

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION IN IRAQ, JORDAN AND LEBANON



REPORT NO: AUS0001349 · MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

STATE OF THE MASHREQ WOMEN FLAGSHIP 1

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION IN IRAQ, JORDAN AND LEBANON



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<https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/mashreq-gender-facility>

EXECU SUMM

ATIVE ARY





Female labor force participation in the Mashreq is exceptionally low, a problem likely to be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This report calls for action in the following areas: stronger economic growth, effective policy action to close legal gaps, promotion of more egalitarian attitudes, access to quality childcare, and the provision of safe transportation. The report also notes significant opportunities in the digital economy; however, without action to close the digital gender gap, those opportunities could become another barrier.

INTRODUCTION

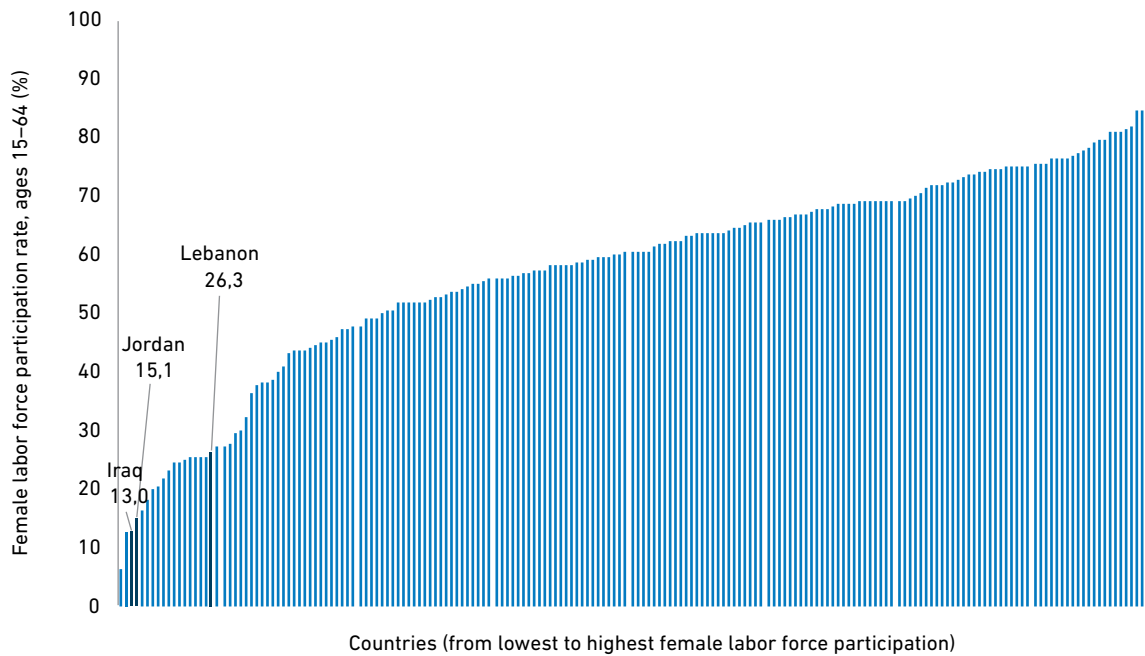
Women's participation in the labor market in the Mashreq countries of Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon remains among the lowest in the world. Less than 15 percent of women work in Iraq and Jordan, and only 26 percent do in Lebanon. Although low levels of economic participation are found in other countries within the region, Iraq and Jordan rank among the countries with the lowest female participation rates in the world, only after the war-torn Syrian Arab Republic and Republic of Yemen. The participation rates for women in these three countries lie between 25 and 35 percentage points below the international average given their per capita GDP (Figure ES.1).

Participation is particularly low for less educated women. Few non-tertiary-educated women are in the labor

force, compared to two-thirds of women with tertiary education in Iraq and Lebanon and half of those in Jordan (Figure ES.2). Notably, differences in labor force participation between educated and uneducated women are larger than between educated men and women. With younger women increasingly having more education, labor force participation rates among the young are significantly higher in Lebanon and, to a lesser extent, Jordan. (Figure ES.3). In some other countries, a pattern of sharply increasing participation among younger age groups marked the beginning of a generational shift in which younger women participate to a greater degree in the labor market and older cohorts slowly leave the working-age population.

FIGURE ES.1.

Female labor force participation rates, selected Mashreq countries compared to rest of the world



Source: Based on modeled International Labour Organization data from the World Development Indicators.

Women in the Mashreq countries who are willing to participate in the labor market face high unemployment rates and tend to be paid less for similar work. Female unemployment is nearly twice that for men, reaching almost 25 percent in Jordan—meaning that low rates of female participation mask an even lower rate of employment. Moreover, those women who do work tend to work in certain sectors and earn less than men do for comparable jobs. The gender wage gap for women and men working similar jobs with similar education and experience is about 17 percent in Jordan's private sector and 18 percent and 22 percent for all workers in Iraq and Lebanon, respectively. This combi-

nation of high unemployment and lower pay likely discourages some women from seeking work at all.

The governments of Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon have set ambitious targets for increasing female labor participation, which, if achieved and sustained over the longer term, will have substantial potential impacts on economic growth. From 2000 to 2017, the annual economic growth rate in Iraq was 1.4 percent; increases in the value added by female workers contributed 0.3 percentage points of this (Figure ES.4). In Jordan, females contributed 0.5 points of the 1.5 percent annual growth rate; in Lebanon, they contributed only 0.2 points of the 1.5 percent growth rate. The three

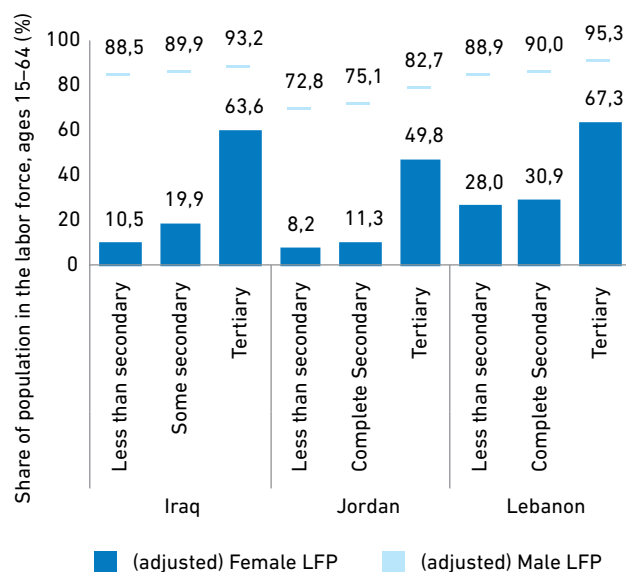
governments have targeted increases in women's labor force participation rates by 2025 of 5 percentage points in Iraq and Lebanon and to a rate of 24 percent in Jordan. If the targeted increases in participation of five points over five years are not only met but also continued for a further decade, annual economic growth would be increased by 1.6 percentage points in Iraq, 2.5 points in Jordan, and 1.1 points in Lebanon by 2035.

Achieving these targets will not be easy; this report outlines the many constraints on economic participation for women at different life stages and from different backgrounds. Few countries have achieved the increases targeted by the Mashreq countries in such a short



FIGURE ES.2

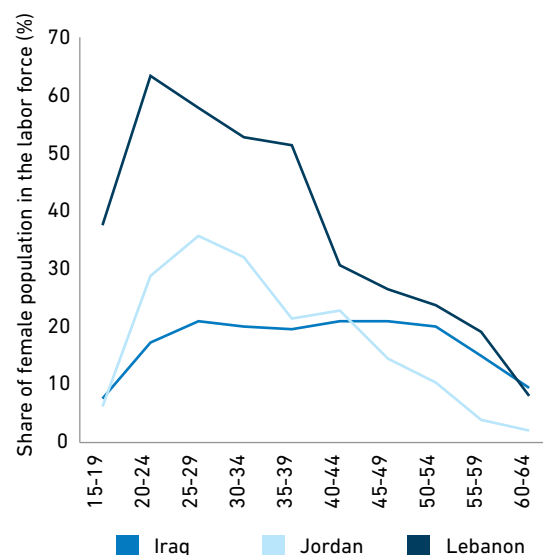
Labor force participation in selected Mashreq countries, by education level



Sources: 2011/12 Lebanon Household Budget Survey; 2012 Iraq Household Socio-Economic Survey; 2016 Jordan Labor Market Panel Survey 2016.
Note: Adjusted labor force participation (LFP) rate is defined as the share of women (men) in the labor force over the total population, excluding those in full-time education.

FIGURE ES.3.

Female labor force participation rates in selected Mashreq countries, by age group



Sources: 2011/12 Lebanon Household Budget Survey; 2012 Iraq Household Socio-Economic Survey; 2016 Jordan Labor Market Panel Survey 2016.
Note: Participation rates for women aged 25-64, excluding those who may still be enrolled in full-time education.

time and beginning from such a low starting point. This report summarizes the barriers to women's economic participation and outlines a forward-looking agenda for policy makers and researchers. It combines a life-cycle approach to analyze each constraint as it occurs at a particular critical point in a woman's life (represented in Figure ES.5), while recognizing that this experience will be different for women of different socio-economic backgrounds.

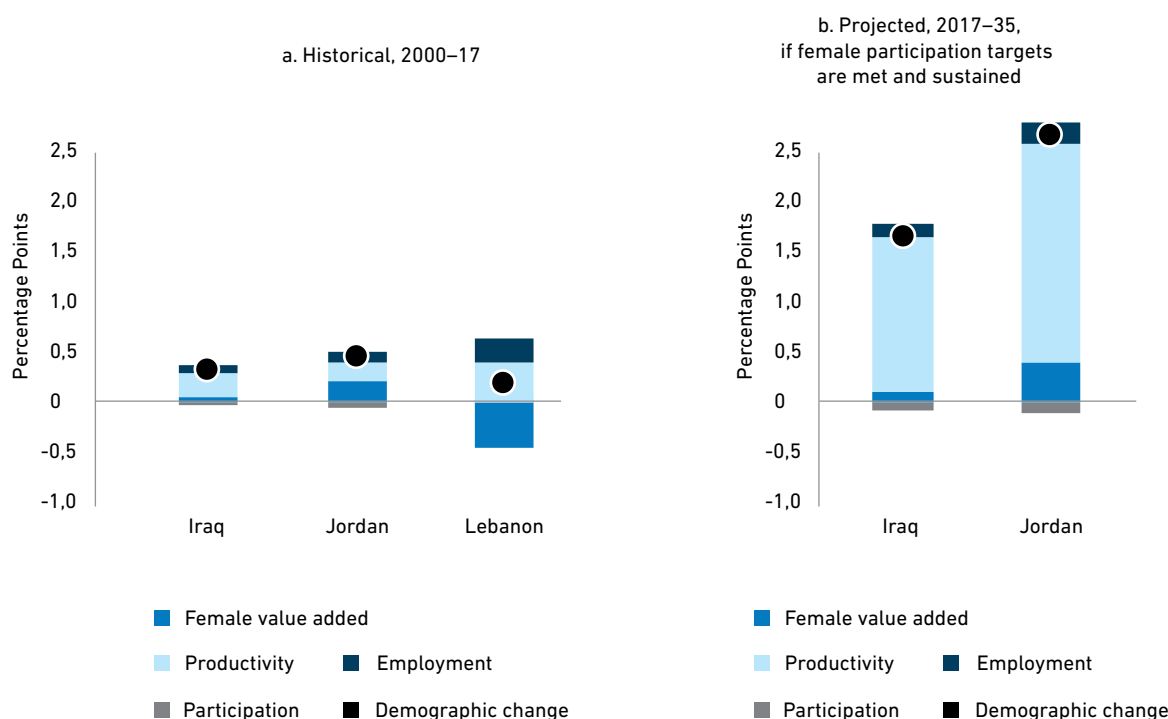
CONSTRAINTS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOR FORCE

Weak labor demand represents the major constraint for obtaining gainful employment for both women and men. The sluggish job creation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is a primary barrier to greater female participation in the economy. Compounded with recent instability and crises, employment growth in these countries has been unable to overcome the fast pace of

demographic growth. The implication is a persistently high unemployment rate, especially among youth and women. Moreover, in the context of an economic slowdown, fiscal constraints, and the conflict-related crisis in the region, weak labor demand may continue to constrain economic opportunities for women and men going forward.

FIGURE ES.4

Female workers' contribution to growth, selected Mashreq countries



Sources: Value added data are from World Development Indicators (WDI), World Bank calculations, and World Bank (forthcoming); population/demographics data are from United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Population Prospects 2017 Update, and World Bank calculations from World Bank (forthcoming); and employment and participation data are from modeled International Labour Organization estimates (from WDI). Historical calculations done with the World Bank's JobsStructure tool; future calculations are original for this report.

Women face additional barriers related to social norms, legal constraints, and market failures. Several factors have disproportionate effects on women's ability to effectively participate in the labor market, including more limited access to capital (human, physical, and financial) than men, lack of affordable and adequate childcare and of safe public transportation, and laws and societal preferences for men that result in their taking the few available jobs. Moreover, marriage and children dramatically reduce a woman's probability of working, albeit with differences across countries.

FIGURE ES.5

Critical turning points of women's participation in the labor market



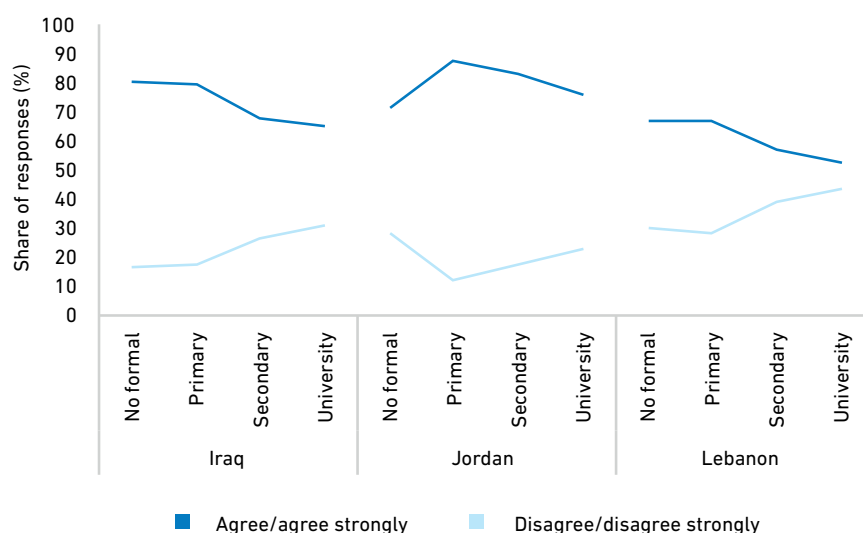
Source: Original figure for this report.

Young women and girls encounter barriers as they develop the human capital needed to enter the labor force. Although girls get an equal start with boys in all three countries in terms of school attendance at early ages, completing ed-

ucation is a challenge for Iraqi girls, particularly in rural areas. In addition, gender gaps associated with certain fields of study may, in turn, be shaped by society's expectations.

FIGURE ES.6

Women's views on working in selected Mashreq countries, by highest education level



Source: World Values Survey Wave 6 (2010–14) and World Bank calculations.

Note: Figure shows women's responses to the statement "Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working." "Agree" and "agree strongly" have been combined, as have "disagree" and "disagree strongly". "Don't know" is low and excluded.

In addition, several barriers prevent women from entering and remaining in the labor market. Harassment in the workplace and on public transportation is common, preventing many women from accessing economic opportunities. Poorer women are often disproportionately affected, for instance, because they are the most reliant on public transport. About 1 in 3 women in the three countries has ever been verbally harassed in public; 1 in 5 women in Iraq and Lebanon and 1 in 10 women in Jordan have been physically harassed. A recent survey in Jordan found that 81 percent of women think economic participation would be improved through better and safer public transportation, and 47 percent said they had refused to take a job because this was lacking. The situation

is even more dire in a country like Iraq where insecurity and instability are widespread. Similarly, women with disabilities are even less likely to work, and poor public transportation is likely an important factor. In addition to safety concerns, women face other restrictions related to societal expectations of the role of women, to employers who are reluctant to employ them, and in some cases to legal restrictions (and a lack of awareness and enforcement of rights and obligations) on the nature of work women can do.

Participation rates fall for married women because of a combination of preferences and social norms around women's roles and responsibilities after getting married. Lower education is correlated with less equal views on gender roles at home and on women's

decision-making power. Although the impact varies by country, for most women of most education levels, the number who work drops significantly when they marry, likely reflecting a combination of personal preferences, an expectation of having children soon, and social norms. Importantly, most women in all three countries and at all education levels agree that being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working (figure ES.6). Moreover, women who do choose to work, contrary to existing social norms, may suffer from domestic violence as a result. In Jordan, working women are more likely to suffer emotional or sexual violence, particularly among the less educated. One possible explanation may be husbands' attempt to reassert power, control, and dominance

over wives who are potentially transgressing their expected roles as wives.

Finally, as women become mothers, additional barriers to participation in the labor market emerge with further demands on household chores and childrearing. Acceptability, perceptions of available quality of childcare provision, and its accessibility and affordability are all additional factors preventing women with children from entering or remain-

ing in the labor market; legal frameworks and adequate facilities that might support families in balancing work and family duties are incomplete. For example, in Iraq, 10 hours a week of housework is associated with a 20 percent lower probability of working for women with a tertiary degree and a 70 percent lower probability for those with less than secondary education; the results are similar for hours spent in childcare.

The gap between the law on paper and the law in practice needs to be closed. Changes in the legal framework mean little if unaccompanied by public awareness or compliance and enforcement. These issues can arise because of unclear legislation, poor enforcement, women's lack of knowledge, and women's ability or options to seek justice. For example, clear definitions of key behaviors that are likely to give rise to conflict are needed: Exactly what constitutes discrimination or harassment? Is there a body to enforce the laws and regulations, and, if there is, is it timely and effective? Furthermore, problems may arise when women do not pursue legitimate grievances because they lack awareness of their legal rights and the recourse they may have or because they are deterred by the high costs of action and a real or perceived limited chance of success.

Improvements to public transportation are needed beyond responding to and criminalizing sexual harassment. It must be made safe, affordable, and reliable. A 2018 study by SADAQA, a local organization that promotes women's economic rights, makes a series of recommendations for Jordan that would similarly apply in Iraq and Lebanon. These recommendations include greater connectivity between cities to open up more economic opportunities for women; a focus on shortening time spent in transit and improving cost efficiency; increasing the number of women in public transportation management

THE ROAD AHEAD

Many of the policies needed to address these issues have already been discussed in the literature. Foremost, economic growth needs to be stronger, and more jobs must be created. Although more jobs are necessary for more women to work, however, job creation itself will not be enough. In many cases, revisions to laws and regulations are needed. In other cases, interventions are needed to address the issues with public transportation and the supply of childcare that prevent women from accessing economic opportunities. Finally, although social norms can be difficult to change, some interventions have proven successful elsewhere, particularly those aimed at correcting misperceptions. Some important examples of each follow.

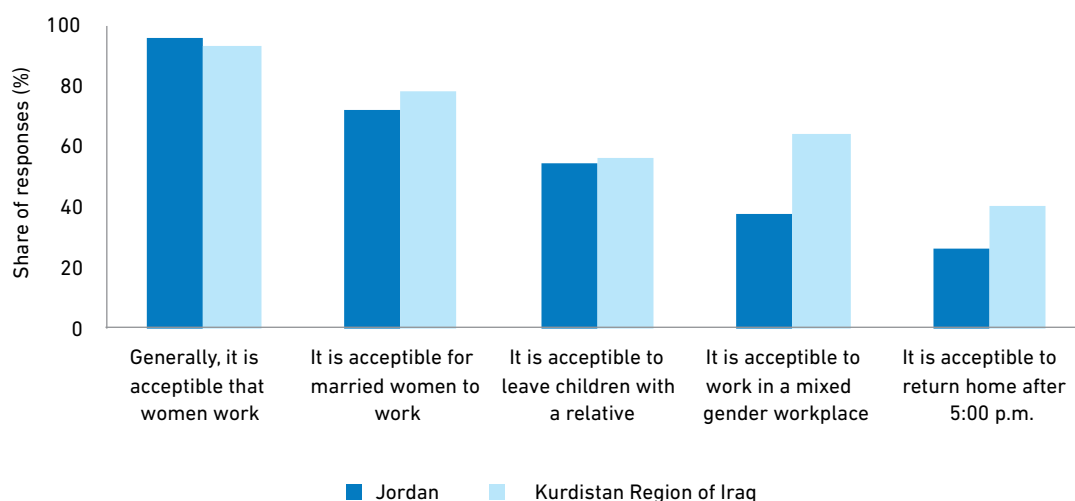
Further legal and policy reforms are needed. Women's employment could potentially be increased by legislation eliminating gender-based discrimination in

employment and sexual harassment in the workplace and public spaces, especially on public transportation. *Women, Business and the Law 2020* identifies legal deficiencies in Jordan and Lebanon, as well as constraints on women traveling outside the home in Iraq and Jordan (World Bank 2020). It identifies in all three countries legal deficiencies related to ensuring equal pay, hours, and access to jobs and industries; marriage and domestic violence; maternal and paternal leave and protection of pregnant workers from dismissal; prohibiting discrimination in access to credit based on gender; and ensuring equal rights to inheritance. ILO (2018) summarizes additional care policies required to make working more family-friendly, including leave entitlements for sick or disabled relatives and family-friendly working arrangements such as part-time work, flex work, and telecommuting.



FIGURE ES.7

Perceptions of whether (and when) it is acceptable for women to work, Iraq and Jordan



Source: World Bank 2018b, forthcoming.

as well as hiring more female conductors, bus-drivers, and ticket sale officers to make it a more inclusive space; and making bus stops and depots safer through better lighting, continuous surveillance, and access to security officers in the case of emergency. Most important, these changes need to be supported by adequate budgets, which may require public subsidies. In addition to the report recommendations, locations could be made more accessible by installing ramps for baby carts and providing changing facilities, while smartphone applications could provide information about bus schedules, stop locations and current arrival times. More generally, World Bank (2014) provides other recommendations targeted at increasing coverage and affordability, including improved public transport expertise and an expanded but consolidated supply of

public transport. It also emphasizes the integration of urban planning, land use, and transportation planning in order to make cities denser, which in turn helps cost and coverage.

Addressing the care market can liberate women from unpaid housework and care responsibilities while creating new jobs, often for women. Despite prevailing social norms and preferences for performing such tasks at home, the Mashreq has a large unmet demand for child- and elderly care, especially as Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon enter the transition to aging societies. Existing childcare benefits richer households, which means that greater access for other households will potentially free women to perform other tasks that may increase families' earning capacity. Greater access to childcare could also increase human capital of poorer children if that childcare includes

early childhood development practices. Moreover, the expansion of care will create new jobs within the care industry, many of which may be filled by women, and contribute to economic growth.

Governments may be able to take actions to support scaling up the care economy. Jordan has recently made legal revisions regarding childcare services in larger businesses (for employers whose employees have a total of 15 or more children aged under five years) and to the licensing system to facilitate more home-based nurseries. Other measures can also contribute, including expanding public provision, streamlining regulations of care providers, creating incentives for private sector-led provision of childcare and for investors, and setting up and enforcing good industry standards. For women who cannot afford private services, a combination of tax-,

cash-, or voucher-based incentives and support schemes can be implemented; Turkey provides an overseas example.

Barriers to gender equality are often left unaddressed because of the perceived rigidity of traditional values. Recent research has shown, however, that correcting misperceptions of norms can increase economic participation of women. In some communities, both men and women misperceive what they think their neighbors believe is appropriate behavior, including when it comes to activities such as whether it is appropriate for women to work in various settings, or whether men should participate in childcare and other unpaid household work. There is evidence in some countries that exposing such misperceptions where they exist can in some cases result in a shift toward more mutually beneficial social norms. A recent study found that most young married men privately supported women working but underestimated how others did. When this misperception was corrected, those men's wives were more likely to enter the workforce. Another study in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq found that, whereas 93 percent of individuals believed it was acceptable for women to work, they also believed that only 62 percent of the community agreed. Similar gaps exist for working when married, or in mixed company with men, suggesting that an awareness campaign could be effective. The study (and a similar one in Jordan) also showed it is just as important to un-

derstand which norms are most binding; whereas almost all respondents thought it was acceptable in general for women to work, less than half thought it was acceptable for women to come home from work after 5:00 p.m. (figure ES.7).

Moreover, for the policies discussed to be effective, they need to be designed to complement each other and implemented in a coordinated fashion. This report emphasizes the multitude of legal, social, and market barriers that impede women's ability to work over their lives. Although each of the different policies reviewed are needed to increase female participation, none are likely to succeed without a strategic and coordinated approach. Addressing any single issue without addressing the range of constraints women face is unlikely to improve outcomes.

Beyond the mentioned policies, facilitating the development of digital jobs provides a specific opportunity. Worldwide and in the Mashreq, an increasing number of digital jobs will be created as technology transforms almost all economic sectors. This transformation has great potential for increasing opportunities for women. The ability for women to work from home with flexible hours enhanced by digital technology helps overcome many of the constraints identified, such as lack of safe and quality transportation, lack of childcare, personal preferences, and restrictive social norms. The increased opportunities that digital

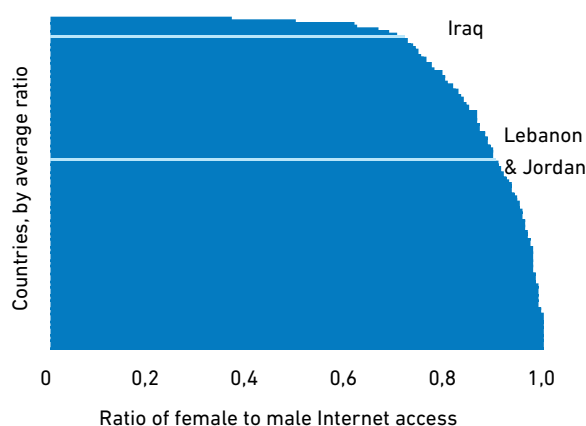
jobs offer will not by themselves lead to massive increases in participation; however, they can help circumvent existing barriers and be part of the generational shift observed in other countries that did subsequently experience rapid increases in participation. These new opportunities are not restricted to highly educated young women, for whom participation is already relatively high. Low-skilled and rural women can also benefit from this digital transformation as opportunities for impact outsourcing and platforms connecting small-scale farmers and craftspeople emerge. Governments can play an important role in addressing specific constraints by investing in digital infrastructure, platforms, financial services, and skills. Situations vary across countries: Iraq needs investments in all areas whereas Jordan and Lebanon present more advanced environments for these activities. Nonetheless, increasing digital jobs will take time and work, and not all such jobs may be right for all three countries.

Unfortunately, the digital gender divide in the Mashreq is one of the widest in the world; without closing it, digital transformation threatens to become less of an opportunity and more of a barrier. In Iraq, it is estimated that only 72 women use the Internet for every 100 men, a gender gap of 28 percent (figure ES.8), and only 89 women use mobile phones for every 100 men, a gender gap of 11 percent (figure ES.9). In Lebanon and Jordan, the Internet gap is smaller at



FIGURE ES.8

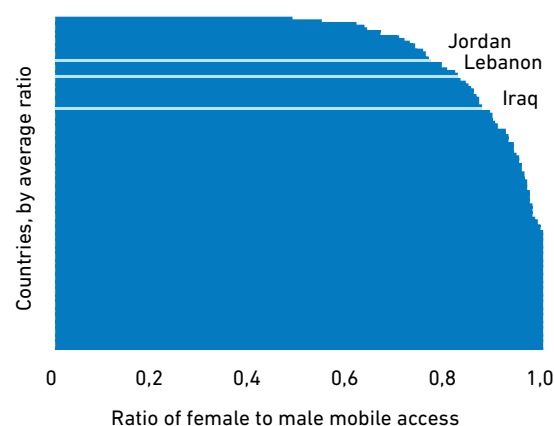
Ratio of female to male Internet access, selected Mashreq countries



Source: Created using data from Digital Gender Gaps, www.digitalgendergaps.org.
Note: ITU data used where available, otherwise average of online, combined, and offline estimates.

FIGURE ES.9

Ratio of female to male mobile phone access, selected Mashreq countries



Source: Created using data from www.digitalgendergaps.org.
Note: GSMA data used where available, otherwise average of online, combined and offline estimates.

10 percent, but the mobile phone gap is larger than in Iraq—at 17 percent (Lebanon) and 21 percent (Jordan). The digital divide means young women do not access or excel in digital jobs as much as young men do. This divide exists for several reasons: women are less likely to own mobile phones and, even if they do have a phone, are less likely to use mobile Internet, social media, or SMS services. This report discusses constraints that keep young women from gaining digital jobs at the individual level, because of market failure related to laws, social norms, safety and security concerns, and discrimination in the workplace. For example, women enter science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields less than men in Lebanon and Jordan, whereas some families may dis-

courage girls and women from accessing and using the Internet out of concerns for their safety.

Progress needs to be monitored on several dimensions. This report identifies various indicators that could potentially be monitored regularly using existing data, but other important indicators are not currently collected. Governments, the international community, and broader civil society can take efforts to leverage existing instruments to collect additional data or develop new survey instruments to do so, when needed. For example, the current annual Labor Force Survey conducted by the Jordan Department of Statistics could be modified to collect more information on the number of different digital jobs being created and performed by women; the gender gap

in terms of Internet, mobile, and smart phone use; and the stock of digital skills young women have or need.

Such monitoring requires new data and analysis in many areas. There is a pressing need for more frequent basic data in the Mashreq countries. Lebanon last conducted a national household survey in 2012, although results from a recent 2018–19 labor force survey are being released. Iraq has a comprehensive national household socioeconomic survey, which is representative at the district level but is held only every six years or so; but the country has no regular labor force survey. Consequently, monitoring even the headline outcome of female labor participation on a regular basis is not possible. There is also a need to collect more information that would illuminate

constraints to both the demand and the supply of female labor, especially among younger women. For example, because demographic and health surveys are not regularly conducted in all three countries, some of the countries have only infrequent data on gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive rights and health issues. In addition, more surveys of informal and microenterprise sectors would help reveal the constraints on female microentrepreneurs.

To address the lack of data, a new survey on key issues has been launched in the three Mashreq countries to shed new light and to act as a benchmark against which to measure future progress. The survey will look at digital jobs, the care economy, social norms, and the de jure–de facto gap of the legal frameworks in place. The results will be presented at the Third Mashreq Conference on Women's Economic Empowerment in 2021. The World Bank will work with

local researchers using the new data for collaborative inputs to the next report.

A key step would be to better understand each country's current institutional structures that are designed to protect women's existing rights—and why these structures have not been as effective as they could be. In some countries, a specialized legal commission has been established to promote legal change and enforce women's rights. Such bodies coordinate gender policy, conduct analysis and evaluation, and have an investigative and corrective capacity with respect to gender discrimination in employment, education, resources allocation, facilities, and services. Alternative approaches to establishing and implementing such bodies are discussed in the report using examples from the United States and the Republic of Korea.

Finally, this report was prepared before the COVID-19 crisis. However, women are likely to be disproportion-

ally affected by the labor market effects from COVID-19. Women will probably experience a significant burden on their time given their multiple care responsibilities as school closures and confinement measures are adopted, possibly leading to reductions in working time and permanent exit from the labor market among those who currently participate. Women tend to be engaged in sectors that may be hit particularly hard (services) and in vulnerable forms of employment (e.g. self-employment in small subsistence businesses, informal domestic work), which often leaves them out of formal social protection measures targeted to workers, making it even more complicated to cope with the crisis. Moreover, in a context where societal attitudes suggest that in times of scarcity of jobs, those should go to men, women are also likely to be left out even more than prior to this crisis.



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