

Women in MENA Enter Labor Markets at Half Global Rate says World Bank Report

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BEIRUT March 15, 2013 - The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has taken admirable strides over the past four decades to bridge gender gaps, especially in the areas of education and health. But, paradoxically, these investments in human capital have not been matched by increases in womens economic and political participation and women enter the MENA labor market at half the average global rate.
The World Bank today launched a new report entitled Opening Doors: Gender Equality in the Middle East and North Africa at an event jointly hosted by the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington DC in collaboration with the World Bank.
The changes sweeping across the region for the past two years offer opportunities for advancing gender equality as well as risks of regression. As Inger Andersen, World Bank Vice President for the MENA region writes in her foreword to the report: "It is not only in the protest squares that we have seen women whose aspirations are changing rapidly but increasingly unmet?. This fact is surely an important one to grapple with as the region undergoes a profound transformation.
The report highlights the set of constraints to womens decision-making, choice, mobility and opportunity. "Often what stands between women and jobs are legal and social barriers, said Manuela Ferro, Director for Poverty Reduction and Economic Management in MENA at the World Bank. "MENA countries have wisely invested in womens education but they are not yet fully tapping into their potential to contribute to growth and prosperity. At the end of the day, greater participation of women in the labor force is smart economics.
The findings of the report draw on quantitative economic data, qualitative research and other international evidence to identify priority areas where policy actions can further gender equality. Job creation in MENAs private sector has been too limited to absorb the large and growing number of young jobseekers, the report points out. And within this already limited sphere, women are unable to compete on an equal footing. Young women face unemployment rates as high as 40 percent in many countries in the region. Thus, a critical policy challenge will be to create a large and diverse set of job opportunities for women and men. Even if jobs are created, targeted efforts are needed on multiple fronts to increase womens participation in the economic and political spheres, and these efforts must be specific to each countrys context. These include changes in policies to secure womens equality under the law, addressing skills deficits and mismatches and actively promoting womens economic, civic and political participation. Consultations were held across the region to gather input for the report. Women affirmed again and again their desire to work and highlighted the lack of job opportunities, emphasizing the constraints posed by conservative gender norms. A recurrent theme in these discussions was the role played by laws that govern womens ability to exercise choice, move freely and access opportunities. Based on the reports findings, Tara Vishwanath, Lead Economist in the Poverty Reduction and Economic Management group, outlined a set of recommendations: "Some countries will need to bridge the remaining gender gaps in health and education and improve service delivery, she said. "All will have to actively foster womens economic opportunities by removing constraints to their participation in the labor market and by nurturing entrepreneurship. Important too is making sure women have greater voice and access to a fair legal system. The report emphasizes that designing effective policy packages will depend on country context and must be guided by evidence and data. For more information and to access the full report, please visit: <http://worldbank.org/mena>
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