

Can the Arab region fulfil the promise of leaving no one behind?



Shared Prosperity Dignified Life



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Overview

Approximately 187 million individuals in the Arab region are experiencing vulnerability and deprivation across critical domains such as social protection, health, education, economic empowerment, technology, food security, housing and basic rights. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) estimates that as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development midpoint approaches, the Arab region faces significant developmental challenges in fulfilling the promise to leave no one behind.¹

187 million

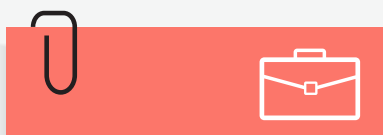
individuals in the Arab region are experiencing deprivation such as social protection, health, education, economic empowerment, technology, food security, housing and basic rights.



Key messages



Social and health gaps: **292 million** individuals lack at least one social protection benefit, and **174 million** lack access to essential health services.



Education and employment deficits: there are **78 million** illiterate people, **15.3 million** unemployed people and **41.2 million** working in informal employment without protection.



Technological and financial exclusion: **154 million** individuals lack Internet access and **211 million** have limited access to financial services.



Infrastructure and basic needs: **50 million** people lack safe drinking water, **154 million** lack safe sanitation, **42 million** lack electricity, **79.5 million** lack quality housing, and **154 million** suffer from food insecurity, with **56 million** being undernourished.



Young people are particularly vulnerable: **29.3 million** young people are being left behind in various areas of development. As of 2022, **24 million** young people were not in education, employment or training (NEET), and **5.3 million** were unemployed.

Some social groups experience deprivation in specific fields (women and young people) as well as deprivation and vulnerability based on their unique circumstances (migrants, persons with disabilities, refugees, older persons, informal workers, agricultural labourers and slum dwellers).

Women

In spite of accrued gains such as in legislation, education and health, women in the Arab region continue to face significant barriers in achieving equality. Structural and societal challenges aggravate disparities, especially in economic empowerment, political representation and access to services, leaving women overly vulnerable.

Economic exclusion

The Arab region is host to the world's lowest women's labour force participation rate at 20 per cent, which is three times lower than that of men. Women's unemployment is 20 per cent, compared to 8 per cent for men. The wage gap remains significant, reaching

as high as 48 per cent in some countries.² Businesses led by women are met with financial constraints, and property ownership is very low, with women holding only 3 per cent of land in Jordan and less than 1 per cent in Egypt. Women represent just 5 per cent of landholders regionally.³

Political underrepresentation

Only 11 per cent of leadership positions in the Arab region are occupied by women, far below the global average of 27 per cent.⁴ The Arab region has closed just 15 per cent of the gender gap in political representation, compared to the global average of 22 per cent. The United Arab Emirates has succeeded in achieving gender parity in parliament, while Yemen and Qatar are lagging behind with less than 5 per cent female representation. Quotas in Morocco and Iraq have increased representation to 24 per cent and 29 per cent, respectively, yet significant gaps remain.⁵

Deprivation in access to healthcare

Maternal mortality decreased from 240 to 132 deaths per 100,000 live births between 2000 and 2020, however access to healthcare remains constrained. In Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, 13.6 million women lack access to family planning. Anaemia, which affects 36 million women, is a persistent reproductive health challenge.⁶

Challenges to educational achievement

The gender gap in primary and secondary education has narrowed, but disparities in adult literacy have persisted. Women's literacy rates improved from 53 per cent in 2000 to 68 per cent in 2022, although Yemen and Somalia still face high gaps of 38 per cent and 26 per cent, respectively.⁷ While significant progress has been made in educational access, with the average school enrolment rate for girls at 95 per cent, rates drop at the upper secondary level, where only 67 per cent of girls remain enrolled.⁸

Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a major challenge. For example, 26 per cent of Egyptian women experience partner violence. Child marriage affects 25 per cent of women aged 15–49 years in the region, and 37 million women face female genital mutilation in seven countries. Conflict exacerbates GBV, as seen in Yemen, where incidents increased by 70 per cent since 2015.⁹



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Intersectional challenges

Conflict, displacement and climate change greatly burden women. In Yemen, 30 per cent of displaced women are heads of households, often living in

poverty. Women in rural areas face compounded inequities, including a 14 per cent gender gap in Internet use and limited access to water, sanitation and healthcare.

Young people

More than half of the Arab region's population is under the age of 25 years. The region faces significant challenges in meeting the needs of its youthful population, leaving many behind due to systemic barriers in health, education, economic empowerment and social protection.

Economic deprivation

The unemployment of young people in the Arab region is at 26 per cent, compared to 10 per cent for adults. Informal employment is pervasive, with 89 per cent of young people working informally, compared to 69 per cent of adults. In the Sudan and the Comoros, over 98 per cent of young workers are informally employed, which leads to job insecurity, low wages, and limited or no social protection. Youth economic independence is structurally hampered by the fact that only 26 per cent of young people have

bank accounts, and just 3 per cent can access loans to start businesses.¹⁰

Deprivation in access to health

Young people in the Arab region struggle with inadequate healthcare services, with 63 per cent of individuals aged 18–29 years expressing dissatisfaction with healthcare services in 2021. Adolescent birth rates in the region average 43.6 per 1,000 women aged 15–19 years, exceeding the global average of 41.3, and nearly 1 million children were born to adolescent mothers in 2023. Child mortality is a significant concern, with 827,810 deaths recorded in 2023. Obesity rates among young people are expected to double from 11 per cent in 2020 to 23 per cent by 2035. Road accidents are a leading cause of death for young people, accounting for 42 per cent of injuries and fatalities in Lebanon among children aged 6–14 years.¹¹



Deprivation in access to education

The quality of education remains a challenge, with 87 per cent of young people reporting dissatisfaction with education in 2018. Over 50 per cent of students in the region fail to meet minimum standards in international exams. Tertiary education attainment varies widely, with only 27 per cent of young people in Egypt and Tunisia achieving post-secondary education compared to 50 per cent in Jordan. The mismatch between education and labour market needs leaves 30–40 per cent of young people in prolonged transitions from school to work, contributing to a NEET rate of 31 per cent, greater than the global average of 21 per cent.¹²

Deprivation in social protection

Many informally employed young people are excluded from social protection systems. In a survey across five countries in the Arab region, 30 per cent of young people reported employers refusing to register them for social security, rendering young workers particularly vulnerable to poverty, illness and workplace injuries.

Leadership and political engagement

Representation of young people under the age of 30 years in parliaments in fifteen Arab countries where information is available stands at 1.3 per cent, less than half the global average of 2.8 per cent.¹³ Political disengagement of young people is underpinned by distrust in Governments and a lack of effective youth policies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, youth unemployment increased, educational disruptions surged, and mental health challenges multiplied, with Tunisia reporting depression in 15 per cent of young people aged 18–29 years.¹⁴

Migrants

The Arab region was host to 32 million migrants in 2020 and faces critical challenges in addressing migrant exclusion driven by economic disparities, systemic barriers and crises.

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Intersectional challenges

Conflicts, climate change and urban-rural divides worsen youth exclusion. Over 25 million children aged 6–15 years in conflict zones have missed school, which increases their risk of exploitation. In rural areas, young people face inactivity rates as high as 45 per cent in Egypt and 33 per cent in Tunisia, compared to 33 per cent and 25 per cent in urban areas, respectively.

Labour and economic exploitation

Most migrants are low-skilled workers concentrated in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries,

which host 28 million migrants. They often fill low-wage jobs in construction and domestic work, with women being particularly vulnerable. Legal systems like the Kafala system restrict workers' rights, prevent job mobility, and enable exploitation. Two-thirds of domestic workers are excluded from minimum wage protections, and many earn substandard wages and limited access to collective bargaining. Additionally, 89 per cent of migrants in informal sectors lack social security, amplifying their economic vulnerability, especially during shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Deprivation in health and social protection

Migrants frequently lack access to health services, particularly mental healthcare, and face systemic exclusions. While 11 Arab countries provide essential healthcare regardless of immigration status, broader protections remain insufficient. Social protection systems inadequately cover migrants; although Bahrain provides unemployment schemes to non-nationals and the new social protection law in Oman is expected to extend social protection measures to documented non-Omani workers,¹⁵ in sectors heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, many migrants experienced job losses and unpaid wages, deepening economic and social disparities.

Social exclusion and discrimination

Migrants who do not speak Arabic experience integration issues due to linguistic and cultural barriers, compounded by xenophobia and racism. Legal barriers also prevent migrants from changing employers easily or securing justice when mistreated, perpetuating systemic inequalities.

Forced displacement and irregular migration

Migrants fleeing conflict and poverty often face dire risks. In 2023, 2,750 deaths occurred during treacherous Mediterranean Sea crossings. Migrants in Libya face extreme exploitation, including arbitrary detention, torture, and GBV. Irregular immigration status further marginalizes migrants, limiting access to public services and legal protections.

Intersectional vulnerabilities

Migrant women and low-skilled workers are particularly disadvantaged, facing GBV and wage disparities. Intersectional factors, including race, legal status and economic shocks, exacerbate their exclusion, limiting upward mobility and social inclusion.

Persons with disabilities

While there are severe data limitations and inconsistency in data collection, it is approximated that 16 per cent of the global population experiences disability, with prevalence rates in the Arab region

ranging from 2 per cent in Oman and Iraq to 5 per cent in Bahrain and Morocco. Persons with disabilities face significant barriers across health, education, employment and social protection.¹⁶





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Deprivation in health

Persons with disabilities are at a higher risk of receiving lower-quality medical care than their counterparts without disabilities. In Lebanon, 82 per cent of persons with disabilities incur regular medical expenses, compared to 25 per cent of those without disabilities. Also, 62 per cent of persons with disabilities in Lebanon did not seek medical treatment due to financial constraints, compared to 28 per cent of their counterparts without disabilities. Persons with disabilities are also at a higher risk of poverty and of facing challenges in access to food. In Egypt, 30 per cent of individuals with disabilities face challenges accessing meals, compared to 14 per cent of those without disabilities.¹⁷

Deprivation in education

Illiteracy rates among persons with disabilities are consistently higher across countries in the Arab region. In Palestine, 46 per cent of children with disabilities aged 6–17 years are not enrolled in education. In Lebanon, only 6 per cent of individuals with disabilities attain higher education, compared to 26 per cent of their peers without disabilities.¹⁸

Deprivation in employment

Unemployment rates for persons with disabilities are disproportionately high, such as 51 per cent in Saudi Arabia compared to 16 per cent for those without disabilities. Informal employment rates are higher for persons with disabilities: 64 per cent of workers with disabilities are informally employed in Lebanon and 51 per cent in Somalia, compared to 43 per cent and 43 per cent for workers without disabilities, respectively. Many countries in the region implement employment quotas for persons with disabilities, but non-compliance limits their impact.¹⁹

Social protection

Only 15 per cent of people with severe disabilities in the Arab region receive cash social protection benefits, compared to the global average of 33 per cent. Fragmented social protection systems aggravate poverty and vulnerability for individuals with disabilities.²⁰

Intersectionality

Rural residents with disabilities face compound challenges due to inaccessible transportation and infrastructure. Conflict and crises increase challenges for persons with disabilities, with individuals denied access to evacuation routes and emergency services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, women with disabilities experienced heightened risks of domestic violence, with inadequate protection measures in place.

Refugees and internally displaced persons

The Arab region faces one of the most serious displacement crises globally, hosting over 35 million forcibly displaced persons by the end of 2022, including 25 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) due to conflict and violence; 10 million refugees, including 4 million under the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and 5.9 million Palestinian refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.²¹

Conflict-related displacement

There are 6.7 million IDPs in the Syrian Arab Republic, 4.5 million in Yemen, 3.9 million in Somalia and 1.2 million in Iraq. In the Sudan, the 2023 conflict displaced 6.7 million people internally and forced 2 million to flee the country. Starting in October 2024, the war on Gaza led to the displacement of 90 per cent of the 2.1 million people residing in the Gaza Strip, precipitating a humanitarian catastrophe.²² Lebanon hosts the world's highest per capita refugee population, with 1.5 million Syrian refugees, 180,000 Palestinian refugees and 31,400 Palestinian refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic. Jordan hosts 655,762 Syrian refugees.²³

Living conditions and vulnerabilities

Many displaced individuals lack adequate healthcare due to overburdened service systems. In 2021, 39 per cent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan experienced food insecurity, with refugee children facing significant barriers. In Lebanon, 88 per cent of Syrian refugees lack secondary education, and 39 per cent of Syrian school-age children in host countries are not enrolled in school. Women and girls are especially vulnerable to GBV, with displacement increasing risks of exploitation, harassment and violence.

Economic and social protection challenges

Among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, 39 per cent were unemployed in 2020, with 70 per cent working informally. Many lack legal residency permits, limiting job opportunities, and are often excluded from host countries' social safety nets. For example, welfare spending in Lebanon fell to 7 per cent of gross domestic product in 2022, shrinking support for refugees.²⁴

Intersectional and climate vulnerabilities

Displacement exacerbates existing vulnerabilities, with one in four displaced persons living in urban informal settlements lacking basic services.

39 per cent

of Syrian refugees in Lebanon were unemployed in 2020.



Climate change compounds challenges, with rising temperatures, droughts and water scarcity increasing displacement risks. Some parts of the Arab region may become uninhabitable within the next 50 years.

Older persons

The Arab region is experiencing rapid population ageing, with the number of older persons (65+ years) increasing fivefold from 4.5 million in 1970 to 20.8 million in 2020. By 2050, this number is projected to reach 71.5 million, doubling their share of the population from 5 per cent to 11 per cent. The region's ageing transition, driven by declining fertility rates and improved life expectancy, varies significantly, with transitions ranging from 10 years in Kuwait to 42 years in Egypt.²⁵

Deprivation in health

In many countries in the Arab region, 70 per cent of older persons lack health insurance. Non-communicable diseases are the leading cause of death among older adults and caused 3 million deaths in 2019. Out-of-pocket healthcare expenses exceed 70 per cent in some countries, burdening older individuals and families. Disability rates rise significantly with age, affecting up to 31 per cent of those aged 65 years and above in some countries.

Deprivation in education

Two-thirds of older persons are illiterate in Egypt, Morocco and the Sudan. Digital illiteracy further

isolates older adults, hindering access to services and communication, especially during crises.

Deprivation in social protection

Only 42 per cent of older persons in the Arab region receive pensions, with significant disparities. Coverage ranges from 7 per cent in Yemen to 85 per cent in Tunisia. Older women are particularly disadvantaged due to lower labour market participation and reliance on spouses' pensions.

Economic dependency

The old-age dependency ratio, stable at 7 per cent since 1970, is projected to rise to 17 per cent by 2050, increasing the economic burden on working-age populations.²⁶

Challenges of ageism and shocks

Half of the global population holds ageist views, contributing to the exclusion of older persons in policies and services. Older persons are disproportionately affected by climate shocks, conflicts and health crises like COVID-19, leading to poverty, malnutrition and increased vulnerability.

Additional excluded populations

The Arab region faces significant challenges in addressing the needs of informal workers, agricultural workers and urban slum dwellers, who remain among the most vulnerable populations.

Informal workers

Informal employment accounts for 70 per cent of total employment in the region, with over 70 per cent of workers outside agriculture and the public sector in informal jobs. Informal workers suffer from poor working conditions, inadequate job security and limited access to rights, financial services and social

protection. Rural areas have higher rates of informal employment: 72 per cent in Egypt, 89 per cent in Morocco and 81 per cent in Yemen. Shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, disproportionately impact informal workers, leading to income loss and increased vulnerability.²⁷

Agricultural workers

Agriculture employs 19 per cent of the workforce regionally, with higher rates in Mauritania (53 per cent), the Sudan (40 per cent) and Morocco (36 per cent). Small-scale family farmers manage 75–85 per cent of agricultural land, but disparities in land access and tenure rights persist, particularly

for women, who own only 5 per cent of land in the Arab region. Seasonal employment, lack of formal contracts, and exclusion from social insurance schemes aggravate the precariousness of agricultural workers' livelihoods.²⁸

Urban slum dwellers

In the Arab region, 24 per cent of the population resides in urban slums or informal settlements, with higher rates in the Sudan (74 per cent), Mauritania (59 per cent) and Yemen (44 per cent). Slum dwellers face inadequate access to essential services such as water, sanitation and electricity, made worse by environmental hazards like floods and droughts. Shocks, such as conflict and displacement, expand informal settlements, with 31 per cent of displaced populations living in slums.²⁹

Intersectional vulnerabilities

Informal workers, agricultural workers and slum dwellers face compound challenges due to shocks, weak governance and geographic isolation. Women in agriculture face barriers in accessing inputs, markets and legal protection, while slum dwellers are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards.

Concluding remarks

As the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development midpoint approaches, the Arab region faces considerable barriers to fulfilling its commitment to leave no one behind. Exclusion is driven by discriminatory laws, structural constraints and

social norms, compounded by conflicts, inadequate governance and shocks. Marginalized groups lack equal access to opportunities, services and resources, and the need for reliable data and intersectional policy frameworks is urgent.

Policy recommendations



Women

Address systemic barriers by implementing gender-sensitive policies, promoting equal pay, and ensuring representation in decision-making. Extend social protection, including old-age pensions, and recognize unpaid care work.



Young people

Empower young people through innovative entrepreneurship programmes, job creation incentives and youth representation in governance. Invest in data collection to address challenges faced by marginalized young people.



Persons with disabilities

Ensure inclusive policies, improve accessibility, and prioritize disability-responsive humanitarian assistance, particularly in conflict zones and rural areas.



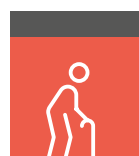
Refugees and IDPs

Provide targeted assistance, vocational training and safe spaces, while integrating refugees into national systems and offering donor-supported economic initiatives in host countries.



Migrants

Reform the Kafala system, ensure minimum wage protections, and include migrants in disaster preparedness plans and social protection systems.



Older persons

Develop anti-discrimination policies, expand access to pensions, healthcare and urban infrastructure, and ensure the voices of older persons are included in policy planning.



Informal workers

Conduct comprehensive research, support transitions to formal employment, and invest in social solidarity mechanisms to safeguard rights.



Agricultural workers

Improve rural infrastructure, enforce labour protection, and promote food sovereignty while addressing gender disparities in land rights.



Urban slum dwellers

Enhance urban governance, climate resilience and access to services, focusing on vulnerable groups like women, young people and migrants.

Endnotes

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Shared Prosperity Dignified Life



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