



# LEVELS OF HUMAN WELL-BEING

## Introduction

*Previous chapters have compared the respective positions of women and men in the Arab countries in terms of the acquisition and utilisation of essential capacities since these are two primary dimensions of human well-being from the standpoint of human development. This chapter focuses on other aspects of human well-being as they relate to Arab women.*

## TOPOGRAPHY OF POVERTY AND GENDER

Despite the limitations of data and taking into account a study undertaken on five Arab States (Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen), there is no evidence of the “feminisation of poverty”, i.e., no clear evidence that women suffer from higher levels of poverty than men, as indicated by income and expenditure, the traditional measures of poverty (Abdel Gadir Ali, background paper for the Report). A better measure within the framework of human development is the extent to which women are deprived of opportunities to acquire capacities and use them to secure the elements of human welfare. These yardsticks indicate that women suffer from higher levels of such “human poverty”, which measures deprivation by taking into account the three indices of human development: health, knowledge and income.

Chapter 2 illustrated the great relative deprivation of women in this respect in terms of gaining knowledge through education and of enjoying health in its positive and comprehensive sense.

When it comes to the utilisation of people’s capacities in economic activity, women are affected by higher rates of unemployment just as they are at greater risk of losing their jobs in

a recession, especially in the large-scale private sector. Likewise, they do not benefit to the same degree as men from the creation of new jobs during an economic revival.

Working women generally receive lower wages than their male peers. The disparity increases in the private sector in that government and public-sector employers more closely adhere to laws concerning equality of wages.

## POVERTY AND THE GENDER OF HEADS OF HOUSEHOLD

Accurate investigation requires analysis of the relationship between the gender of heads of household and poverty, distinguishing between two types of female household headship: (a) that which is imposed by widowhood, marital separation or abandonment; and (b) that which is voluntary and results from the husband’s migration for the sake of work. In the latter case, legally speaking, a male remains the head of household.

Study reveals that households headed by females are not necessarily the poorest of the poor. Indeed, some families headed by women are better off according to some indicators of social welfare, including, in certain cases, income and wealth, especially if the women’s situation is voluntary. Nevertheless, the great majority of households that are headed by women through no choice of their own appear to be poorer than the minority of households headed by unmarried men.

## THE SPREAD OF POVERTY AND THE DISEMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Inasmuch as empirical evidence does not exist to confirm the feminisation of poverty, the present Report examines how the spread of

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poverty contributes to the disempowerment of women, using cumulative indicators of poverty to represent its spread.

To this end, a regression analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between the "gender empowerment measure" (GEM) as a dependent variable and the head count index (level of poverty) and human poverty indicators as independent variables. The data were drawn from the Human Development Report 2004 (Abdel Gadir Ali, background paper for the Report). It is worth noting that a value for the indicator "gender empowerment" was available for only four Arab States out of 79 countries in the world for which data were available: Bahrain (where the indicator value was 0.395), Egypt (0.266), Saudi Arabia (0.207) and Yemen (0.123). The value for the indicator was the highest in Norway (0.908) and the lowest in Yemen. The results of the analysis show that the spread of income poverty on average leads to the disempowerment of women (as expressed by the indicator 'social gender empowerment'-GEM) as compared to men. Income poverty also leads to the disenfranchisement of women in the areas of parliamentary participation, professional and technical employment, and control of economic resources.

As far as human poverty is concerned, the results of the analysis on average confirm that it results in the disempowerment of women (again, as expressed by the indicator "social gender empowerment-GEM") and the exclusion of women in upper-level legislative,

administrative and organisational jobs as well as in the professional and technical arenas. The results did not reveal a statistically significant effect of the spread of human poverty in developing countries on the political empowerment of women, as reflected in the number of parliamentary seats occupied by women.

## THE IMPAIRMENT OF PERSONAL LIBERTY

Women's right to enjoy personal liberty and security is still thwarted on many fronts. Simply making a connection between women and freedom excites controversy in some quarters and conflicts with custom and tradition. Some parties believe in restricting women's freedom of movement in the name of protecting them or their "reputation". In many cases, the law plays its part by legitimising such restrictions, claiming to be acting in defence of obedience or "honour".

The forms and degrees of violence inflicted on Arab women confirm that Arab legislators, governments and social movements need to redouble their efforts to achieve security and development in its comprehensive sense. To discuss violence<sup>1</sup> against women in the Arab countries is not to imply its absence in the rest of the world. It is a world problem, the fight against which has been part of the global programme for human rights. Its extent was recognised at the World Conference on Human Rights through the adoption of the global Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women in December 1993. The preamble to the latter asserts that violence against women is linked to the definition of the asymmetrical status of men and women and, consequently, to all types of discrimination against women. Such violence represents an obstacle to equality, peace and development and a violation of human rights and freedoms. The Declaration also established 25 November as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

It remains difficult to speak of violence

BOX 4-1

### **Kemal Derviş\*: On the Occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (25 November 2005)**

Violence against women not only devastates lives and fractures communities, but also impedes development. While its extent is hard to estimate given it is so widely under-reported, the World Health Organisation estimates that 25 per cent of women worldwide will be raped, beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in their lifetime. No country or society can

claim to be free of domestic violence; it cuts across boundaries of culture, class, education, income, ethnicity and age.

Today, violence against women is still a universally tolerated and often unpunished crime. Women are attacked on the street, in the workplace, in the home, while in state custody, and in conflict situations.

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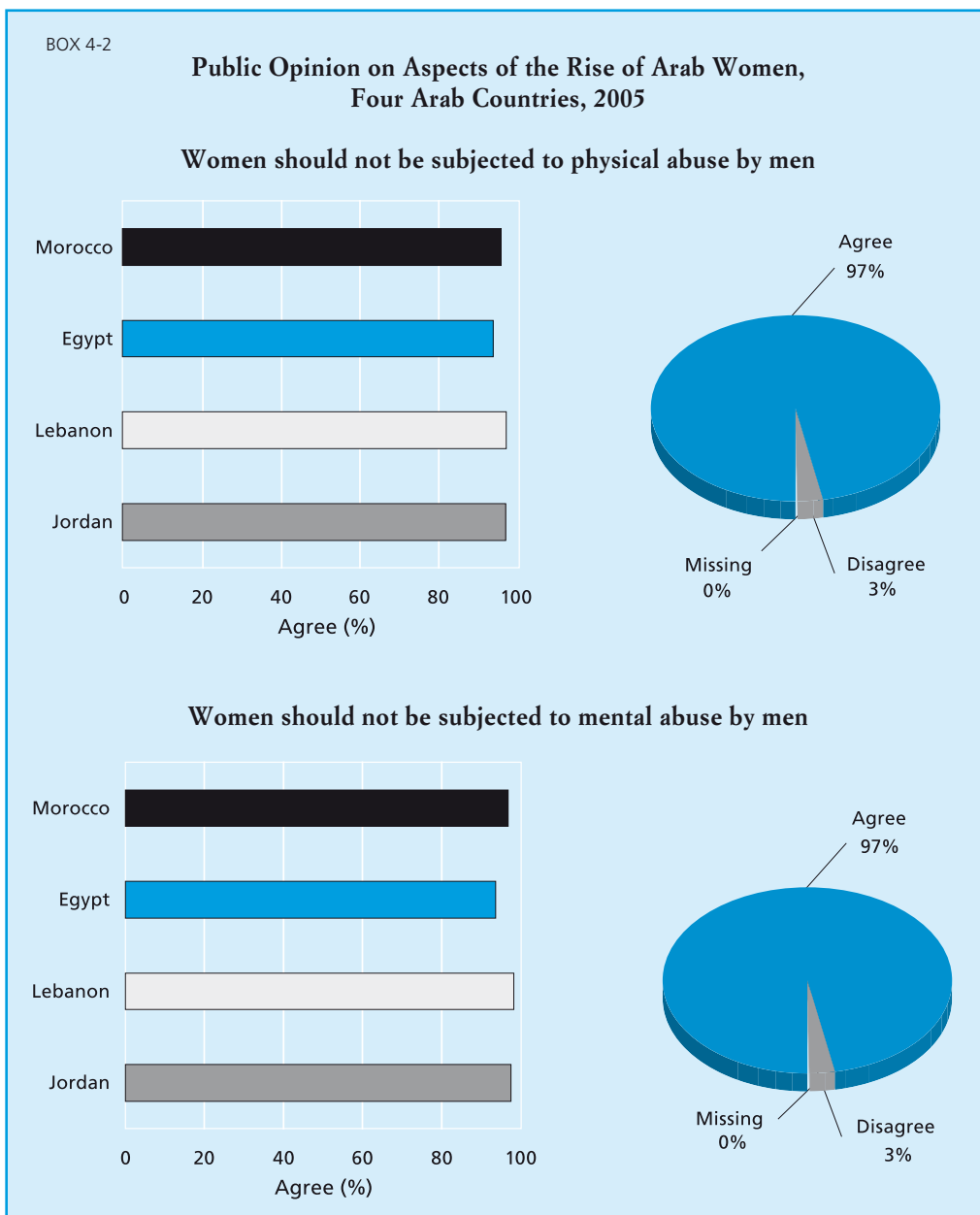
<sup>1</sup> The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, Article 1, defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life." (A/RES/48/104)

against women in the Arab world from a statistical point of view<sup>2</sup> because merely talking about it in some Arab countries arouses resistance. Studies investigating violence across Arab societies are in their infancy. Sources of data available to date are reports by the media, presentations made at Arab and international seminars, reports from human rights organisations and women's shelters for victims of violence, and the testimonies of affected women. Though not strictly quantifiable, such accounts indicate that the most important step to oppose violence against women in the Arab

world is to fight against its concealment, to remove the cloak of silence surrounding it and to expose it wherever it occurs whether in public or in private. Continued silence on the subject incurs a heavy cost for individuals, society and even the State. It is equally important to place forms of violence that many affected women have come to accept as natural in the category of unacceptable behaviour.

It should be noted that, according to the Report survey, the Arab public overwhelmingly condemns all forms of abuse of women – physical or mental (Box 4-2).

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<sup>2</sup> Article 4 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women states that it is incumbent upon States to condemn violence against women". States also should "promote research, collect data and compile statistics, especially concerning domestic violence, relating to the prevalence of different forms of violence against women". (Ibid.)

## FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE ARAB WORLD

*Laws in many Arab countries still protect the killer and allow him to enter a plea of extenuating circumstances.*

*The family in many parts of the Arab world has been transformed from a place of safety and security into a place where any type of violence against women may be practised.*

### Honour crimes

The killing of women in defence of honour is an old tribal custom still practised in many local Arab societies, including those of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territory. These are premeditated murders carried out by a father, brother, husband or son. The woman is killed under the pretence of protecting her family's honour. Many are killed because "they have been exposed to the disgrace of rape" (The Lebanese Organisation to Combat Violence against Women, in Arabic, 2001, 17). In some Arab societies, the murderers are still treated as heroes who have erased a disgrace visited upon the family by the slain woman. Moreover, many female suicide cases are connected with the issue of honour where the woman is forced to kill herself to spare the family the responsibility for murdering her.

Statistics indicate, for instance, that between May 2004 and March 2005, there were 20 honour killings and 15 attempted killings in the occupied Palestinian territory on the basis of honour. Official statistics also show that 20 women were killed in Jordan annually on the same pretext. Sometimes the

motive is male greed in obtaining a larger portion of an inheritance at the expense of women (UNIFEM, in Arabic, 2005, 17) or the concealment of sexual assault by relatives in the same family. Also, the organisation "Rawan" recorded honour crimes that were inflicted on Kurdish women in northern Iraq (UNIFEM, in Arabic, 2004, 140).

Despite the success of civil society organisations in introducing changes to some criminal laws (in Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon and Morocco) in order to have honour crimes treated as criminal acts, laws in many Arab countries still protect the killer and allow him to enter a plea of extenuating circumstances. Many judges use their discretionary powers to impose light sentences upon murderers (see Chapter 8).

### Domestic violence

Domestic violence is not a purely Arab phenomenon; it is found and condemned in many areas of the world. Nevertheless, what is disturbing is the persistent denial in some Arab countries that it exists.<sup>3</sup>

Testimonies heard in discussion groups and in mock trials indicate that the family in many parts of the Arab world has been transformed from a place of safety and security into a place where any type of violence against women may be practised. Family violence may range from the beating and sexual assault of wives to the sexual abuse and rape of immature girls by male relatives.

As a spokeswoman for the family counselling office of the Bahraini NGO, Girls' Renaissance Society, says, "We receive every kind of case of physical and emotional violence, mostly domestic. The violence to which women are subjected is unnatural and degrading. The greatest fear is that a girl will grow accustomed to it and become unable to resist or to break down the barrier of silence"<sup>4</sup>.

In a recent report<sup>5</sup> entitled *Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Women deserve dignity and respect*, Amnesty

BOX 4-3

#### WHO: Women Find No Shelter from Violence at Home

A study conducted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 10 countries found that between 15 per cent (Japan) and 71 per cent (Ethiopia) of the women interviewed had been subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate male partner during their lifetime.

...The violence of those in the "ever abused" group was severe enough to result in physical injury including fractures and eye damage.

Source: Agence France-Presse, 24 Novembre 2005.

"Women are more at risk from violence involving the people they know at home than from strangers in the street" (Lee Jong Wook, WHO Director General).

"It has devastating consequences for the women who experience it, and a traumatic effect on those who witness it, particularly children" (Yakin Erturk - United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women).

<sup>3</sup> In answer to a report by Amnesty International about violence against women in the Gulf States, the president of the Supreme Council for Women affirmed, after female journalists publicly concurred with the report, that it is widespread. "Cases of violence are individual and are not referred to the courts because it has become a social phenomenon, ... everyone in Bahrain knows that cases of violence against women are not recorded at police stations or in hospitals" (Mona 'Abbas Fadl, Bahraini writer).

<sup>4</sup> Mona Fadl. "Women Gateway." (2005). <http://www.womengateway.com/arwg/Qadhya+Almaraa/violence/atameez.htm> (Accessed 10 April, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Document number MDE 04/004/2005, 11 May 2005.



International concentrates on the many forms of discrimination facing women in the Gulf States, and especially domestic violence: “Women suffering gender-based domestic violence often have no practical option but to remain in the home and risk further violence. Economic and social pressures arising from discriminatory attitudes and treatment contribute to women’s experience of violence” (Miadi, background paper for the Report).

Other forms of violence against women are practised within full view of the State, such as that inflicted by the *motawa* (volunteer religious advocates) in Saudi Arabia or by religious groups that set themselves up as guardians of the propriety of women’s clothing and conduct. Women also suffer from numerous forms of violence in the work place both in the form of sexual harassment or blackmail in return for a pitiful wage and the arbitrary severance that follows in case of refusal. The lack of data indicates the difficulty of estimating the extent of violence of this sort.

### Female circumcision

The high incidence of female circumcision<sup>6</sup> in some Arab countries (Table 4-1) leads to serious health complications for women. The operation itself can lead to death from bleeding, and the severe pain that it causes can lead to a nervous breakdown. There are long-term complications such as inflammation of the incision from unsterilised operating tools, blood poisoning, fatal tetanus, hepatitis and AIDS. These afflictions can, in turn, lead to serious disturbance of the urinary system, reduced fertility or even sterility and can create difficulties in childbirth since the incisions often lead to mutilation.

Similarly, sensations of pain or the absence of pleasurable feelings can lead to failure to enjoy a normal sex life. Even when the operation is carried out in the least damaging way, its psychological effects can only be negative, resulting in feelings of sexual inferiority. The wide extent to which this phenomenon is

TABLE 4-1  
Female circumcision rates (up to the year 2000) (%)

Country	Year	Rate
Djibouti		98
Somalia		98
Egypt	2000	97
Sudan	1990	89
Yemen	1997	23

Source: WHO (<http://www.emro.who.int/rhrn/part5.htm>), (5 April 2006).

culturally accepted in some quarters contributes to the difficulty of combating it. An opinion poll carried out in Egypt in 2000 showed that 80 per cent of women with daughters confessed that circumcision had been, or would be, performed on their children. This represented a slight improvement over 1995, when 87 per cent of women had resolved to have their daughters circumcised. Studies in Egypt have shown that among the factors facilitating the spread of circumcision are low levels of education, residence in a rural area and, most of all, personal beliefs. They revealed that eight out of ten women in rural areas believed that men preferred a circumcised wife; in the city, not more than four in ten did. The cultural character of the issue becomes clear when it is noted that circumcision occurs among Egyptian Copts as well as Muslims, though to a lesser degree (El-Zanaty and Way, 2001).

In a positive development affecting the rights of women and children, the Council of State, Egypt’s highest administrative court, on 28 December 1997 supported a Ministry of Health decision prohibiting female circumcision after a lower court had declared the decision null a year earlier except under medical supervision. The Council ruled that female circumcision was not an individual right in shari’a (Islamic law) since there was nothing in the Qur’an or Sunna (practices approved by the Prophet Muhammad) sanctioning it. It decided that carrying out a circumcision

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<sup>6</sup> Mutilation of the reproductive organs takes different forms in different countries. These include the partial or complete removal of the clitoris (clitorectomy), the removal of the entire clitoris and the cutting of the labia minora (excision) or, in the most extreme form, the removal of all external genitalia and the stitching together of the two sides of the vulva, leaving a tiny hole for the flow of urine and blood. The operation is generally performed without anaesthesia, with the likelihood of health complications that include severe pain during urination, menstruation and the sexual act. Bleeding or inflammation stemming from the cutting of sexual organs is in some cases fatal (Equality Now, Women’s Situations, 1, 20 June 2001).

*Women in Arab lands under occupation have been subject to forms of violence inflicted upon them by the occupying powers.*

operation was illegal even if the girl or her parents agreed to it. The Sudanese Ministry of Health also moved towards taking steps to prohibit the practice.

### **Violence against women under occupation**

Women in Arab lands under occupation have been subject to forms of violence inflicted upon them by the occupying powers.

In Iraq, towns and neighbourhoods have experienced the forced displacement of thousands of families. Women are afraid to leave their houses because of the prevailing conditions of insecurity, and they often miss work. Women prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison

have been subjected to various violations and abuses including rape and sexual degradation, driving some of those released to commit suicide; others have been killed by relatives to wipe out the “dishonour”. Similarly, women have been taken hostage to force their male family members to give themselves up or make confessions regarding the resistance in occupied Iraq (Haifa Zangana, in Arabic, Al-Quds al-Arabi, 30 October 2005).

## **WOMEN IN MARGINALISED GROUPS**

### *NOMADIC AND REMOTE RURAL WOMEN*

The situation of Arab women in rural and desert areas is linked for historical reasons to that of other weak and marginalised social groups, communities and districts. Their situation is the most poverty-stricken, wretched and oppressed and the least fortunate in terms of opportunities for development. Everything about Arab Bedouin life, with its myriad challenges stemming from exceptional societal circumstances,<sup>7</sup> a harsh desert environment and the exhausting search for the rudiments of life and social contact – conditions not much different from those Ibn Khaldun described in the fifteenth century<sup>8</sup> – speaks of an unfavourable situation for women (Al-Rawi, in Arabic, 1972, 223).

The Arab desert and countryside, with their wild expanses and limited contact with modern civilisation, are still ruled by family and tribal solidarity, kinship ties, loyalty to tribal authority and a traditional economy tied to the land, livestock, the weather and simple industries. All of these are conducive to male dominance, permitting no participation for women except in certain activities, such as childbearing, service to the husband and family, and pastoral and agricultural activities that are related to sheer survival (Hijab, in Arabic, 1988, 192).

BOX 4-4

### **Discrimination against Women under Occupation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory**

“Occupation and the separation wall unevenly violate women’s rights. Palestinian women are routinely harassed, intimidated and abused by Israeli soldiers at checkpoints and gates. They are humiliated in front of their families and subjected to sexual violence by both soldiers and settlers. There are approximately 120 Palestinian women prisoners of whom 11 are in administrative detention – that is, held without charge or trial. Women prisoners are subjected to gender-based violence while subject to investigation and in detention. Moreover, prison conditions raise concerns for their health and well-being.

Restriction of movement owing to the occupation severely impedes Palestinian women’s access to education and health. Restrictions on movement limit opportunities for independence and decrease the number of women seeking formal education or employment ... Women’s health has suffered as a result of their inability to reach health centres. Pregnant women are vulnerable to long waits at checkpoints. A number of unsafe deliveries in which both mothers and infants have died have occurred at

checkpoints. From the beginning of the second intifada to March 2004, 55 Palestinian women have given birth at checkpoints and 33 newborns were stillborn under these conditions, owing to delays or denial of permission to reach medical facilities.

Unemployment and poverty resulting from the occupation have been shown to produce divorce and domestic violence. The Israeli Nationality and Entry into Israel Law of 2003 aims to stop family unification when one spouse is a resident of the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The result of this law is that thousands of affected family members live separately from one another with no legal means available to unify the family. The only way to maintain the unity of the family is to reside illegally in Israel, in permanent fear of investigation and expulsion. This places an immense burden on the psychological state of Palestinian women. The law, which does not apply to Israeli settlers living in the Occupied Palestinian Territory or to Israeli Jews marrying aliens, institutes a discriminatory system based on national origin and is directed exclusively against Palestinians”.

Source: Dugard, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Among the signs of this exceptional status is the scarcity of statistics and qualitative or quantitative information about rural and Bedouin societies or gender-based information and academic studies on the marginal categories. (see UN and ESCWA, in Arabic, 2005, 22, 71).

<sup>8</sup> Pastoralism in Arab societies has attracted little historical and sociological research. Hence, the work of Ibn Khaldun retains its place as a reference for rural, tribal and Bedouin life (see Ibn Khaldun, in Arabic, n.d.; Sabir and Malika, in Arabic, 1986; Al-Marzuqi, in Arabic, 1980).

The challenges and difficulties facing women in the desert and countryside are numerous and vary according to age and place within a complex society (Ghamiri, in Arabic, 1989, 1). They pertain to the basic right to life and to necessities such as food, shelter, clothing, education and health care. From childhood on, women encounter difficulty in obtaining the smallest portion of food. In some countries, such as Iraq, Mauritania, the Sudan and Yemen, especially in socially deprived areas, women lack nutrition as well as basic social supports and are subjected to various forms of violence (Centre for Arab Women Training and Research, in Arabic, 1998).

The lives of women in these areas are threatened as a result of obvious shortfalls in their communities' ability to provide a decent living and human care. In the best of circumstances, women may receive some basic services from the mobile medical units that exist, mainly in some Gulf countries and the Maghreb (Western Arab countries). These units specialise primarily in family practice, free pre-nuptial examinations and reproductive health (UN and ESCWA, in Arabic, 2005, 27). They do not provide the full range of health care required to assure complete good health. Despite providing some urgent assistance at times, the units operate as gifts from the ruling regimes rather than as an established right of human beings.

In such situations girls are denied the most basic rights, especially the rights to education and knowledge—the very things that could help them escape from the situation imposed upon them. While their urban compatriots enjoy opportunities, afforded by various institutions and organisations, that help to mitigate or transform their situations, by contrast, girls from remote areas are buffeted by deprivation, lack the simplest facilities and services and remain ignorant of their rights. This undermines rural women's physical, mental, and psychological health, reduces life expectancies at birth and affects their prospects for a healthy life, which

are much lower than those of Arab women in general (Centre for Arab Women Training and Research, in Arabic, 2001, 30).

In some Arab countries girls are taken from the countryside and forced to serve as household servants in a form of neo-slavery. This is a black mark on the human development of all the Arab countries.<sup>9</sup> Marginalised Bedouin and rural girls have not benefited from the quantitative expansion of education in Arab countries, while anything resembling a quality education is well beyond their horizon. They are unable to read or write and thus express themselves – and have never heard of their human rights. This erodes their very human status, perpetuates the wrongs done against them and is completely inconsistent with what humanity today regards as the minimum in terms of the broad spread of education, knowledge, and political and social liberty.

Threatening the marginalised Bedouin and rural women with yet more poverty, need and devastation is the lack of will, policies and strategic plans for addressing their position from the ground up. Government agencies could instead take advantage of the obvious difficulties these people face to insist that States adopt contingency solutions and provide special assistance. Such assistance would include basic housing, roads and potable water, using the funds available under various endowments and programmes<sup>10</sup> even if these services do not rise to the level of legally guaranteed rights. Programmes of this kind are usually exploited for their political propaganda value and are controlled by government agencies. Continuing deprivation in turn raises the rate at which girls leave school early to rush into marriage, herding and agricultural work, confirming their imprisonment within the circle of male exploitation (Tlili, background paper for the Report).

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<sup>9</sup> See the relationship between gender and poverty, especially the feminisation of poverty, and the importance of studying the structural reasons for poverty, marginalisation and deprivation and of rescuing women from their trap (Droy, in French, 1990, 40-41).

<sup>10</sup> Such as Tunisia's programme for the elimination of underprivileged areas with the support of Solidarity Funds, e.g. the Tunisian National Solidarity Fund, better known as the 26-26 Fund.

## WOMEN IN SQUATTER SETTLEMENTS

*Women in squatter settlements are unaware of their rights and of the services available to them.*

There is no reliable database on squatter settlements in the Arab States in general and on the status of Arab women in them in particular. However, field research in a number of such areas shows that the residents are of low social status with poor levels of education and weak technical skills, leading to very few job options. This has an impact on their lives as a whole. Residents cannot find jobs and they cannot obtain suitable housing. Families in informal areas are characterised by a high proportion of women providers. While the number of women heading households amounts to 21 per cent in Egypt overall, they range between 25 and 33 per cent of all families in these areas (El Samalouti, background paper for the Report). The high number of female-headed households reflects the high rate of divorce, separation and widowhood in informal housing settlements. Female heads of household rely on assistance and transfers of money to a larger extent than do male heads (El-Samalouti).

Women in squatter settlements are burdened with numerous problems caused by their difficult economic and environmental conditions, which affect their relations with their families and make it difficult for them to raise their children properly. What is more, women in such areas are unaware of their rights and of the services available to them. Often, they do not possess the papers, such as birth certificates, that would permit them to receive such services.

Finally, many women in these settings suffer the effects of violence and most, as in Egypt for instance, still practise the circumcision of their daughters. Around 8.13 per cent of all women in the 15- to 49-year-old age group were married before the age of sixteen and nearly one third of married women have been exposed to physical abuse by their husbands at least once in their married lives.

Such informal settlements generally lack services such as health care. Even so, many women decline to use those services that are available, preferring folk medicine. This behaviour stems from the prevailing culture, which in most cases is that of the rural migrant.

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## FEMALE MIGRANT WORKERS

While the situations of female migrant workers, both Arab and non-Arab, are similar, this section will focus on non-Arab migrants. Attention to women migrant workers has recently increased in step with the complaints of individuals, international human rights organisations and some labour-exporting States. The cause of these complaints is the constant abuse of the rights of women workers in receiving Arab countries. A particular focus of attention is Asian women in the domestic labour sector.

Among the Arab States, the general characteristics of female migrant workers in different countries vary. Those in the Gulf States come from a wide range of professional, national and ethnic backgrounds while those in other labour-exporting and -importing Arab countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon, share similar skills and origins.

The Gulf States take in women workers from both the West and developing countries, i.e., from Asia, other Arab countries and Africa. These women undertake the different kinds of work that are on offer to them in the Gulf States and thus may be found working in professions both high and low on the occupational scale, in jobs that are socially acceptable and others that are not.

The distribution of female migrant workers by nationality also varies. Generally speaking, women workers from South and South-East Asia are concentrated in the service sector, especially in domestic work. At the same time, there is, in the United Arab Emirates for example, a concentration of European women workers in the banking sector. Arab female migrant workers are to be found in all sectors but are especially numerous in education and health.

The number of foreign women in the Arab Gulf region was estimated at 7.3 million in 2002, of whom around one million were estimated to be workers (Table 4-2). Though the statistics available do not indicate either the nature of their work or the nationality of these women, it is possible to say that the largest number of them (around 30 per cent) work in the service sector, specifically in domestic service (Alnajjar, background paper



for the Report). Others work in the health and education services sector and in banks, hotels, restaurants, certain food and pharmaceutical industries and certain recreation sectors. The sex trade has come to absorb increasing numbers of short-term female workers, who come for a few months or even weeks in search of quick material returns. Every now and then, local newspapers report raids by the security forces on dens of prostitution or the capture of gangs of white slave traders. The men involved in this trade are generally from certain Arab countries, the countries of the former Soviet Union, and certain East Asian and East African countries.

Outside the Arab Gulf, Jordan and Lebanon are the countries that import the most female workers. The few studies available, along with first-hand accounts, indicate that in both countries, the domestic service sector represents the principal employer, especially for women from the Philippines and Sri Lanka. In Jordan, hotels, restaurants and places of entertainment have, however, started to absorb increasing numbers of female migrant workers.

### Conditions of women workers in the domestic service sector

The domestic service sector constitutes the largest employer of female migrant workers not only in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council but also in the less affluent Arab countries, among them Jordan and Lebanon particularly. Conditions in this labour sector in the Arab region are characterised generally by:

- Low wage levels. The average monthly wage in this sector may not exceed \$150 and may go as low as \$100. Wage scales are linked to nationality, going as low as \$95 a month in some cases among Ethiopians and Sri Lankans and as high as \$250 and \$300 in the case of some Philippine women.
- Non-inclusion within the labour laws. Arab labour laws do not cover female or male domestic workers and wages are not subject to yearly increases. Contracts do not give these workers either weekly or annual paid leave.
- Unspecified working hours. Work for a maid may begin at five or six in the morning

TABLE 4-2  
Expatriate working women in Arab countries, 2002

Country	Number (in thousands)	% of female labour force in the country
Saudi Arabia	426	6.8
United Arab Emirates	261	4.8
Kuwait	241	71.5
Oman	145	79.2
Bahrain	36	1.4
Qatar	38	71.6

Source: Alnajjar, background paper for the Report

and continue until late at night. In general, domestic workers are on permanent call.

- No freedom of movement. Workers are not allowed to visit friends or relatives or to create a network of relationships with their peers outside the orbit of the family that employs them. They are permitted to leave the country only under the most pressing circumstances, such as the death of a relative in their home country. Their sponsor usually retains their passports and returns them only on the day of travel.
- Incidents of physical and mental injury inflicted upon them by their employer, male or female. Physical harm may on occasion result in permanent injury or death. The local press has carried stories of workers suffering burns and other wounds inflicted by their employers. Exploitation and bodily injury may lead servants to retaliate, sometimes by murdering their employer or harming young children or damaging the family's possessions and furniture.
- Sexual assaults. Female workers are exposed to sexual assaults by the master of the house, who is generally elderly, or by one of his sons. At other times, one of the young men working in the house, such as the driver or the cook or the gardener, carries out the assault. Others, such as a neighbour or a worker in a neighbourhood shop, have also been reported in attacks on female workers.

The harsh and degrading treatment meted out to foreign female domestic workers is a mark of shame on the brow of those societies

*The harsh and degrading treatment meted out to foreign female domestic workers is a mark of shame on the brow of societies that ignore it.*

### Asian Female Domestic “Servants” Subjected to Physical Abuse

A Jordanian court sentenced a Jordanian national to five years in prison for raping his Sri Lankan servant and attempting to murder her (Al-Ayyam newspaper, occupied Palestinian territory, 8/12/2005).

#### **Kosoma is subjected to physical abuse**

Kosoma, a maid, tells the story of her life in an Arab country: “When, after working for three months, I asked the mistress of the house for my wages, she fell on me with blows and kicks, using a metal bar and wooden sticks”. She goes on: “Sometimes she would take a piece of hot metal and burn me with it or heat a knife and place it against my body”. Kosoma is still trying to understand why her mistress treated her this cruelly when she had done nothing to deserve

such treatment. She relates that her employers tired of her and told her they were going to the police station and that she would be arrested. In the end, however, her mistress put her on board a plane to Sri Lanka, knowing full well that she would never be held to account by the courts for torturing the woman.

It didn’t make any difference to them that Kosoma was forty-one years old. She remembers the repeated rapes to which the eighteen-year-old son of the house subjected her. She says: “When I tried to resist, he threatened to kill me”. Kosoma goes on: “I complained to his mother but she just replied: ‘I’ll give you contraceptive pills.’ Then she beat me”.

Source: BBC web site: 23 February 2005 (Marzouki, background paper for the Report).

*The restoration of dignity and self-respect to domestic workers may well prove to be inseparable from the recovery of dignity and self-respect by Arab citizens.*

that ignore it; it also reveals a deep flaw in those societies’ values. The restoration of dignity and self-respect to domestic workers may well prove to be inseparable from the recovery of dignity and self-respect by Arab citizens who seek to be rid of the dishonour that accrues to those who use violence against weaker parties.

Abuse of the rights of women workers from Sri Lanka, Thailand and other Asian countries and Africa can no longer be easily concealed;

indeed, it is starting to take on a political dimension, evident in discussion of the issue at the international level. Yet more dangerously, and quite aside from the demeaning impact on the affected women, it reflects a crisis of values within those Arab societies that treat some foreign women as inferiors in whom all the marks of lowly status – femininity, poverty and foreignness—had combined.<sup>11</sup>

#### **ENDNOTE**

This chapter concludes the section of the Report that assesses the status of women in the Arab world. The next section examines the societal framework in Arab countries, which partly accounts for women’s status at the present time. The analysis to this point has demonstrated that, in terms of human well-being, women in these countries are altogether more deprived than men, a situation sharply incompatible with creating a human renaissance in the region.

<sup>11</sup> A positive development in this regard is the project, “The Protection of the Rights of the Immigrant Women Workers in Jordan”, implemented by UNIFEM in collaboration with Jordan’s Ministry of Labour, which created a unified work contract for non-Jordanian domestic workers. The significance of this contract lies in the articles that stipulate a day of rest, medical care, life insurance and severance pay. This contract is now a basic requirement for residence and work permits and provides an important basis for the protection of the rights of foreign women workers. It also provides for support from the guest country, as represented by its ministries and security apparatuses, as well as from the embassies concerned.