health of young men and women is characterized by a lack of access to information; sex education curricula are rare. Health service providers seldom recognize the need of youth for knowledge in this area of health or make youth welcome, particularly if they are not married. Apart from Tunisia, which undertook the most serious effort to establish a national programme to address young people's sexual and reproductive health, such services are limited (Egypt, Morocco and Palestine) or non-existent in most Arab countries.<sup>34</sup>

Precarious forms of marriage are also reported, such as temporary marriages practised under different names. The few studies carried out on these forms of marriage show that they favour men and that women are denied most marital rights.<sup>35</sup>

Four married women of reproductive age in 10 in Arab countries use modern contraception, in contrast with six women in the developing regions as well as globally (table 4.1).<sup>36</sup> Unwanted

pregnancies are very common, especially in poorer countries such as Sudan, Somalia and Yemen. These three countries have the lowest contraceptive use (i.e., percentage of married women ages 15–49 using contraception) and account for 77 percent of maternal deaths in the region.<sup>37</sup>

Data on unwanted pregnancies, abortions, sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDs are difficult to obtain.<sup>38</sup> Young women's sexuality and childbearing before or outside marriage are generally taboo. The stigma is reflected in how governments approach children born out of wedlock. In some countries, unmarried mothers cannot register their babies, and the children of unmarried parents have limited nationality rights. The actual choices and coping strategies of young women who become pregnant vary greatly depending on their social and legal environment.

Lack of information and access to health care services among poor and uneducated women are the main factors in many unwanted pregnancies. In Morocco, of the 78 percent of married women who would prefer to avoid a pregnancy, 67 percent use contraceptives, and 11 percent do not. These 11 percent have no access to contraception, an unmet need, which is usually more prevalent in the poorest wealth quintiles and among women with less education (annex 2 table A.12).<sup>39</sup>

One particularly harmful consequence of unintended pregnancy is unsafe abortion, especially where women face legal barriers to obtaining a safe abortion, that is, in most Arab countries. Abortion is illegal except to save a woman's life in 13 Arab countries, and abortion is legal to save a woman's life or preserve her physical and mental health in eight.<sup>40</sup> Only in Tunisia is abortion legally available without restriction.<sup>41</sup> According to the World Health Organization (WHO), in the six countries of North Africa alone, nearly 1 million unsafe abortions were performed in 2008.<sup>42</sup> Complications from these abortions accounted for 12 percent of maternal deaths in the subregion. The unavailability of legal abortion puts the weight of the state behind the existing dissonance between later marriage and the taboo on premarital sexual activity. The disconnect is especially notable in countries such as Lebanon and Libya, where the highest marriage ages combine with the strictest positions on abortion.

In the countries where abortion is illegal, seeking one is likely to result in different outcomes depending on who the women are and where they live. Indeed, a young woman's socioeconomic

### Box 4.3 Islamic feminism across borders: the Musawah Movement

Musawah (equality) is a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family. It was launched in February 2009 at a global meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and initiated by the Malaysian Muslim feminist group Sisters in Islam. The movement was a transnational response to the equally transnational problem of the use of Islam to resist women's demands for equality. Musawah comprises NGOs, activists, scholars, legal practitioners and policymakers across the globe and approaches gender equality in the Muslim family along three axes: knowledge-building, capacity-building and international advocacy.

Focusing on progressive and feminist interpretations of Islamic texts to counter the male-centric interpretations of Islamic orthodoxy, Musawah highlights the efforts of women to reclaim their right to shape the religious interpretations, norms and laws that affect their lives. Musawah starts from the premise that equality is a founding principle of Islam, and gender equality is therefore in line with Islam, rather than opposed to it. The movement rejects absolutist religious understandings, and it critiques both the way Islam is used as a political ideology and the discrimination against women and the violations of fundamental liberties that often stem from this use. The approach also criticizes notions of feminism—necessarily imported—that have a Western or anti-religious bias.

Musawah has produced a working document,

the Framework for Action, which advocates for initiatives based on Islamic sources, international human rights, national laws, constitutional guarantees and the lived realities of women and men and calls for reforms in law and practice. The framework offers the possibility that these various approaches can be in harmony with each other and that women activists can choose how to emphasize these approaches in their advocacy according to specific needs and contexts. The framework has been adopted by Muslim feminists across the world, including those in Arab nations, and has informed their strategies for change. It has been an important tool for countering the rising dominance of conservative interpretations of Islam and the use of these interpretations in politics.

The transnationalism of Musawah is a core of the movement. Bringing together Muslim women from across geographical borders has been important in building solidarity, and women across the world realize that they are not working in isolation, but that they are fighting similar battles. Musawah's transnational ties represent a channel that is important to women activists in sharing information and strategy. Musawah has established an affinity group for young women advocates, the Young Women's Caucus, in which some 30 Muslim women under age 35 are working on issues among young Muslim women and based on the Musawah framework.

Source: Report team.

standing can be as important as whether abortion is legal. Within each country, the level of service provision and class and wealth add an element of differentiation in the choices available to unmarried women. A middle-class woman living in a city where illegal abortion medication is easily purchased may have more choice than an impoverished woman in a rural environment where abortion is legal, but services are geographically and financially inaccessible. While young women seeking to terminate pregnancy in Cairo are likely to seek out drugs that are relatively easy to acquire and safe to use, women in rural areas are likely to rely on other means. In one rural area in Upper Egypt, 92 percent of women who had had an abortion sought the services of a friend, neighbour, or traditional midwife to carry out the procedures.<sup>43</sup>

### Negotiating waithood in the parental home

The social and legal treatment of women as dependent individuals within the family as daughters, sisters and then wives produces frictions, especially among unmarried young women whose freedoms are constrained by family members as they grow older and continue to live in the parental home. Social and economic norms that cast men as breadwinners and women as caregivers shape how young women find marriage partners even if the realities are somewhat different for other reasons. The idea that higher education is inappropriate for women, especially if the education would require women to live far from home, is an obstacle in some settings, mainly in lower class and suburban areas.

While certain freedoms during waithood are reduced, others are increased, such as the ability to pursue educational and social activities without the worry of supporting oneself financially. The family is also a key source of emotional and social support for many young women. This can be especially important for young women in migrant or minority groups who experience oppression along lines other than gender. In this case, the family may represent a haven from discrimination in the outside world. The often violent conditions under the Israeli occupation have bolstered a Palestinian (neo-)patriarchy that is highly deleterious to women.<sup>44</sup> However, a study of Palestinian women's birthing experiences in Occupied East Jerusalem shows that husbands and family members are the most important support for young women in difficult times.<sup>45</sup> Embattled situations can strengthen patriarchal society, while also strengthening young women's reliance on and appreciation of family members.

## 4.3 Young women mobilizing in a globalized world

### From feminism to social justice

The political and social mobilization of young women was a conspicuous feature of the recent popular uprisings across the region. Young women not only participated in these protests, but many also took the lead in organizing them. Campaigns and activism have focused primarily on women's rights and gender equality, addressing issues as diverse as legal rights (reforms of the personal status codes and the penal and labour codes),

political representation and gender-based violence and harassment. Because gender-specific injustices are closely tied to wider forms of inequality and injustice, it is no surprise that, in much of the mobilization of women, gender-specific and broader issues are addressed together. This has been the case especially among the young women involved in the uprisings who have used the momentum of the protests and transitions and the climate of questioning authority to promote gender justice as an integral element of wider social justice. This was evident, for example, in the International Women's Day gathering in Tahrir Square in 2011, where Egyptian women joined one another to ensure that women's rights issues constituted essential claims within the broader issues being advocated, such as economic justice, freedom of expression and labour rights.

Some of the most powerful feminist mobilizations tackle gender-based violence and denounce the broader structural violence that underpins it. For example, a Palestinian feminist initiative, the Committee for Resisting Women's Killing, has demanded the use of the term *qatl al-nisa* (femicide) so as to counter the legitimization and justification of these crimes and to respond to the reliance on the term "honour crime" by the Israeli authorities to promote the idea that such violence originates in Palestinian and Arab culture.

Women's activism is diverse and stretches across the spectrum of traditional party-based politics to lobbying, informal activism and alternative cultural initiatives. Historically, movements of women across Arab countries comprise different strands: liberal feminist, reformist, anti-imperialist, nationalist, Marxist, Islamic and Islamist. In a context where much of the population is sensitive to or supportive of Islamist-oriented political projects, Islamic feminist movements have emerged. Groups taking this approach concentrate on the radical transformation of Islamic jurisprudence or otherwise use Islamic arguments to challenge gender inequality (box 4.3). Examples include movements that focus on challenging male guardianship laws or that use religious texts to challenge domestic violence. Many women's rights activists combine religious approaches with an international human rights framework, arguing that the two are compatible; an example is the transnational *Musawah* movement (box 4.3). Other groups pragmatically shift their focus depending on the issue or the authority they are lobbying. Many initiatives across the region

#### **Box 4.4 An inclusive space: Egypt's Imprint Movement**

The Imprint Movement is a voluntary social organization founded by a group of young women and men in Cairo in July 2012 to confront a range of social issues in Egypt, from illiteracy to the plight of street children. It was founded in the context of post-revolution Egypt. Through the revolution, many young people became aware of the oppressive conditions experienced by Egyptians, especially by Egyptian women. This awareness amplified the voices of the women who were speaking out for social justice and refusing to accept gender inequality. These voices were crucial because they broke the silent assumption that sexual harassment is an accepted element of Egyptian society. Nonetheless, a year after the beginning of the Egyptian revolution, many young people were still struggling to find a way to make their voices audible. The Imprint Movement sought to create a safe space that was not divided by political rifts, where people from different backgrounds could work side by side to improve society.

Against this backdrop grew the movement's first project, on sexual harassment. The project's co-founders, having witnessed an increase of oppression and violence against women during the upheaval, started the project in a belief in justice and security for all. The project is based on two fundamental principles: nonviolence and the power of dialogue. It completely rejects the use of physical or verbal violence to combat harassment, believing that the only way to

end harassment—itsself a phenomenon of violence—is through respectful dialogue. While the emphasis is on learning practical strategies by taking part in the project, Imprint members learn about the power structures that lie behind the phenomenon of sexual harassment, including patriarchy.

In addressing the problem of sexual harassment, the movement agreed on the importance of including men in its work, which came naturally as two of Imprint's co-founders are men. During Egypt's major holidays, when harassment is typically at its worst, Imprint organizes patrols in public spaces, made up of young male volunteers who intervene non-violently to prevent incidents of harassment, to deliver harassers to the police, and to help in filing legal claims against harassers. The patrols also act to promote positive examples of masculinity. They show that there is an alternative, that joining the movement against harassment is cool. The sight of men commanding respect without using violence or harassing women is as a powerful tool for change.

Imprint functions at the grassroots level and through advocacy, transmitting voices from the streets to the government through online media and through face-to-face meetings with officials. The movement relies on teams that work at various levels and aim at different targets, though all have the overarching aim of fighting sexual harassment.

*Source: Report team with input from Nihal Saad Zaghloul, co-founder of Imprint.*

are pursuing a secular approach across a broad spectrum of political trends.

#### **Obstacles to women's mobilization**

One obstacle faced by those mobilizing for gender equality is the suspicion that such groups are often met with. One reason for such suspicion is the history of "state feminism" within the Arab countries. State-building and modernizing efforts in many Arab countries in the 1970s and 1980s led to policies pushing for women's education and entry into the workplace alongside men. Subsequently, in order to consolidate state power, women's unions were incorporated into the ruling parties. As such, feminism continues hold some associated with an authoritarian past,

and a lack of independence from the ruling political class. The "NGO-ization"<sup>46</sup> of the women's movement in the past two decades or so has also fostered suspicion of women's mobilizations. The weighty presence of global funders has helped create a damaging view that feminist groups are "inauthentic" to local culture, or are "agents of the West".

Another major hindrance to women's political organization is the undemocratic character of political regimes that suppress dissent and ban civil society organizations and public gatherings. Women's groups often frame themselves as philanthropic or as community projects to avoid government interference. Another response is to seek refuge on the web to share information and mobilize (see below).

A common pattern is that women's rights activists are sidelined by broader movements. The involvement of young women in uprisings and revolutions has not necessarily led to the inclusion of their demands in post-transition political landscapes. In the Iraqi Kurdish region, young women are often forced to choose between airing their gender concerns among mainstream feminist groups (which do not address their specific position as Kurds) or forgoing such concerns so as to be included in the male-centric struggles for national liberation.<sup>47</sup> The relegation of feminist demands was a feature of the activism of young women in the recent uprisings. Thus, while the protests brought young men and women together in displays of solidarity with the struggles of women, young women can still be marginalized in male-dominated social movements, and many suffered abuse during the demonstrations.

#### **A new political consciousness that transcends divisions**

The massive participation of young women alongside men in the demonstrations, which included physical confrontation with security forces, has galvanized and altered political consciousness in the region. Such involvement in new forms of protest and solidarity has inspired a new political image of women in which the wider public, as well as women themselves, recognize young women as important agents of change. Public perceptions were impacted most in cases where the involvement of women in protests represented a dramatic shift in their customary behaviour.<sup>48</sup> Several feminist initiatives that have sprung up in the wake of the 2011 uprisings have been organized on the principles of participatory democracy, leading to grassroots entities characterized by less hierarchy and bureaucracy. These initiatives are re-politicizing the NGO-dominated landscape of women's rights and social justice.

The active involvement of women in the uprisings helped erode divisions within the women's movement and build new alliances in the wider

landscape of activism. The mobilization of women in street demonstrations, informal gatherings and online were often characterized by an overarching framework of dignity, which transcended differences among religious and political positions. This feature has been adopted and incorporated into many of the gender-focused groups that have been formed since the uprisings, such as the Cairo-based Harakat Basma (imprint movement) (box 4.4).

New research underlines that various political streams have begun to coalesce under the banner of women's rights. Research conducted on the February 20 Movement in Morocco and mobilizations focusing on the Moroccan family code that hinged on the debate between equality and the complementarity of the sexes represent instances in which feminism not only penetrated the social imagery of a new generation of activists, but also in which many of the young women who are mobilizing for equality are not anti-Islamist or anti-religious.<sup>49</sup> According to many participants in the pro-equality demonstrations, this new generation has a much broader base and is willing to advocate for women's rights and gender equality, regardless of the different religious and political views of its members.

Research on women's rights in Egypt highlights that various initiatives have drawn together young and older activists from diverse backgrounds and span different discourses ranging from human rights to Islamic feminism.<sup>50</sup>

Another feature of contemporary feminists in Arab countries is their willingness to broach new and potentially sensitive topics such as gender norms, sexual choices and the politics of the body. Previously, only a few well-known intellectuals such as Nawal al-Sa'dawi and Fatima Mernissi were prepared to tackle such issues, which most activists felt lay beyond the pale of social, religious and cultural acceptability. But with topics such as sexual harassment, FGM and femicide now openly targeted in recent feminist campaigns, an emerging group of young, urbanized and educated women's rights activists is speaking to these issues more directly.



## 4.4

# Removing the cultural and economic obstacles to women's equality

Although the experiences of young women in Arab countries have much in common, they are greatly affected by different specificities in the various political, legal and economic contexts across countries. The plight of young women in Iraq, Palestine and Syria, for example, is inextricably linked to the conflicts in those countries; war is leading to first-hand experiences of violence and displacement among young women that their counterparts living in relative peace do not face. Many women in the Gulf States, for example, occupy a complex gendered space where wealth and economic privilege, at least among women who are citizens, rather than migrant workers, are confronted by rigid social codes and constraints. These women are free from war and may never experience the violence of war; yet, they live without an elementary freedom of movement, of expression and of association and may have few means to challenge violence in the home.

The struggle against authoritarianism may push women's activism more deeply online, while women elsewhere in the world may have greater opportunities for offline action. The activism of young women varies according to the shape of the particular popular uprising or revolution in Arab countries. This diversity of experience across countries needs to be recognized. Failure to recognize it will favour ignorance of the complex roots, forms and outcomes of the fight of young women in Arab countries for their rights.

The variations in the experiences of young women in each Arab country, especially between rural and urban settings, are significant. Although no group in society is immune to gender-based violence, the violence is often associated with other social and structural deficiencies and tendencies towards marginalization. Among young women in poor rural areas, lack of access to contraception is likely to be compounded by lack of access to safe abortion to end unwanted pregnancies; in contrast, women in cities have a larger range of options. Economic conditions within rural areas also contribute to the greater prevalence of child marriages and gender-based violence, such as FGM.

Nonetheless, within cities, migrant status and race can dictate the obstacles women face. By virtue of her immigrant and indentured status, a migrant domestic worker in the GCC has little room to challenge the pervasive structures that affect her life. Meanwhile, well-educated, non-migrant, urban-dwelling, middle-class young women might have more room to challenge oppressive norms and structures, whether by joining an organization addressing taboo topics or through routine choices about non-traditional lifestyles.

While culture and religion are often central to discussions of women in Arab countries, the impacts of political economy are often neglected. Concepts of culture, stigma and taboo are present in young women's lives, yet these concepts are one part of the picture, not the driving force in inequalities. The negotiations in which young women engage vis-à-vis marriage and the views of their immediate families, for example, are closely related to changing demographics and economic necessity. For women seeking entry into the workforce, the realities and opportunities of the labour market are as crucial as any cultural sanction against women working outside the home.

The problems facing young women in Arab countries are linked to the dominant neoliberal economic model of the last three decades, which has failed to produce jobs or decent livelihoods for many of the young. Indeed, the challenges facing young women in the Arab countries have many parallels with those facing women living in other parts of the global South and some in the global North. Culture and political economy are intertwined. While the former calls for public education, changes in attitudes and religious reform, the latter requires structural change without which it will not be possible for women to achieve sustainable advances.



Young women in Arab countries are anything but passive victims. Women in these countries, as in many other locations, are suffering due to instability and conflict, gender-based violence, exclusion and discrimination in work and education. These problems should not be downplayed. Nonetheless, despite and in reaction to this situation, young women are far from victims of circumstance. Contrary to the mainstream global media depictions of women in Arab countries - which paint the latter as passive, oppressed, and voiceless - these women are negotiating and contesting systems of power in diverse, creative, and transformative ways.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> IRIN 2009.
- <sup>2</sup> Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Somalia (Provisional Constitution), Sudan, Syria and Tunisia explicitly enshrine gender equality in their constitutions in some way (although not all of these countries explicitly define and prohibit gender discrimination). Other constitutions—Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, United Arab Emirates, Yemen and Libya's Interim Constitutional Declaration—either make generalized commitments to equality that omit explicit references to sex or gender or make ambiguous statements about women's equality.
- <sup>3</sup> Only Tunisia and Jordan provide special protection against domestic violence, and none of the Arab countries explicitly recognizes marital rape as a crime. In Saudi Arabia, there is no written penal code; the legal approach is based on Sharia law, which is open to interpretation by individual judges. In Sudan, criminal law, which is based on Sharia law, allows discrimination against women in many contexts.
- <sup>4</sup> Through marriage to women citizens, true of Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia (applies only to non-Muslim husbands), United Arab Emirates and Yemen. In Qatar, the Qatari Citizenship Act (No. 38 of 2005) allows foreign husbands to apply for citizenship, but there are extensive restrictions. Bahrain, Jordan, Oman, Sudan, Syria and United Arab Emirates do not allow citizenship to be passed from mothers to children. In 2012, United Arab Emirates issued a one-time decree granting citizenship to 1,117 children of women citizens married to foreigners. In Qatar, the Qatari Citizenship Act grants non-citizen children the right to seek citizenship, but subject to extensive restrictions. In Egypt, children of Egyptian mothers and Palestinian fathers cannot obtain citizenship, and the law prohibits such children from joining the army and police forces or taking up certain government posts.
- <sup>5</sup> This is the case in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Syria, Sudan (unmarried only) and Tunisia.
- <sup>6</sup> Legally, women in only 13 Arab countries can travel freely without the permission of husbands or guardians: Algeria, Bahrain (clearly stipulated in the Constitution), Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia and United Arab Emirates.
- <sup>7</sup> See Moghadam 2004, p. 147. Personal status codes are a primary source of the authority of conservative patriarchal structures and are viewed as the legal basis for religious or cultural norms. This arises because of the origin of the codes in the struggle for national liberation against European colonialism.
- <sup>8</sup> IPU 2014a.
- <sup>9</sup> IPU 2014a.
- <sup>10</sup> IPU 2014a.
- <sup>11</sup> The Beijing Platform for Action was drafted during the Fourth World Conference on Women organized by the United Nations in Beijing in September 1995 to put forward the goals of equality, development and peace. The Platform supports the diversity of women's voices, the recognition that, despite progress, women suffer because of obstacles to achieving equality with men and that further progress is hindered, especially, by the poverty suffered by so many women and children.
- <sup>12</sup> Al-Nadawi 2010 (Arabic); Jameel Rashid 2006 (Arabic); Mekki Hamadi 2010 (Arabic); Richter-Devroe 2008.
- <sup>13</sup> UN 2013a.
- <sup>14</sup> World Bank 2015b.
- <sup>15</sup> World Bank 2015b.
- <sup>16</sup> Ridge 2010.
- <sup>17</sup> Lewis and Lockheed 2007.
- <sup>18</sup> This term was coined by Diana Pearce in 1978 in relation to her research in the United States. It has since come into common parlance and used in reference to women's economic position on a global scale.
- <sup>19</sup> Moghadam 2009.
- <sup>20</sup> Mansur, Shteiwi, and Murad 2010.
- <sup>21</sup> CAWTAR 2015 (Arabic).
- <sup>22</sup> Amnesty International 2014.
- <sup>23</sup> UNICEF 2013c, p. 20; 37.
- <sup>24</sup> Mansur, Shteiwi, and Murad 2010.
- <sup>25</sup> Kandiyoti 1988.
- <sup>26</sup> Despite common characterization of the 'Arab family,' the realities are more nuanced, meshed with elements such as class, ethnicity, urban/rural residence and the nature of the state.
- <sup>27</sup> Moghadam 2004.
- <sup>28</sup> UN-ESCWA 2013a; Moghadam 2004; De Bel-Air 2012.

- <sup>29</sup> Obermeyer 2000; Singerman 2007.
- <sup>30</sup> Carmichael 2011.
- <sup>31</sup> Roudi-Fahimi and Ibrahim 2013; World Vision 2013.
- <sup>32</sup> See <http://www.hrea.org/programs/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment/moudawana/>
- <sup>33</sup> SIGI 2014.
- <sup>34</sup> Roudi-Fahimi and El Feki 2011.
- <sup>35</sup> Roudi-Fahimi and others 2012.
- <sup>36</sup> UN 2014.
- <sup>37</sup> Roudi-Fahimi and others 2012.
- <sup>38</sup> The mobility and displacement associated with conflicts in many Arab countries today are risk factors for sexual transmitted infections.
- <sup>39</sup> UNFPA 2013a.
- <sup>40</sup> It is illegal except to save a woman's life in Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Somalia, Syria, United Arab Emirates and Yemen. In some of these countries, it is explicitly allowed by law, while, in others, the allowance is only implied through general legal principles. See also WHO 2011c.
- <sup>41</sup> Center for Reproductive Rights 2007; UN 2013b.
- <sup>42</sup> WHO 2011c.
- <sup>43</sup> Dabash and Roudi-Fahimi 2008, p. 7.
- <sup>44</sup> Moghadam 2004.
- <sup>45</sup> Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2012.
- <sup>46</sup> Al-Ali and Pratt 2011.
- <sup>47</sup> AWID 2013.
- <sup>48</sup> Salime 2012.
- <sup>49</sup> Amar 2011; Singerman 2013.

