

Women and Education in Palestine: Is Education Improving the Status of Women?

Internationally, women's education is seen as a development necessity and as a human right. In gatherings such as the International Conference on Population & Development in Cairo (1994) and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) links have been made between women's access to education and their improved social status. Similarly, the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (2000) have included goals for improving education, gender equality and women's empowerment, while emphasizing that women and girls' education is essential in building democratic societies and creating a platform for sustained economic growth. More importantly, education should serve as a means to improve women's status within their families and within their societies.

The Palestinian people have viewed the education of future generations as a form of protest in response to the region's on-going conflict, displacement and upheaval and, appropriately, the education of women has thrived in recent years. This commitment to education has resulted in a combined male and female gross enrollment ratio of 82.4% for primary, secondary and tertiary education.¹ At the primary level, females have lower repetition and dropout rates; at the secondary level females routinely outnumber their male counterparts, as well as outrank them in academic achievement and *Tawjihi* scoring; and at the tertiary level females also outnumber males, and pursue and excel in a variety of academic fields. Thus, there should be no question that Palestine contains a motivated and educated pool of women well prepared to contribute to society. However, despite an impressive resume of academic accomplishments, Palestinian women are still marginalized, resulting in severe losses for the development of a thriving, economically successful State.

Palestinian women continue to be some of the most educated women in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region. While women's academic participation is indeed measurable, they are not reaping the benefits of education. It is clear that Palestinian women, especially educated Palestinian women, are an overlooked and under-utilized source of human capital within Palestine. Current indicators reveal that access to education has not improved women's status in Palestinian society. It is therefore imperative that individuals at all levels acknowledge that women are the missing human capital and that the efficient use of Palestinian women's education and skills in society is not only a social right, but a development necessity.

Women's Participation in Education

Women and girls' presence has increased at all education levels in Palestine. The 2007/2008 academic year was the first year that girls surpassed boys in primary and secondary enrollment combined; 548,781 females versus 548,314 males.² This is also reflected at the university level, as rates of enrollment in higher education are in favor of females; during the academic year 2006/2007, out of 158,132 students, 86,098 were female and 72,034 were male.³ While only a small portion of all females hold advanced degrees, 6.6% compared with 9.8% of men,⁴ it is important to note that as enrollment figures increase in the coming years so, too, shall the number of female degree holders.

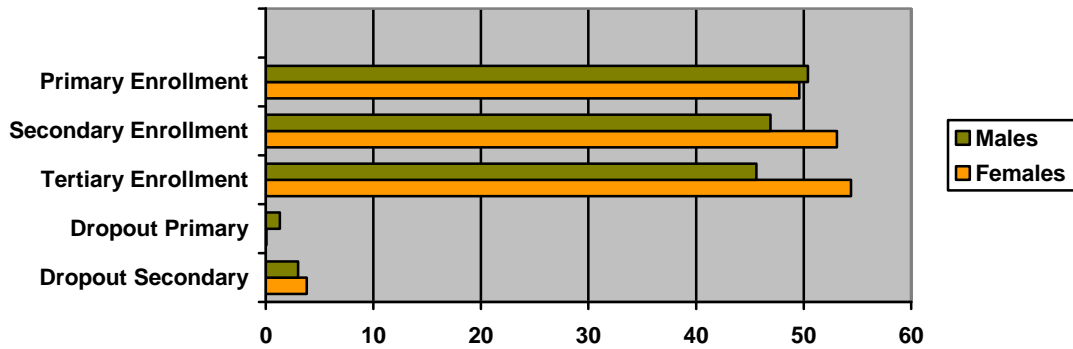


Figure 1. Education Statistics as Percentages (2007)

The dropout rate for girls at the secondary level has fallen over the years implying that society is viewing girls' universal education as the norm. In 2002/2003, the female dropout rate was 4.8%; in 2006/2007 it decreased to 3.8%. Unfortunately, the rate is still higher than males, which was 3.0% for the same year.⁵

Educating Women and Girls: Palestine and the MENA Region

The MENA region has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world among females, averaging between 60-70%,⁶ yet overall female literacy in Palestine is quite high, 88%,⁷ and is expected to increase in the coming decade since the female youth literacy rate is currently 98.9%.⁸ Within the MENA region, Palestine consistently leads the way in gender parity in education. The enrollment rate of girls in several MENA oil-producing countries and in Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia, is higher than that of boys.⁹ At the primary level, enrollment rates for girls are at least 90% that of boys in the majority of MENA States, including Palestine.¹⁰ In contrast, at the secondary level, barely 80% of girls attend school except in Bahrain, Jordan, Palestine, and Qatar.¹¹ While it appears that Palestinians consistently stand out regionally in the field of education, other indicators reveal that increases in educational attainment do not necessarily translate into women's improved social status.

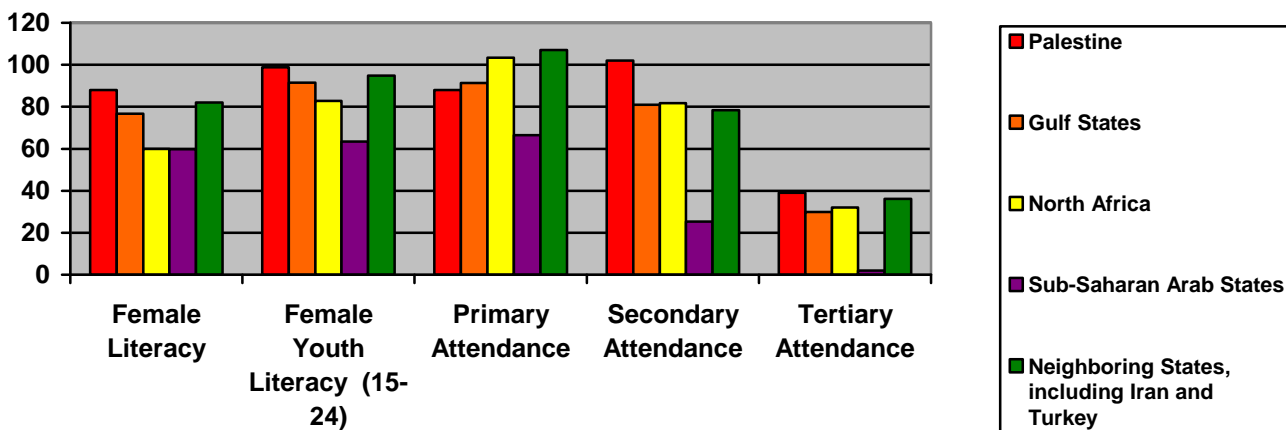


Figure 2. Female Literacy and Education Rates in Palestine and the MENA Region (2008)

Women's Full Participation in Society Denied: A Lack of Investment

Despite the real successes experienced at all education levels, the education of girls in Palestine is not commonly seen as an investment or a form of social security in the manner than boys' education is. Rates of girls' enrollment within private schools serve to illustrate this claim. In the 2006/2007 school year, 42,854 male were enrolled in private schools compared to only 29,521 female.¹² In the Palestinian context, private schools are less likely of being affected by teacher strikes, factional fighting, and program cuts. It is also assumed that private schooling offers a higher quality of education, often increasing a student's ability to seek tertiary education abroad, which many males often do.

At the secondary level, girls are making great progress in achieving gender parity in scientific study streams, 49% to boys' 51%, but they are still over-represented in the humanities, 55% versus 45%.¹³ There is a noted lack of girls in the scientific streams in rural areas where limited resources translate into fewer options. If girls must travel long distances or attend co-educational schools, families often remove them from such schooling.¹⁴ This realization implies that girls' presence in the sciences could be even higher if opportunities were made available.

Girls' participation in vocational training and education is lower than boys, 29% compared to 71% for boys¹⁵, despite a 10% increase of the recent decade. Traditional subjects like sewing, knitting, embroidery, secretarial work and nursing were previously encouraged but, now newer courses focus on non-traditional industries and are attracting more and more females.

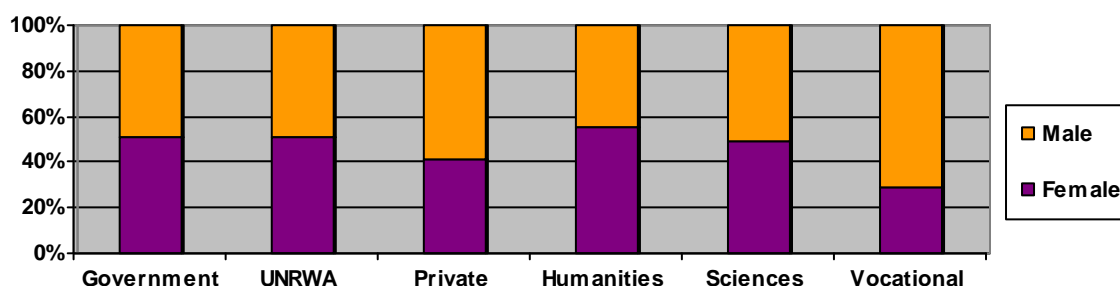


Figure 3. Attendance by Type of School and Study Stream (2007)

The Occupation and its regime of control affect all students' right to education. Especially affected by the Separation Wall and the 62 permanent checkpoints and 512 physical obstructions¹⁶ that impede their access to school are girls. Parents are more likely to remove their daughters from schooling as a result of travel restrictions, thus negatively affecting their education.

Education and Social Status: How Are Palestinian Women Fairing?

Education commonly serves as a means to improve one's social status. This is especially true for women, as research shows that educated women have better access to the job market, are healthier, are less likely to experience early marriage and early motherhood, are less poverty-stricken, and are less likely to be victims of violence in

the home¹⁷. More importantly, educated women value education for both their sons *and* daughters. Palestinian women, however, are not reaping the benefits of education in similar ways to the rest of the world's women.

Education and the Labor Market

The MENA region as a whole suffers from women's under- and unemployment when compared to other regions in the world and Palestinian women's participation in the labor market is the lowest amongst all MENA countries, despite being the most educated. Whereas the world average for females in the labor market is 52%, in the MENA region it is down to 29%¹⁸ and it drops even further in Palestine. In early 2008, only 14.7% of Palestinian women were found in the labor market.¹⁹ Many development and empowerment models specify women's education as the key to their economic participation, as well as society's well-being. This has not proven to be true in Palestine. In fact, the more educated a woman is, the less likely she is to be employed. Unemployment rates among all Palestinians are highest among women with 13 or more years of schooling, 33.8%, whereas unemployment is lowest among women with no years of schooling, 1.2%. The opposite is true for men.

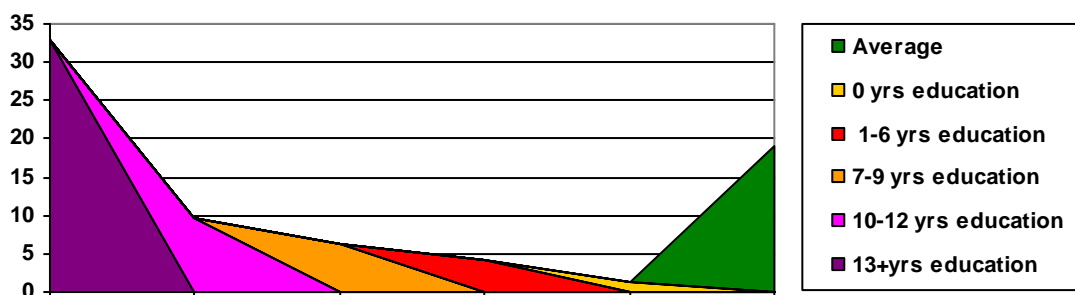


Figure 4. Females' Unemployment Rates as Percentages, by Education Level (2007)

A 2006 survey states that, of Palestinians with Bachelor's degrees or higher, those with degrees in the fields of engineering or math fared best in the job market, with labor force participation at 94.8% for males and 82.8% for females. It is very revealing that the vast majority of males with such degrees were able to gain employment, whereas 12% fewer female graduates succeeded. In contrast, those with degrees specializing in teacher and training programs, fields traditionally attracting females, fared worst in the market, with 13.2% of males and 42.8% of females facing unemployment.²⁰ Even in a field such as teaching, which is traditionally seen as feminine, women are facing more than three times the unemployment rate of males. These statistics serve to expose a gender-based bias in hiring practices among equally qualified individuals.

The same survey reveals that of all participants in the labor market, married males are the most likely to be employed, 83%. Never-married males' participation rate is recorded at 43.6%. As for females, the reverse is true. Non-married females' participation in the labor market stands a bit higher than married females, 14.9% and 10%, respectively.²¹ Regardless of education, the labor market clearly prefers not just males, but married males, viewing them as the main breadwinners in their families. Married females are actually at a disadvantage, possibly due to the perception that their contribution is most needed within the domestic sphere or that their income is

merely supplemental. The labor market favors males, as a whole, but the misconception that a female's labor is less valuable and that her income is not necessary, least of all if she is married, persists.

Gender Gap in Wages

When access to the labor market is achieved for Palestinian women, it does not translate into equal pay for equal work. On average, women in Palestine earn 70% of what men earn on a monthly basis. In the West Bank, women are paid 66% of men's earnings and in Gaza women receive 72% of men's earnings.²² The greatest wage gaps exist between men and women at the level of associate diploma and higher.

Health Concerns

Increases in disease affect Palestinian women of all education backgrounds. While the Occupation interferes with access to quality health care, gendered diseases are surfacing at record numbers. Women are not seeking out preventative care that in turn has disastrous effects on health. Maternal health education is lacking; on average, 44.9%, of women receive such education, only slightly lower than women with secondary education or above, 45.4%²³. 73% of women do not seek out tri-annual pap smears and 71% of women do not perform manual breast exams. Thus, breast cancer has become one of the most prevalent cancers in all of Palestinian society, 16.4% in the general population and 31% in all women, and is the second leading cause of cancer mortality, 11.5%.²⁴

Violence in the Home

There are slight differences in levels of family violence between highly educated and less-educated women, but the differences are not substantial enough to conclude that education protects women from violence in the home. Statistics show that 62.5% of women with primary education or less report psychological violence by their husbands compared to 58.4% of women with secondary and tertiary education. Reported instances of physical abuse for women with primary education or less are 25.8% compared to 19.1% for women with higher education levels. Similar instances occur for sexual abuse, as 12% of women with less than a primary education report the offence compared to 8.5% of women with secondary and tertiary education.²⁵ So-called 'honor' killings have not subsided either as nearly 50 were reported in 2007.²⁶

Early Marriage

Early marriage may interfere with a female's secondary and tertiary education. The average age of marriage for females is currently 19 years²⁷. Since secondary education is not compulsory and the legal age of marriage is not legally binding, these factors, coupled with the current economic situation, may cause girls and their families to see marriage as an investment in the future as opposed to seeking out formal employment. Additionally, the gendered messages sent by school curricula about a woman's role as wife, mother and caregiver might have some influence²⁸.

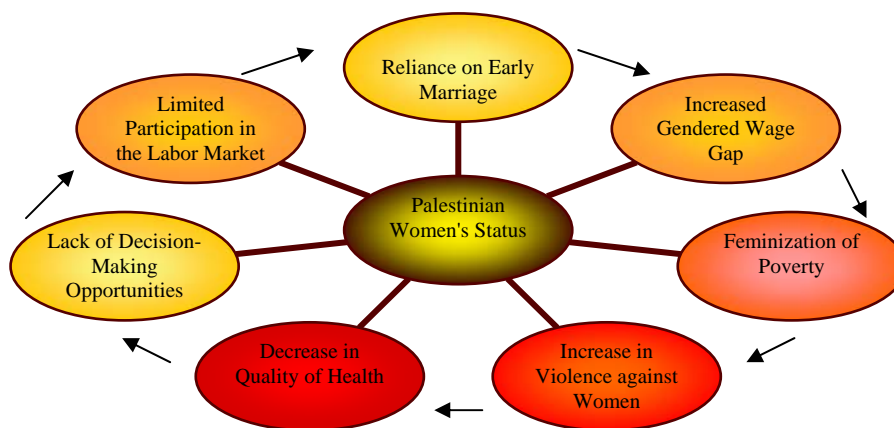


Figure 5. Indicators Used to Measure the Status of Women

Limited Leadership and Decision-Making Opportunities

While Palestinian women have always been visible in the national struggle, formal government participation has been limited. In decision-making positions, women comprise only 8.3% of all ministers, 0% of ministerial representatives, and 6% of assistants to the ministerial representatives. Within all ministries, women comprise 30.6% of staff. In the Ministry of Women's Affairs, women are the majority, comprising 68.1% of all staff²⁹. Additionally, women account for 11% of all judges, 12% of all prosecutors, and 11% of all lawyers³⁰.

Education and Poverty

In 2007, household incomes were reduced by 87% in Gaza and 81% in the West Bank³¹. During the same time in Gaza, 8 out of 10 persons were living on US\$2 a day³². The difficulties in finding gainful employment for educated women, the gendered wage gap, and increases in female-headed households due to male death and imprisonment leave women as one of the most poverty-prone groups in Palestine with little recourse to improve their situation. In 2005, nearly 10% of non-refugee women were food aid dependent³³.

Recommendations

- At the primary level, mainstreaming gender within curricula must occur so that gender discrimination is not inherently written into Palestinian schoolbooks and syllabi. Further work must include gender sensitization training of educators so that discriminatory stereotypes are not perpetuated in the classroom.
- At the secondary level, efforts must be made at lowering the dropout rate of girls, especially as they transition into their final year of schooling and prepare for the *Tawjihi*. One way to achieve lower dropout rates is to make secondary education (Grades 11-12) mandatory for all students. Campaigns must be implemented which alert families to the fact that educating their daughters is a worthwhile investment in theirs and society's future. Greater efforts must be

made in attracting more females to vocational training and education, especially to non-traditional courses.

- At the tertiary level, graduation rates must be increased for both populations at institutions of higher learning, but this is especially true for females in order to improve their academic and career options. A stronger financial investment in female's tertiary education must be made by the government in the form of scholarships and grants to study locally and abroad. As many doctoral, medical and legal programs do not exist within the West Bank or Gaza, it is imperative that Palestinian women have the same opportunities as their male counterparts to study abroad. Investing in women's education at the advanced level will encourage other women and girls to pursue studies and careers that enrich Palestine's human capital.
- At the government level, a commitment is needed on behalf of the government to draft legislation that seeks to eradicate gender-based discrimination in all facets of Palestinian life. Legislation must address the hiring process and the wage gap, while also giving recourse to women who find themselves discriminated against. Victim-friendly family violence legislation must be drafted which also seeks to criminalize all forms of violence, including psychological. Campaigns against early marriage must be implemented at all levels. Awareness-raising campaigns must be cultivated that encourage women to seek out pre-emptive medical care, especially for curable diseases such as breast cancer. At the leadership level, the governmental gender quota must be acknowledged and enforced.
- At the NGO and grassroots level, organizations must generate awareness among the public of the discriminatory practices women and girls face. As women are the missing human capital in Palestinian society, their potential must be utilized for the betterment of society. Advocacy must include the drafting of legislation, from a woman's rights perspective, which seeks to eradicate gender-based discrimination in all facets of Palestinian society. A shift from discriminatory social practices against women to a more gender-neutral approach has the potential to change the way future generations accept women's rights and equality.

¹ UNDP. (2008). HDI. http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/data_sheets/cty_ds_PSE.html

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³ PCBS. (2008).

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⁶ UNDP. (2005). Arab Human Development Report.

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- ²⁸ See Sfeir
- ²⁹ PCBS (2005)
- ³⁰ PCBS. (2007).
- ³¹ Oxfam. (2007).
- ³² WFP. (2007). www.wfp.org/english/?ModuleID=137&Key=2394
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