

Women's Role in Economic Development: A Systematic Analysis Review Considering the Middle Eastern Region

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Abstract Background: Economic development indicates an increase in citizens' quality of life, their opportunities, and their standard of living. Therefore, it is often measured using Human Development Index. It is also said that the empowerment of women significantly contributes to accelerate the level of human and economic development in a country. **Objective:** The study has aimed to assess the women's role in economic development. **Methodology:** A broad-spectrum literature search was conducted from different libraries. Six articles have been finalized through rigorous scrutiny process. The articles, which are related with women empowerment, their health, education and fertility levels in the Middle Eastern region were included in the review. **Results:** There is considerable awareness of issues, faced by women; and improvements that are observed, but there is a lack of appropriate policy and action, particularly in the social inclusion of women and their presence in the business world. Proper recognition of women's productive and reproductive roles is critical for more sustainable economic development. **Conclusion:** It is concluded that women have to challenge accepted social, political and economic frameworks followed globally to achieve sustainable and equitable development.

Keywords Economic Development, Women Empowerment, Education, Jobs, Careers, Middle East

1. Introduction

A skilled, educated, and healthy workforce of both women and men is required for the economic growth of a country. In addition, they are primary for the development and the advancement of a country. Economic development can be defined as efforts that seek to improve the economic well-being and quality of life for a community by creating and/or retaining jobs and supporting or growing incomes and the tax base. Among many factors that affect economic growth; the most important one is natural resources. The discovery of more natural resources; like oil or mineral, deposits boost economic growth substantially as it shifts or increases the country's production curve. The other factors include physical capital or infrastructure, population or labor, human capital, legal system, and science and technology.

Economic development is always recognized as a broader term as it indicates an increase in citizens' quality of life, their opportunities and their standard of living. It is also measured using the Human Development Index. The Human Development Index (HDI) is an amalgamated measurement

of life expectancy, education, and income per capita indicators. A country scores higher HDI when the life expectancy at birth is longer, education period is longer and the income per capita is higher. Middle East and North African countries (MENA) have achieved much related to human development. Falling child mortality and transition to low fertility have transformed family structures in most MENA countries. Although, women are armed with excellent education and equipped with marketable skills, their smooth transition into the outside world is not without challenges. Due to this, only a small number of such educated women are moving to the main marketplace to look for relevant employment. However, women's involvement in paid work has significantly reduced their share of unpaid work in caring for household members. Despite important advances in health, education and income, there are certain aspects of human development in which MENA countries have not progressed so far. There are inequalities in human development regionally and most importantly for youth and women. The Middle Eastern region has witnessed economic development mainly due to their rich oil resources. In addition, MENA enjoys a reasonable degree of similarity in other respects and is well integrated historically and culturally. A common language (Arabic) connects the majority of the region's inhabitants. In addition, a common natural resource, which is oil, boosts incomes across Middle East and also ties its economies together. However, when associating their economic development with their human

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capital, women's empowerment has lagged in both absolute terms or relative to economic growth of the region.

Transition to lower fertility is the most important factor that influences both the empowerment of women and assists in the economic development of a country. To transition from a traditional and conservative system into a modern economic growth model, economic development theory deliberates the change in the purpose of family. This essential change of goal must be from procreators to producers of human capital (Lucas, 2002). Furthermore, fertility transition is associated with child health, education, and women's empowerment. It allows greater participation in economic and civic life for women. In a similar way, it increases the power of women both inside the family and in the outside world. Low fertility and less children allow the shift of the allocation of family resources in the path of health and education. Apart from this, equal attention is paid to the girls of family. The current study assesses the patriarchal system and the fertility rates amongst women of different countries in the Middle East region in relation to their socioeconomic status. It also examines the challenges faced and the benefits available to women in various businesses to empower them for the economic development of the country.

2. Conceptual Framework

The empowerment of women significantly contributes to accelerate the level of both human and economic development in a country. The Middle East region comprises of highly patriarchal social structures. In these patriarchal societies; gender inequalities, biases, and discrimination are present in most spheres which include economic, political or social domains (Moghadam, 2004). Taking this a step further; the percentages of economically active women, are substantially lower than men both globally, and particularly in the Middle East. To make comparisons, the global average of economically active women averages 50%; whereas, this figure drops to 25.2% in the Middle East (Kuttab, 2006).

In many oil-rich countries of Middle East region; rising incomes have expanded the education of women faster than men. However, the positive figures in education have failed to reduce the gender gap in employment. In a similar way, the reduction of gender gaps in education and health in many countries of Middle East, has not resulted in greater gender equality in the family, the labor market or in the wider society in general (Kuttab, 2006). Correspondingly, greater access to education has not meant greater access to jobs for women. They have to face challenging conditions in employment and have to make earnest attempts at their social inclusion.

With regard to the health indicators of women, transition to lower fertility is the most essential factor affecting the well-being of women globally. Furthermore, it is more important in the context of the Middle East because of the very high fertility rate that has been prevalent in many countries in the region. However, there is considerable

variation between economic development of women amongst different countries of Middle East. Tunisia and Jordan have shown healthy environment for women to enter the market place and conduct business (e.g., between Tunisia and Saudi Arabia), in the extent to which the Sharia influences the laws of particular countries and the extent to which gender relations have progressed (Moghadam, 2003). Even where the unequal treatment at the macro level has not improved by much, women have made significant progress in important dimensions of human development, namely health and education. In Jordan and Kuwait, women's life expectancy and average years of schooling equal or exceed those of men, and the decline in fertility throughout the region has created the basis for more equal status within the family. In spite of these improvements, full gender equality remains elusive. Perhaps the most important manifestation of persisting gender inequality in Middle Eastern societies is lower participation of women in market work due to the patriarchal system. Taking the illustration of women in a Muslim country like Malaysia, they are three to four times as likely to engage in market work as women in ME countries with similar education and fertility such as Egypt, Iran and Tunisia. This is primarily due of the absence of the Patriarchal domination in the Malaysian society.

A conceptual framework has been developed based on the comprehensive analysis of previous studies, models and perceptions of professionals. This model has highlighted certain features which have implications with regard to women's role in economic development in the Middle East region. The corresponding model has depicted that there are three elements and challenges that hinder the progress of women and have a negative effect on the economic development. The three issues are patriarchal structure of the Middle East region, higher fertility rates and reduced employment opportunities and marketplace exclusion. The patriarchs have strictly defined a woman's role in many countries in the Middle East. The traditional societal norms of the region label women's role chiefly as homemakers and mothers. Furthermore, gender inequities are pervasively present in Middle Eastern Muslim societies. Therefore, in spite of the high rate of education amongst women, the percentage of women in the workforce is minimal. A part from this, despite credible fertility transition being noticed in some Middle Eastern countries, particularly in the United Arab Emirates, some oil rich countries fail to show lower fertility levels. In the oil rich countries of Oman and Saudi Arabia with their high GDP per capita, fertility is very high and it directly has an impact on the wellbeing and the quality of life for women in these countries eventually affecting their empowerment and progress in the society. Existing literature has indicated that unlike the situation of women in other developing countries of the world, economic growth in these countries is yet to transform women's status from the conventional role of wives and mothers to that of a full citizen, who enjoy equal rights and equal opportunities to that enjoyed by their men.

According to 2015 Global Gender Gap Report, 13 of the

15 countries with the lowest rates of women participating in their labor force are in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Despite the high education level of women and the education rate parity for boys and girls, women face more challenges than men in accessing and finding employment opportunities. One of the reasons for this unfortunate situation and this inhospitable business environment for women is the traditional nature of gender roles and lack of support for reproductive and family costs. In addition, oil and oil-related dominant public-sector industries have conservative patriarchal hierarchy that do not prefer women. Besides, private organizations that do employ women cannot afford to cater to the costs of women's reproductive roles (Assaad, Krafft & Salehi-Isfahani, 2014).

The conceptual framework has also provided suggestions to meet and resolve the challenges faced by women in the Middle Eastern countries in their attempt to find equal economic opportunities. It reiterates the change that is urgently require in the attitude of the patriarchs of the family and social structure of the Middle East region. There must be freedoms that must be granted to women. There has been a substantial improvement in the restrictions imposed on women more recently in Saudi Arabia. They are allowed to drive and they also do not require to take their male counterparts along, when commuting. It is imperative to attain low fertility rates for women to chase their dreams and to pursue their ambitions. Additionally, the work culture must encourage the inclusion of women. If these remediation and modifications are adhered to, there might be hope for light at the end of the tunnel.

3. Methodology

A broad-spectrum literature search has been carried out from different libraries and scholarly platforms. Specifically, Medline, ERIC, PubMed, and Google Scholar have been explored to retrieve quality studies which have discussed women's role in economic development in different countries in the Middle East region. Some of the common keywords included women, economic development, women empowerment, Middle East, education, fertility and jobs. Only the research articles along with the review articles have been considered, all other categories have been excluded. All of the articles which are related with women empowerment, health, education and fertility levels in the Middle East region and the role of women in economic development of specific countries have been included in the review. Moreover, only the studies were published during the 10-years duration (2009-2018) have been considered. Because of reduced reliability and authenticity, the older versions of the studies, case reports, essays, and blogs have been excluded from the search.

The literature search has started extensively in all of the aforementioned platforms. Initially, 2100 abstracts have been searched based on the keywords. These abstracts were retrieved by considering both the inclusion and exclusion

criteria. The reason for such comprehensive scrutiny of the studies is to select the most relevant studies and articles. Only those studies were promoted which have any correlation with women empowerment and women's role in the economic development of the country. The first phase has resulted in the exclusion of 88% of the articles (1848 abstracts). The remaining articles have been promoted for the second phase of scrutiny.

In total, 252 abstracts have been promoted, and all of the 252 studies have been read fully, to get the in-depth analysis. The inclusion criteria were again applied very strictly on these articles, which has resulted in the retrieval of 40 articles in total, eliminating around 212 articles. The remaining articles were investigated and evaluated on the basis of the developed conceptual framework to assure the significance and the direction of this study. In this phase, 34 articles have been eliminated due to less authenticity or relevancy with the identified variables. In such a way, selection of 6 articles has been finalized, which were used for systematic review analysis.

4. Results & Discussion

In a study by Ahmad (2011), the role of women entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia was analyzed. The number of Saudi women entrepreneurs have increased significantly from 2007 to 2017, from 4% to 39%. It was due to the incentive and the support provided by the Saudi government and private organizations. In addition, it was observed that Saudi Arabian businesswomen are highly educated. Apart from this, they also have strong support from family, and have good people skills and inclination for innovation too (Ahmad, 2011). In another study by Charles (2011), there was considerable gender discrimination noticed in educational institutions and labor markets. Despite having access to these institutions, there has been reservations with regard to their proper social inclusion and acceptance in the market place (Charles, 2011).

One more qualitative research study included interviews with women entrepreneurs in Lebanon, Bahrain, Jordan, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates. It was discovered that women-owned firms in Jordan are the smallest, with an average of six employees, while Tunisian women entrepreneurs employed 20 people (Weeks, 2009). The findings of research conducted by Adely (2009) revealed that women with good education have excelled at the workplace and as entrepreneurs in Arab Countries. A part from this, transition to low fertility had also a positive effect on the health and economic status of women in the Middle East region (Adely, 2009). In a study by Tliass and Kauser (2011), it was revealed that Lebanese women managers do not perceive gender-centered factors as obstacles to career advancement. Their levels of education and experience did not matter. Furthermore, the culture of 'Wasta' in Lebanon helped women in their careers. There was a major reliance on social connections and less importance was given to gender,

personal education, and experience; when looking for employment opportunities and career growth (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011). In another study by Danish & Smith (2012), women in small and medium size businesses were interviewed. The results revealed that women were making profits in their businesses despite social and institutional

restraints. However, to make the overall market environment more conducive for women entrepreneurs, it was suggested that the state should open training institutes and also provide them with the much-needed funds to sustain and grow in their careers (Danish & Smith, 2012).

Table 1. Systematic Review

Ref #	Author and Year	Title of the Article	Methodology	Results	Conclusive Remarks
1	Zamperi Ahmad, S. (2011).	Evidence of the characteristics of women entrepreneurs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:	Empirical Investigation	It has been evaluated that in spite of significant societal challenges, women entrepreneurs have promoted significant economic development in Saudi Arabia.	Women's entrepreneurs in KSA play a significant role in both economic and social development. It has shown that Saudi women's entrepreneurship, when properly encouraged and directed, contributes substantially to the economy.
2	Maria Charles (2011).	A world of difference: International trends in women's economic status.	Systematic Review	The results have shown that though women have made major revolutionary strides and have found a place in the man's world, they have faced major challenges in participation in labor markets and higher educational institutions. There was segregation and lack of inclusion due to patriarchal social systems in the MENA region.	The study has concluded that there was gender discrimination in higher educational institutions and in labor markets. Women's social and economic inclusion is a must for the overall development of countries. Interventions by governments and private organizations can go a long way in empowering women globally and to enhance their skills and competence to enter the business world.
3	Julie R. Weeks (2009).	Women business owners in the Middle East and North Africa: a five-country research study.	This qualitative research study comprised of interviews with women entrepreneurs in Lebanon, Bahrain, Jordan, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.	The findings have shown that women operated across a wide-range of business and industry sectors. They were dynamic, trading internationally and were growth-oriented and ambitious. They contributed greatly to job creation and economic development.	It has been concluded that Tunisian women-owned companies are the largest, employing about 20 workers per firm on average, while women-owned firms in Jordan are the smallest, with an average of six employees. Furthermore, women in Bahrain and Lebanon are the most experienced business owners of the group. It has been recommended that small and medium sized businesses that are owned by women must get incentives by the government to sustain and encourage them to grow.
4	Fida J. Adely (2009)	Educating women for development; The Arab Human Development Report 2005 and the problem with women's choices	Research Review	The findings revealed that only with greater access to the tools of human and economic development, including education and healthcare, had women excelled in life in Arab Countries. Additionally, measures to assure low fertility also had a positive effect on the overall well-being and the economic status of women in the Middle East region.	It was concluded that both the patriarchal social hierarchy and the State must facilitate a strong and substantial improvement and social and economic transformation of women in Arab Countries.
5	Tlaiss, H., & Kauser, S. (2011).	The impact of gender, family, and work on the career advancement of Lebanese women managers.	In a qualitative analysis, a total of 32 interviews were conducted with 32 women managers.	The findings have shown that Lebanese women managers do not perceive gender-centered factors and their levels of education and experience as difficulties to progress in their career path.	It is concluded that 'Wasta' collaborative approach and the reliance on social connections had a major impact on their career progression.
6	Yousuf Danish, A., & Lawton Smith, H. (2012).	Female entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia: opportunities and challenges.	Qualitative research conducted by a survey of 33 Saudi women entrepreneurs in Jeddah in a variety of commercial sectors.	The results reveal that female entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia are establishing more small and medium sized entities than at any time in the past despite institutional and social challenges.	It was concluded that State institutions need to provide support by providing resources and offering training. Besides this, bureaucratic procedures must also be streamlined.

In today's world, in spite of women and girls having almost equal opportunities when it comes to education, challenges and contradictions facing women globally are still considerable. There are less than half of the population of women of working age in the labor force globally. Taking this a step further, women still earn much less than men (UN, 2015). The socioeconomic status of women has not improved substantially, taking the improvement in their education level into consideration. Furthermore, women face extra challenges and issues in the Middle East region. This is due to the patriarchal social structure, high fertility rates and no support or incentive provided by the State. In these patriarchal societies, gender inequalities, biases and discrimination are present in most spheres. Furthermore, the legal and social barriers hampering women's access to jobs and careers in the Middle East and North Africa is costing the region an estimated 575 billion dollars a year (Salehi-Isfahani, 2016). Social barriers include requiring a guardian to travel and accompany a woman, as in Saudi Arabia or laws requiring permission from husbands or fathers to work, common in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Egypt, Jordan and Libya. As a Muslim country, Malaysia has shown a lot of promise with regard to Women's empowerment and their important role in the economic development of the country. There are a huge number of women entrepreneurs running major businesses. Besides this, due to the lack of patriarch domination and microcredit program of the Government of Malaysia, low-income sector of women has hugely benefitted. The AIM's microcredit program has improved urban low-income women achieve economic security, gain more control over resources. It has also improved their level of legal awareness and their ability to go outside to seek work opportunities (Al-Mamun *et al.*). Such major government programs are absent in the Middle East regions. However, more recently, the Saudi Arabian Prince has permitted women to drive and has also sent out a message to the patriarchs to start sowing leniency towards women in general. The serious issue though is the high fertility rates, that are ubiquitous in most Arab countries. This must be given serious consideration and there must be women awareness programs to educate them on their reproductive roles and on the disadvantages of bearing many children.

5. Conclusions

Although, there is considerable awareness of issues faced by women and improvements that are observed, but there is a lack of appropriate policy and action, particularly in the social inclusion of women and their presence in the business world. A part from this, traditional notions of appropriate gender roles must be modified and there must be a change in attitude of the patriarchs that dominate the whole system. Women must come together to drive change in the conservative structure. The proper recognition of women's productive and reproductive roles is critical for more

sustainable economic development. Finally, the efforts of women's and men's organizations to achieve gender equity are not made in a vacuum. At international policy level; there is increasing, and at least rhetorical, recognition by bi-lateral agencies and governments of the importance of gender equity to achieve development targets. To achieve sustainable and equitable development, women have to challenge accepted social, political and economic frameworks followed globally. This requires a better understanding of the links between women's household survival strategies, livelihoods and larger scale economic and social processes. Activists, researchers, and practitioners must continue to examine the issues faced by women in merging with the men in the outside world. There must be more critical examination of why inequalities persist, despite major modifications in policies.

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