

The Marriage Mystery: Exploring Late Marriage in MENA

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Abstract¹

Recent trends in developing countries reveal that women are marrying at a later age. A 1996 study of early marriage in developing countries revealed that the Middle East and North Africa region had the greatest decline in the proportion married before age 20, with some countries experiencing as dramatic as a 35 to 41% declines.²

This article will show how the changing economic structure is impacting the dynamics of the marriage social contract in the Middle East. The basis of this work is to entice further research into exploring marriage as an important variable beyond fertility levels. In order to impact reform or policy on the demographic trend towards an increasing single, female population, perceptions and the roles of women other than mother and wife need to be examined. In addition, policy makers need to develop safety nets for women who are currently marginalized in the labor markets, and are often seen as dependents on either fathers or husbands.

Introduction

For a long time, the picture painted of the MENA region was that of a homogenous high fertility region. In the early 1950's, the average total fertility rate (TFR) for MENA ranged around 7.³ Demographers and family planning programs had little hope of being able to curb the high population growth that was anticipated. However, around the mid-1980s, the homogenous image was shattered, as TFRs began to widely differ from country to county. Although each country in MENA had a different starting point, there was a clear decline in TFR across the region. According to a study by Hoda Rashad and Zeinab Khadr, even the late starters, such as Libya, Sudan, and Syria, experienced an unprecedented pace of change. The study points out that "very few countries in the world managed to reach comparable magnitudes of decline even when the period of change was extended for fifteen years."⁴

Other countries that have experienced a similar trend in declining fertility levels, have found that marriage has played a keen role in lowering the TFR. A 1994 study done in Japan demonstrated that the decline in fertility among Japanese women was attributed not to contraceptive use but to late age at marriage. The study maintained that because Japanese women have married at a mean age of 27, there is a lower fertility rate. The researchers contend that delayed marriage has played the most important role in Japan's post-1973 fertility decline. Similarly studies throughout Europe and the United States, reveal that women of the age range 20-24 who were ever married fell from 64.2% in 1970 to 34% in 1994.⁵ As a result, late marriage has been recognized as a universal trend. The trend is most noted in developed and industrialized nations, and many population and health specialists began to place an emphasis on the links between marriage at a later age and fertility.

Over the past decade many studies exploring how the increase of marriage age in MENA impacted TFR levels emerged. Indeed, many studies conducted demonstrated a clear link between marriage and fertility. Two studies conducted in 1996 showed that lower Egyptian fertility was directly linked to later marriage.⁶ A 1997 study conducted in Morocco also linked the declining levels of fertility to later marriage. The study reports that the median age at first marriage among women aged 25-49 was 20.3 years in 1995; it was 17.5 years among those aged 45-49 and 23.8 years among those aged 25-29, suggesting a sharp increase over time.⁷

The two trends that seem to be emerging on the demographic front are a change in marriage patterns, often referred to as a "nuptial transitions", and a decline in fertility. Such changes are impacting the region on several levels, including social capital, security planning, and a new questioning of gender roles.

The question of fertility has received the primary

attention in terms of demographic shifts. While a clear pattern of rising age at first time marriages among women has been established by previous studies, there has been little analysis of the causes and consequences, particularly on the well being of women and the overall women's movement in the region. Demographers praise the increase in female education and women's entry to the labor market, pointing out the unforeseen decline in fertility rates in the region as a positive step towards development. More conservative and traditional society blame westernization, and foreshadow an increase in crime and social fragmentation as families are dismantled. Somewhere in the middle, many social scientists caution that despite the many benefits of the rising age of marriage among women, there may also be some consequences lurking in the back ground. Such consequences can have an impact on everything from politics to economics and society.

The importance of marriage in understanding fertility trends in the region has been recognized as an essential variable since the mid 1950s. As a result, marriage has been considered a crucial variable for social and demographic studies over the past few decades.⁸ Particularly in the MENA region, numerous studies have attributed the decline in fertility to the changing patterns of marriage, more specifically, the rising age at first time marriage.

However, in terms of understanding the conditions of economic development and exploring the well-being and security of women, marriage has often been passively researched. Marriage is considered one of the most important decisions an individual will ever make in his life, and it is one of the most important social events for the family and community in the Arab world. Recently, social scientists have expressed concern about the limited amount of research that focuses on marriage. Sholkamy and Khidir explain that while the patterns and processes of marriage has changed at accelerated levels, "our social science understanding of them has remained slow in its pace and classical in its outlook".⁹

Despite the fact that in MENA marriage is seen as all but universal, especially for women, little research has been done on marriage beyond the question of its impact on fertility. According to Diane Singerman, the fact that "cultural blind economic analysis has not recognized the place of marriage in local economies" has led to misguided and possibly inaccurate measurements of poverty, particularly in Egypt.¹⁰ The fact that a one time expenditure, of which entire families spend years saving for, and results in the spending of four and a half times GNP per capital¹¹ is ignored, calls into question the design and implementation of many of the

poverty alleviation and development strategies for MENA.

Therefore, there is a strong argument that the question of the trend in marriage should not be limited to the impact on fertility. Marriage plays a crucial and important role in the social fabric of societies, particularly in MENA. Therefore, an understanding of the socio-economic forces underlying the rising age of marriage, and the possible consequences this trend can cause is crucial to the development of policy planning.

This article does not attempt to pinpoint exact causes and consequences. Instead, it hopes to shed some light on an under researched area that could contribute to a wide spectrum of areas. It hopes to bring attention to important aspects, and possible consequences that could affect not only the economic conditions, but the future well being of women in the region. In particular, the question of marriage could have a direct impact on poverty alleviation, demography changes, and the question of women security and future safety nets.

Methods and Materials¹²

The primary data source used in the paper are from The United Nations Women's Indicators and Statistics Database, WISTAT. However, data was supplemented with information from other United Nations agencies and World Bank research papers. In addition, many of the examples were based in previous research and analysis of census, household surveys, and records used in the relevant country. The primary research is based on a trend analysis of the data over the last few decades. A literature review of marriage and fertility studies has been incorporated as part of the analysis. The annexes provide detailed information on the data used for the analysis and graphs.

Is the Age Really Rising?

The evidence of the rise of first time marriage age is slowly being revealed in population and fertility studies in the region. Rashad demonstrates the steady increase of women's age at first time marriage in the MENA region.¹³ In addition, Mary Kawar describes the increase age at marriage for women as one of the variables contributing to change in the region.¹⁴ The trend, coupled with a consistent decrease in fertility rates since the 1980s, implies that some significant socioeconomic changes are occurring in the region.

No matter what the focus of the study, almost all conclude that marriage age in MENA is rising in one form or another. The actual rise differs from county to county, and can be as dramatic as ten years in Libya, where the average marriage age of 19 in 1970 increased to 29 in 1990, and to one year in a county such as Yemen.

Despite the wide variations, it is clear that women in MENA are marrying at a later stage in life. The chart and graph below demonstrates the rising age for various countries in MENA over the past three decades.

Table 1: Singulate mean age at first time marriage

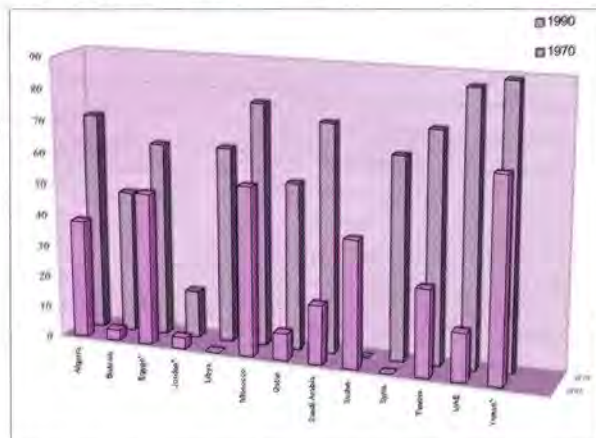
	1970	1990
Algeria	19.3	23.7
Egypt	20	21.6
Bahrain	20	25.6
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	18.7	29**
Morocco	19.4	22.2
Saudi Arabia	19	21.7
Sudan	18.7	24.1
Syrian Arab Republic	20.7	23*
Tunisia	20.9	25
United Arab Emirates	16***	23.1
Yemen	18	19.1

* estimate from Syrian Case Study
 ** from Rasha and Zafar (1998)
 *** from Rasha and Zafar (1998) based on cohort 25-29

Source: The United Nations Women's Indicators and Statistics Database, WISTAT, 2000.

Overall, the age at first time marriage is not only increasing, but has slowly shifted away from the teenage marriages. Typically, girls as young as 16 were married, and started producing by within a year or two. However, the percentage of girls married in their late teens had decreased significantly, as demonstrated for some countries in the graph below.

Graph 1: Percentage Of Girls Married In Their Late Teens, 1970 and 1990



Source: The United Nations Women's Indicators and Statistics Database, WISTAT, 2000.

The chart below demonstrates the dramatic decline in fertility for a few countries in the region over the past three decades:

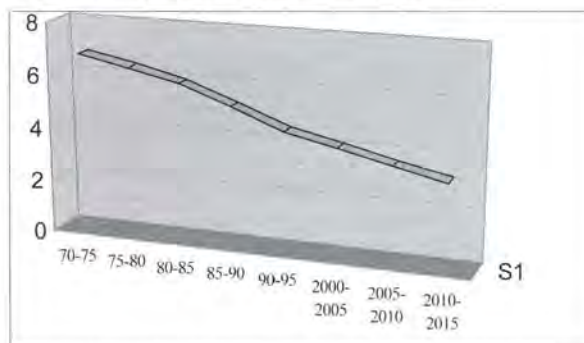
Table 2: Fertility Rates Over the Past Few Decades

	1970-1975	1980-1985	1990-1995
Algeria	7.38	6.35	4.3
Bahrain	5.94	4.63	3.43
Egypt	5.53	5.06	3.8
Jordan	7.79	6.76	5.58
Kuwait	6.9	4.87	3.2
Lebanon	4.92	3.79	3.09
Libya	7.58	7.17	4.1
Morocco	6.89	5.1	3.33
Oman	7.2	7.2	6.7
Qatar	6.76	5.45	4.1
Saudi Arabia	7.3	7.28	6.37
Sudan	6.67	6.42	5
Syria	7.69	7.38	4.7
Tunisia	6.21	4.9	3.13
UAE	6.35	5.23	3.8
Yemen	7.61	7.6	7.6

Source: The United Nations Women's Indicators and Statistics Database, WISTAT, 2000.

This dramatic decrease in fertility caused everyone from policy makers to development specialists to take notice. The high fertility rates had long been seen as the enemy of promoting women's rights in the region, with the absence of low education, low family planning alternatives, and low work opportunities leaving women dis-empowered. Moghadem asserts that, "stripped of their economic/productive role, women depend on motherhood performance for status and prestige and on children's labor as a strategy for survival".¹⁵ The rapid decline sent a message that something was changing, and for those interested in promoting women's entry into the workforce or public arena the time had come to open new opportunities. The graph charts the TFR for the region using the average from sixteen countries over the past few decades:

Graph 2: Average TFR for the MENA Region



Source: The United Nations Women's Indicators and Statistics Database, WISTAT, 2000.

The three primary variables most often emphasized as affecting marital patterns are female labor force participation, woman's access to formal education - particularly higher education - and urbanization.¹⁶ A quick look reveals most MENA countries are undergoing development changes simultaneously with the consistent increase in age of first time marriage. One population study in Jordan, after controlling for other variables, was able to demonstrate the strong effect of marital status on female labor force participation, with single women having significantly higher participation than currently married women.¹⁷

The data available for the MENA region, shows a clear rise in all the factors leading to delayed marriage. There is an increase in education and in women's labor force participation. The percentages for economically active women are becoming higher and higher. The chart below demonstrates the increase in economically active women in the region over the last three decades. The actual number of active women is not fully captured, and would be larger than the estimate if informal work such as agriculture or services were captured in the numbers.

Table 3: Total Economically Active and Not Economically Active By Age, for Total, Urban, and Rural Area*

	1970			1980			1990		
	Total Female population	Active	Not Active	Total Female population	Active	Not Active	Total Female population	Active	Not Active
Algeria	-	-	-	4,207,195	160,000	4,047,191	4	491,400	5,825,483
Bahrain	52,276	3,243	49,033	88,822	19,325	69,235	262	39,591	95,814
Egypt	11,915,812	653,417	11,262,395	10,868,206	695,912	10,169,966	2,328	1,398,149	12,764,350
Jordan	-	-	-	498,860	33,334	465,526	-	-	-
Kuwait	162,539	16,217	146,322	312,963	63,277	249,686	-	132,128	293,009
Lebanon	603,270	89,280	513,990	-	-	-	-	-	-
Libyan	994,453	29,358	965,095	847,144	106,582	740,562	-	-	-
Morocco	4,162,260	523,081	3,639,179	5,979,446	1,009,908	4,969,538	-	1,629,736	6,690,745
Qatar	39,419	1,393	38,026	-	-	-	-	19,635	51,724
Saudi Arabia	1,607,129	75,276	1,531,853	-	-	-	-	166,737	2,263,698
Sudan	-	-	-	4,995,098	1,549,410	3,318,244	127,444	-	-
Syria	1,528,025	131,808	1,396,217	2,194,188	156,753	2,037,435	-	627,786	3,616,617
Tunisia	-	-	-	2,082,400	455,550	1,626,850	-	494,300	1,938,989
UAE	-	-	-	96,310	9,803	86,389	118	65,415	204,401
Yemen	-	-	-	1,581,649	132,012	1,443,645	5,992	605,126	2,981,892

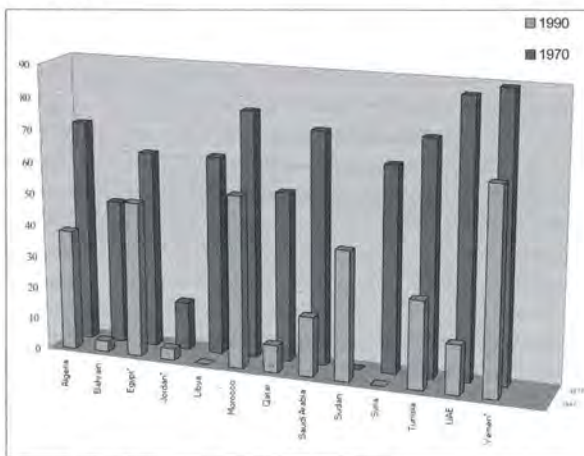
* The sum of active and not active may not always equal total population because there are some numbers whose status was unknown

** It is the opinion of the author that not active is not accurately defined, as there are many studies pointing out the necessity to include house work and other house hold activities as participation in the economy

Source: The United Nations Women's Indicators and Statistics Database, WISTAT, 2000.

In addition, there is a clear increase in education for women, and a decrease in illiteracy. Again, this varies across the region, and in comparison to other regions in the global community remains small, but the increase is still an important variable to understanding the increase in marriage age. The graph below demonstrates the decrease in illiteracy rates for a few selection countries in the region for age group 15-24:¹⁸

Graph 3: Illiteracy Rates for Age Group 15-24 in 1970 and 1990



Source: The United Nations Women's Indicators and Statistics Database, WISTAT, 2000.

The opportunities to work and to receive education undoubtedly played a role in women's lives in MENA. The traditional norm and role of women was slowly shifting, and more options were being presented. According to a UN and the Advancement of Women 1996 report, "women's commitment to and need for the family had traditionally been higher than men's because basic economic survival and the acquisition of valid social roles has been difficult for women to achieve outside of marriage and child bearing".¹⁹ With economic survival and social roles rapidly changing due to a shift in economic structures, women are more likely to make use of the choices set before them. This has caused some women to take a more assertive decision to assert ideological or financial independence.²⁰

Beyond Economics and Demography

There are many changes that have been occurring for women in MENA beyond education, health, and labor force participation. Women have emerged as a strong force, particularly during the Nasser age. Personal Status laws, community participation, and an increase in political representation are common trends in MENA. Annex 8 shows the amount of female participation in MENA governments over the past few decades. Indeed, a look at the political and pub-

lic participation of women in the MENA region shows a steady increase. As shown in Annex 9 all but a few countries have granted women the right to vote. The countries that have not yet granted women a voice in the political arena, such as Kuwait or Bahrain, have been grappling with the issue over the past few years. Although this may not have a direct impact on the rising age of marriage, it is an important factor in determining the progress and social outlook towards women in the public sphere.

Beyond economics, this new trend may also have great implications on the social structure. Marriage holds a primary place from a religious perspective, with the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) equating marriage to the completion of half one's religious duties. With Islam as the predominant religion, women's choice to delay marriage could be seen as a challenge to the religious status quo. There is a strong cultural belief that western women's movements resulted in sexual liberation that destroyed morality and dismantled the family within the region. As a result, the delayed marriage age may be met with a backlash from grassroot groups who feel their social structure is being threatened, and the primary target could be women.

Undoubtedly, the backlash may also have some roots in the overall harsh economic conditions. With single women forming 65.2% of economically active women in countries such as Jordan,²¹ and women's employment levels exceeding men's in MENA as a whole²², women may be perceived as competitors in the jobmarket. With high unemployment rates in MENA, men may feel threatened and thus react against women as a whole.

Liberating or Limiting?

The juxtaposition of these trends in marriage, family structure, education, and labor force participation illustrates the two faces of the decline in marriage. On the one hand, the decline in marriage, particularly for young people, is strongly associated with women's longer periods of schooling and increased labor force attachment. Furthermore, the educational and career opportunities that have become available since the 1980s have led many women to delay marriage and childbearing.

Numerous studies on women and development have revealed that among the positive effects of women who work in developing countries is a greater role in the family household. Women can avoid accusations and the psychological feeling of being an added burden on their husbands, as exemplified by one common phrase where unemployed women are referred to as "enemies of the spoon". Moghadem explains that there is "growing evidence from around the world that employed women, including working-class women with factory jobs, value their work for the economic independence and family support it provides and the opportunity to

delay marriage and childbearing."²³ In a series of interviews conducted by Fatema Mernissi in Morocco in 1990, women praised their work experience and asserted that they would continue to work even if the additional income was not needed.²⁴

Despite Mernissi and Moghadam's argument that equity and empowerment will only come with access to economic resources, there is much criticism from women in the region of the push towards employment and education. They agree with the conservative forces that are often dismissed as part of the patriarchal or Islamists male dogma that the phenomenon of late marriage is indicative of a social problem. Many highly educated women involved in development programs are quick to point out that the simple equation of women plus work equals liberation is faulty. Along with work, comes the potential for exploitation. Not only can factories and corporations exploit women with low paying jobs and long hours, but there is potential exploitation within the household as well. With the poor economic situation in MENA, many men are looking to establish a two income household. Women feel that this allows men an excuse to reduce their role as provider, and place a double burden on women of taking care of the household and having to earn an income. One Egyptian woman asserts, "We do not spoil our men the way you [women in the West] do. We work at home and men should work outside and provide for us."²⁵

In addition, studies such as Singermann and Rashad and Zafar, have demonstrated that late marriage is not merely related to women's conscious choice, once they were exposed to a number of opportunities. In many cases, the economic cost of marriage has become high and has developed into a burden on the men. As a result, marriage is often delayed for men until the 30s, and there is an increasing trend to marry outside of the community. In addition, the lack of marriage feasibility - not enough eligible bachelors due to demographics (too young or too old) or male migration to the Gulf or West also plays a role. These are just a few examples of potential socio-economic causes demonstrating the fact that there are several other factors that may not directly pertain to women's status causing the trend in late marriage

Beyond the causes, there are several consequences that are not necessarily positive, particularly in terms of the women's movements. Backlashes such as the ones women are experiencing in Morocco and Egypt may be exacerbated by a rising population of single women, particularly as they enter the job market.²⁶

The UN reports that "most people still marry but they marry later in life, especially women. As a result of these changes, many women - many more women than men - spend a significant part of their lives without a

partner, with important consequences for their economic welfare."²⁷ Despite the changing economic situation, social norms may not accept single women to live an independent life. Marriage has always been considered a woman's way of securing a future.

As women's level of education and financial independence increases, the potential for finding a suitable match becomes smaller and smaller. Many men are finding that the cost of marriage is too demanding, and many are forced to enter the labor market at a young age (and thus do not pursue higher education) or migrate to other countries (such as the Gulf area) to secure a job. One of the primary motives is to save for marriage.²⁸ This is adding extra pressure on young men wanting to start a family, and causing frustration and resentment among many men, whose age for first time marriage is also substantially increasing. One elderly woman cautions against men who lack the financial capability to marry maintains: "you have to watch these young men today. They want to have a family, but they do not want to pay for them ...In our time, men would feel embarrassed to ask about their wives' income ...A real man would rather die than ask his wife to feed the household."²⁹ Such factors also play a role in the current trend of women late marriage. The overall MENA region faces high unemployment rates and with a large young population, men are often suffocated by the little opportunities available.

The increase in women's education and entry into the labor force, although minimal, further aggravates the situation. Very few social scientists or economists recognize the financial and psychological burden being placed on men during the marriage process. Many educated women recognize the difficulty for men of their generation to play the role of sole provider, and have gone through informal means (such as the *Zawaj Urfi*³⁰), where the man and woman marry with only two witnesses and no contract and no civil registration) to marry the man of their choice. However, this form of marriage denies women many of their rights (such as alimony, child support, or custody).

Conclusions

Despite the increase of women opportunities in terms of access to education and the labor market, the growing population of single women is still at risk. Many of the international labor conventions have not been ratified by Arab nations. For example, six Arab countries have not yet ratified convention 100 on equal pay for men and women doing similar jobs, and eleven countries have not yet ratified convention number 100 on equal treatment of both genders in terms of social security.³¹

At the same time, the increase in the number of single women raises many questions related to several cultur-

al, traditional, and religious issues. This may cause a potential backlash against women in the region. Although the opportunities for women are still small in number and often limited to small percentages of the urban population, they have been visible enough to result in opposition by conservative forces. The relative rise in the position of females is seen by conservative forces as having the greatest potential of any factor to destroy the patriarchal family and its political, economic, and demographic structure.³² As a result, it is important to explore the social impact of the current trend in marriage.

With the social aspect in mind, it is also important to continue opening doors for women in the region in terms of economic development. Programs that incorporate economic development and social awareness objectives should be implemented. As mentioned above, women's participation in the labor force is still the lowest among all the regions, and although there may be social or cultural restraints, there are still little policy or governmental support for women. Moghadam asserts, "If Middle Eastern women were to lose their position in the labor market, it would certainly not be reasons of religion or culture. Economic and political forces shape their employment to a far greater extent."³³

Moghadam also maintains that one of the greatest challenges facing women is the myth of difference versus inferior. Middle Eastern women maintain that they play different roles in society, but that does not mean they are inferior. Moghadam feels that this contributes to a self-censorship or a self imposed obstacle to women reaching their full potential. However, the attitude towards work in MENA is probably more indicative of the double burden imposed on women who work. Women are fully responsible for all domestic chores, since it is not socially acceptable for any form of employment to disrupt the household. In a study conducted by Homa Hoodfar, almost all informants thought that work was unnecessary for women, and that "if a woman chooses to work, she had to do so without jeopardizing her domestic responsibilities."³⁴ There is little incentive to add the responsibilities of paid employment on top of the day to day home responsibilities. The situation for working women is further aggravated by the lack of social supportive facilities (nurseries, cooperatives, etc)³⁵.

Furthermore, according to Hoodfar's study, almost all women, whether employed or not, felt that there was no point in working if they had no control over the income. Since in most cases, the husband is the head of the household, the income goes straight to him. Therefore, many women rejected this double burden, and instead chose to focus on the household rather than work. The younger generation is following in the steps of their mothers delaying the burden of marriage and home.

No matter what the explanation for women's decision to enter or avoid the labor force, there is a clear shift in marriage patterns and there is a strong need to understand the social and economic factors involved. The changing dynamics of the marriage market increase the risk of not marrying at all. Despite the increase witnessed, participation of Arab women in the labor force

remains the lowest of any region in the world. In 1996, women represented 40% of the world labor force, and the participation of Arab women in the Middle East and North Africa Region at that time did not exceed 26%. If marriage is being replaced by women's integration into the labor market, it is important to insure a secure place for women in that market.

End Notes

1. This article is based on a paper presented at the Second Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting, Florence, March 21-25, 2001, Mediterranean Programme, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute.
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5. Blau, Francine D; Kahn, Lawrence M; Waldfogel, Jane. "Understanding Young Women's Marriage Decisions: The Role of Labor and Marriage Market Conditions" *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, v 53, n 4, (2000), p.624
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9. Sholkamy, H and Khidir, Z. A Monograph of Arab Families in Transition: *Social Changes and the Implications of Nuptiality Transition*. 1999
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11. Ibid.
12. At this point, it is important to note some constraints. The MENA regions as a whole have two frequent challenges often identified by a number of disciplines from economists to demographers to sociologists. First, is the question of what defines a region. Although the MENA region is known to share the common language of Arabic, and has a majority religion of Islam, in economic terms each country and area differs greatly. In addition, the social and political environment of each country also differs greatly. The second difficulty often encountered by researchers in MENA is the lack of accurate data. This difficulty is further exacerbated when doing research on women or gender. As a result, whereas there is a clear established pattern of rising age across the region, the causes and consequences often differ. In order to explore the various different experiences in the region, case studies have proven an effective way to explore different areas and circumstances to analyze the current trend. Due to the political situation of the region, other countries with high political instability or civil war (such as Lebanon and Algeria) or external factors (such as sanctions in Iraq or the Palestinian occupation), make it difficult to understand the trend beyond a specific country analysis. Although no case studies were done in this paper, it is strongly recommended that future case studies be conducted.
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16. Singh, Susheela and Samara, Renee. "Early Marriage Among Women in Developing Countries" *International Family Planning Perspectives*. 1996. p.148.
17. Shakhateh, Hussein. "Determinant of Female Labor-Force in Jordan". *Gender and Development in the Arab World*. London: Zed Books Ltd. 1995. p.140
18. To view illiteracy rates for male and female population for various age groups over the past three decades, see Annex 6. For more information on education achievements for women over the past two decades see Annex 7.
19. The United Nations and the Advancement of Women. United Nations. P.135
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