

## Policy brief series

The contribution of development indices in closing the gender gap and advancing social and economic development



Shared Prosperity Dignified Life



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## Brief No.2

**Education** in the Arab region: closing gaps to ensure that no child is left behind



## Introduction: the importance of education, and the status of education in the Arab region

Quality education in a country or locality is associated with increased income levels, better health outcomes, lower crime rates, and greater civic engagement.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past two decades, Arab countries have substantially increased their investments in education. For example, 15 out of 21 Arab countries with available data on youth literacy rates have made steady progress to achieve

nearly universal youth literacy rates of 95 per cent or higher.<sup>2</sup> Primary school net enrolment is above 90 per cent in 12 Arab countries, and at 80–90 per cent in an additional six countries, according to the most recent data.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these gains, disparities between different groups of children persist, reflecting difficulties in ensuring that all the region's children have access to education.

# Barriers to achieving universal education in Arab countries

## 1. Education gap between children from wealthy and poor families

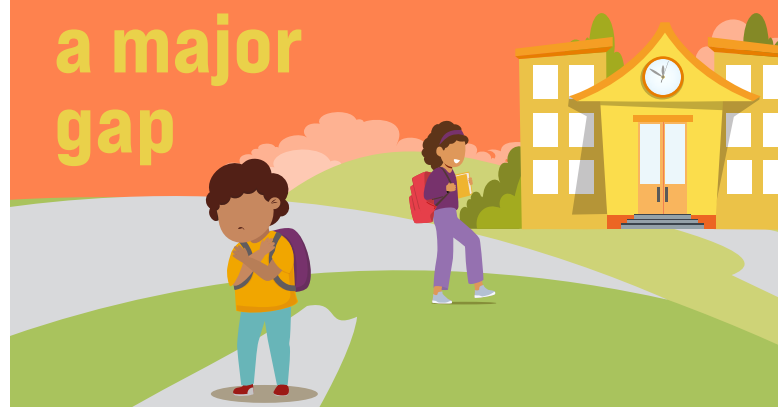
A major gap in education globally and in the Arab region is unequal access to education between children from the richest and poorest families (measured in terms of income, consumption, and/or wealth).<sup>4</sup> This gap occurs due to overlapping socioeconomic factors, including disparities in access to resources (quality schools, educational materials, and supportive environments), a lack of suitable infrastructure in rural areas and low-income neighbourhoods, or negative coping mechanisms<sup>5</sup> that may discourage children from attending school. These factors often create a cycle of disadvantage, perpetuating intergenerational poverty and widening the gap in opportunities for socioeconomic advancement.

In 2020, five Arab countries had a gap of more than 10 per cent in the primary school net attendance rate of children from the richest and poorest households (table 1), with some of the largest gaps in the Sudan (46 per cent), Yemen (34 per cent), the Comoros (23 per cent), Morocco (20 per cent), and Iraq (19 per cent).<sup>6</sup>

Countries that have successfully narrowed the gap in primary and secondary school attendance between children from the richest and poorest households over the last 30 years have done so with interventions that include: targeted outreach to families who do not send their children to school, social programmes providing financial assistance to low-income families

(including cash transfers that are conditional on school attendance), investments in better infrastructure in low-income and rural areas, and lower student-to-teacher ratios in school by investing in higher salaries and in more professional development and training opportunities.

**Unequal access to education between children from the richest and poorest families is a major gap**



**Table 1. Primary school attendance for rich and poor households, 2020**

Country	Primary school net attendance rate: children from the poorest households (per cent)	Primary school net attendance rate: children from the richest households (per cent)	Gap (per cent)
Sudan	48	94	46
Yemen	56	90	34
Comoros	72	95	23
Morocco	77	97	20
Iraq	79	98	19

Source: ESCWA, The Arab Gender Gap Report: Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals, 2020.

Guatemala, Kenya and Nicaragua have demonstrated good practices in successfully increasing the percentage of the poorest children who attend and finish school at the primary and secondary levels, which has significantly narrowed the rich-poor access gap. In 2000, only 41 per cent of children from the poorest families in Kenya finished primary school, increasing to 63 per cent in 2014. Guatemala and Nicaragua saw an even more dramatic increase: only 20 per cent and 34 per cent of children from the poorest families, respectively, had finished primary school in 2000, increasing to 56 per cent and 66 per cent by 2015. In those 15 years, these countries instituted cash transfer programmes aimed at reducing child labour and improving school attendance among the poorest families, introduced school feeding programmes to enhance students' attendance and concentration, and ensured that poor families could afford any related schooling costs such as uniforms and textbooks. Closing the gap in education between the rich and the poor had a snowball effect on these countries' scores in the Human Development Index between 2000 to 2020.<sup>7</sup> The score of Kenya increased by 0.093 points from 0.508 to 0.601. The score of Guatemala increased by 0.114 points from 0.549 to

0.663. The score of Nicaragua increased from 0.577 to 0.660, reflecting a change of 0.083 points.

## Policy options for Iraq to reduce the education gap between rich and poor households

Iraq has a golden opportunity to increase its literacy rate and close the primary completion gap between rich and poor households. In 2018, Iraq had a primary school completion rate gap of nearly 40 per cent between children from the richest and poorest households.<sup>8</sup> If the Government enacts similar measures as those in the above-mentioned countries, and raises the mean years of schooling that children receive from 6.81 to 9 years, the net primary school enrolment rate would increase to 99 per cent and the literacy rate to 95 per cent. Its rank on the Human Capital Index would improve from 143 to 133, its rank on the educational attainment subindex of the Global Gender Gap would also significantly improve from 145 to 137, and its rank on the ESCWA Development Challenges Index would improve from 39 to 43, reflecting a better performance in addressing development challenges.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 2. Possible scenarios for Iraq**

Index rank and score	Status	Proposed reform	Simulated rank and score after reforms
Development Challenges Index (2020) Rank: <b>39</b> Score: <b>0.52</b>	Mean years of schooling: <b>7.3</b>	Mean years of schooling: <b>9</b>	Rank: <b>43</b> Score: <b>0.52</b> (Score stays the same, but rank improves by 4 points)
Human Capital Index (2020) Rank: <b>143</b> Score: <b>0.41</b>	Expected years of schooling: <b>6.93</b>	Expected years of schooling: <b>9</b>	Rank: <b>133</b> Score: <b>0.45</b> (Score increases by 0.04 points, and rank improves by 10 points)
Global Gender Gap Index (2021) Rank: <b>154</b> Score: <b>0.53</b>	Primary school enrolment for females: <b>86.9%</b>	Primary school enrolment for females: <b>99%</b>	Rank: <b>154</b> Score: <b>0.54</b> (Score improves by 0.01 points, and rank remains the same)
Educational attainment subindex of the Global Gender Gap (2021) Rank: <b>145</b> Score: <b>0.81</b>	Primary school enrolment for males: <b>98.4%</b> Literacy rate for females: <b>79.9%</b> Literacy rate for males: <b>91.2%</b>	Primary school enrolment for males: <b>99%</b> Literacy rate for females: <b>95%</b> Literacy rate males: <b>95%</b>	Rank: <b>137</b> Score: <b>0.885</b> (Score improves by 0.075 points, and rank increases by 8 points)

Source: ESCWA, Indices Simulator for Policymakers in the Arab Region.

## 2. Education gap between children in rural and urban areas

Disparities in school attendance rates between rural and urban areas are primarily due to limited coverage, long travel distances to attend school, a lack of available or adequate transport, economic challenges, and cultural norms that may prioritize children assisting with family responsibilities or engaging in labour. In 2020, some of the largest gaps in primary school attendance between rural and urban children in the region were found in the Sudan (24 per cent), Morocco (13 per cent), Yemen (12 per cent), and Iraq (10 per cent). In Somalia, there were three times as many children out of school at the primary education levels in rural areas than in urban areas.<sup>10</sup>

Brazil provides a good example of closing the rural-urban education gap, by doubling the percentage of rural children finishing lower secondary school from 40 per cent in 2001 to 82 per cent in 2018. Algeria, where nearly 25 per cent of the population lives in rural areas, has also made commendable progress in the last 19 years, increasing the rate of rural children who finished lower secondary school from 47 to 66 per cent and

upper secondary school from 23 to 41 per cent between 2012 and 2019.

Algeria and Brazil increased their score on the Human Development Index over the same period, reflecting how increasing education access to all segments of a population is reflected in national development indices.

Brazil closed the gap in rural and urban enrolment rates by constructing more schools, providing transport options, and ensuring that travel distances for rural children were not overly burdensome.<sup>11</sup> For example, the National Program of Peasant Education (Pronacampo) of Brazil, launched in 2010, introduced multiple policies such as investing in school management, learning practices, teacher training, adult education, and school infrastructure. Programmes under Pronacampo include the production and distribution of specialized textbooks, lessons on rural life for greater student engagement, funding for community schools, and expanded school transport.<sup>12</sup>

**Table 3. Rural and urban primary school attendance in the Arab region, 2020**

Country	Primary school net attendance rate: children in rural area (per cent)	Primary school net attendance rate: children in urban areas (per cent)	Gap (per cent)
Somalia	11.2	38.6	27.4
Sudan	61	86	25
Morocco	83	96	13
Yemen	73	85	12
Iraq	84	94	10

**Source:** ESCWA, *The Arab Gender Gap Report: Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals, 2020*.



Algeria has implemented mobile teaching centres, which increased vocational training in rural and remote areas, and proved to be an important lifeline for young rural women. The National Office for Distance Education and Training offers education to students who have not attended mainstream schools in-person. Free school transport is also arranged for students in remote areas, and scholarships are provided to students attending day-boarding schools. According to UNESCO, the number of beneficiaries of these services has more than quadrupled in the past 14 years.<sup>13</sup>

## Possible policy options for the Sudan to close the rural-urban gap in primary school attendance

Today, nearly 65 per cent of the Sudanese population lives in rural areas. In 2020, there was a rural-urban primary school attendance gap of 25 per cent. If the Sudan enacts similar measures as Algeria and Brazil to increase rural school attendance, this could be reflected in development indicators such as an increase in the mean years of schooling from 3.8 to 7 years, an increase in the literacy rate for both females and males to over 75 per cent, and an increase in primary school enrolment from an average

# Algeria implemented mobile teaching centres, increasing vocational training in rural and remote areas



of 65 per cent to 80 per cent (for both boys and girls). Consequently, its rank on the E-Government Development Index would improve from 176 to 173, its rank on the Global Gender Gap Index would improve from 146 to 143 (with an improvement on the education subindex from 124 to 33), and its rank on the Development Challenges Index would improve from 20 to 23, reflecting progress in human development.

**Table 4. Policy scenarios for the Sudan**

Index rank and score	Status	Proposed reform	Simulated rank and score after reforms
Development Challenges Index (2020) Rank: <b>20</b> Score: <b>0.57</b>	Mean years of schooling: <b>3.8</b>	Mean years of schooling: <b>7</b>	Rank: <b>23</b> Score: <b>0.56</b> (Score improves by 0.01 points, and rank improves by 3 points)
E-Government Development Index (2022) Rank: <b>176</b> Score: <b>0.30</b>	Mean years of schooling: <b>3.8</b> Adult literacy rate: <b>60.7%</b>	Mean years of schooling: <b>7</b> Adult literacy rate: <b>75%</b>	Rank: <b>173</b> Score: <b>0.32</b> (Score improves by 0.02 points, and rank improves by 3 points)
Gender Gap Index (2024) Rank: <b>146</b> Score: <b>0.57</b> Educational attainment subindex Rank: <b>124</b> Score: <b>0.94</b>	Primary school enrolment for females: <b>63%</b> Primary school enrolment for males: <b>68%</b> Literacy rate for females: <b>56%</b> Literacy rate for males: <b>65%</b>	Primary school enrolment for females: <b>80%</b> Primary school enrolment for males: <b>80%</b> Literacy rate for females: <b>75%</b> Literacy rate for male: <b>75%</b>	Rank: <b>143</b> Score: <b>0.58</b> (Score increases by 0.01 points, and rank improves by 3 points) Rank: <b>33</b> Score: <b>1</b> (Score increases by 0.06 points, and rank significantly improves by 91 points)

Source: ESCWA, Indices Simulator for Policymakers in the Arab Region.

### 3. Education gap between boys and girls

Some Arab countries continue to show significant gender gaps between girls and boys in school attendance, completion, and enrolment rates. Studies show that educated women are more likely to marry later, have fewer children, and invest more in their children's education, thereby breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty. Furthermore, addressing the gender gap in education can have especially extensive effects on women's economic empowerment and a country's wider economic development.

In 2020, Arab countries with the largest remaining primary school enrolment gender gaps were Iraq at 11 per cent (98 per cent of boys enrolled versus 87 per cent of girls), Yemen at 10 per cent (88 per cent of boys enrolled versus 78 per cent of girls), and Djibouti at 8 per cent (61 per cent of boys enrolled versus 53 per cent of girls).

India, Morocco and Nepal have made significant progress in closing the education gender gap in the last 30 years, and Arab countries can benefit from their experiences. The primary school enrolment gender parity index ratio (GPI) measures how evenly boys and girls are enrolled in schools, with 1 indicating an equal number of boys and girls, and 0.5 indicating that twice as many boys are enrolled in school as girls. In 1990, the GPI ratio for primary school education was 0.6 in Nepal, 0.68 in Morocco, and 0.75 in India. In 2020, all three countries achieved GPI scores of 0.96 or higher, indicating near gender parity in the percentages of boys and girls enrolled in primary school.<sup>14</sup>

Targeted policies that countries can implement to increase the enrolment and graduation rates of girls

include providing conditional cash transfer programmes to ensure that families send their daughters to school, launching targeted community outreach programmes on the importance of educating girls, and enforcing laws on mandatory school attendance for both boys and girls equally. In Morocco, the sizable increase in the primary enrolment rate for girls (almost 28 per cent from 1999 to 2013) was directly attributed to a long-term emphasis on school construction in rural areas and gender equity reforms.<sup>15</sup> Such achievements in closing the gender gap in primary school enrolment are reflected in higher scores on the Global Gender Gap Index from 0.85 in 2006 to 0.94 in 2020 (+0.09), and on the Human Development Index from 0.529 in 2006 to 0.686 in 2020 (+0.157).

#### Arab countries with the largest primary school enrolment gender gaps:

- Iraq 11%
- Yemen 10%
- Djibouti 8%

**Table 5. Primary school enrolment and attendance rates in the Arab region, 2020**

Country	Primary school net enrolment rate for females (per cent)	Primary school net enrolment rate for males (per cent)	Gap (per cent)	Primary school net attendance rate for females (per cent)	Primary school net attendance rate for males (per cent)	Gap (per cent)
Iraq	87	98	11	87	93	6
Yemen	78	88	10	72	80	8
Djibouti	53	61	8	-	-	-

Source: ESCWA, The Arab Gender Gap Report: Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals, 2020.

## Possible policy options for Yemen to close the gender gap in education

Yemen faces significant development challenges compounded by conflict, which has disrupted the education system, leading to the closure of schools and making it difficult for children, especially girls, to attend classes regularly. Efforts to improve educational infrastructure and promote gender equality are hindered by a lack of security and resources.

If Yemen were able to enact policies despite its current challenging context, such as establishing mobile schools, literacy programmes, and community-based temporary

learning spaces; enacting flexible schooling hours and catch-up/remedial classes; and partnering with intergovernmental agencies and non-governmental organizations for programming and resource distribution, it could make exceptional progress in closing the gender gap in education. This would be reflected in various indicators such as achieving gender equity in literacy and primary school enrolment rates of boys and girls, and increasing the average years of schooling students receive from 3.2 years to 6.4 years. In doing so, its rank on the educational attainment subindex of the Global Gender Gap would improve from 152 to 140, its ranking on the Human Capital Index would improve from 161 to 146, and its rank on the Development Challenges Index would improve from 4 to 5.

**Table 6. Policy scenarios for Yemen**

Index rank and score	Status	Proposed reform	Simulated rank and score after reforms
Development Challenges Index (2020) Rank: <b>4</b> Score: <b>0.64</b>	Mean years of schooling: <b>3.2</b>	Mean years of schooling: <b>6.4</b>	Rank: <b>5</b> Score: <b>0.63</b> [Score improves by 0.01 points, and rank improves by one point]
Human Capital Index (2020) Rank: <b>161</b> Score: <b>0.37</b>	Expected years of school: <b>8.13</b>	Expected years of school: <b>10</b>	Rank: <b>146</b> Score: <b>0.40</b> [Score increases by 0.03 points, and rank significantly improves by 15 points]
Global Gender Gap Index (2021) Rank: <b>155</b> Score: <b>0.49</b>	Primary school enrolment for females: <b>78.7%</b> Primary school enrolment for males: <b>89.4%</b>	Primary school enrolment for females: <b>90%</b> Primary school enrolment for males: <b>90%</b>	Rank: <b>155</b> Score: <b>0.53</b> [Score improves by 0.04 points, but rank stays the same]
Educational attainment subindex of the Global Gender Gap Index (2021) Rank: <b>152</b> Score: <b>0.72</b>	Literacy rate for females: <b>35%</b> Literacy rate for males: <b>73.2%</b>	Literacy rate for females: <b>75%</b> Literacy rate for males: <b>75%</b>	Rank: <b>140</b> Score: <b>0.872</b> [Score improves by 0.152 points, and rank significantly improves by 12 points]

Source: ESCWA, Indices Simulator for Policymakers in the Arab Region.

## Conclusion

Investing in education is not merely a budgetary expenditure, but a strategic investment with far-reaching benefits that are reflected in the increased scores and ranks of countries that have narrowed their education gaps on development indices.

Arab countries should close the education gaps between rich and poor households, between urban and rural areas, and between

boys and girls by drawing on the positive experiences of other countries globally and in the region. These investments in access to education will have a ripple effect on countries' rankings and scores across a myriad of development indices, and support Governments in enhancing social cohesion; promoting equality, including gender equality; laying the foundation for sustainable development; and ensuring that no child is left behind.

# Endnotes

1. Eric Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann, *The Knowledge Capital of Nations: Education and the Economics of Growth*, 2023; and World Bank Group, [World Development Report: Learning to Realize Education's Promise](#), 2018.
2. Arab countries with youth literacy rates of 95 per cent or higher, according to the most recent data, are: Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine (Gaza and the West Bank), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates (Source: World Bank Open Data, [Literacy rate, youth total \(% of people aged 15-24\)](#); and World Bank Open Data, [Literacy rate, youth total \(% of people ages 15-24\) - Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, West Bank and Gaza, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen](#)). No data is available for Djibouti.
3. Arab countries with primary school net enrolment rates higher than 90 per cent are: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Qatar, the State of Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates. The latest available rate was 98 per cent reported in 1983 for Libya, and 98 per cent reported in 1974 for Lebanon. Arab countries with rates between 80 and 90 percent are the Comoros, Jordan, Kuwait, Mauritania, Oman and Yemen (Source: World Bank Group, [School enrollment, primary \(% net\) - Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, West Bank and Gaza, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen](#)).
4. The richest and poorest quintiles of families are typically measured using household income or consumption data, often based on national household surveys or censuses. Families are divided into five equal groups, or quintiles, from the lowest to the highest. The richest quintile represents the top 20 per cent of households with the highest income or consumption, while the poorest quintile represents the bottom 20 per cent.
5. For example, in impoverished or conflict-affected regions, girls may be kept home for housework and caregiving responsibilities, whereas boys may be sent out to work for additional income.
6. ESCWA, [The Arab Gender Gap Report: Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals](#), 2020.
7. The Human Development Index comprises three components: education, income, and health/life expectancy. The education sub-score was calculated using gross enrolment ratios and literacy rates until 2010. Since 2010, it has used mean and expected years of schooling.
8. Around 54 per cent of children from the poorest households completed primary education, versus 93 per cent of children from the richest (Source: UNESCO, [World Inequality Database on Education](#)).
9. The Development Challenges Index (DCI) was developed by ESCWA to assess and rank countries based on their performance across various development indicators, including economic development, social progress, environmental sustainability, governance and infrastructure. A lower rank on DCI indicates better performance or improvement in addressing development challenges.
10. ESCWA, [The Arab Gender Gap Report: Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals](#), 2020.
11. Transport options for children to reach school more easily include dedicated school buses, expanded public bus routes, and bicycle provision.
12. UNESCO, [Rurality and education in Brazil: inclusion of rural and remote populations in formal education in Brazil](#), 2020.
13. UNESCO, [Education profiles: Algeria](#), 2024.
14. World Bank Group, [School enrollment, primary \(gross\), gender parity index \(GPI\) - Nepal, Morocco, India](#).
15. ESCWA, [The Arab Gender Gap Report: Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals](#), 2020, p. 85.



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