



Chapter 7

Public Life and Decision-making

Women's representation in political decision-making continues to rise, but is far from achieving gender equality. Women's share in parliament has more than quadrupled since 2000; however, it is still below 20 per cent in the Arab region. Similarly, the proportion of women ministers does not exceed 20 per cent.

Having a bank account is an important starting point for people to access financial services. Women's economic empowerment is still low given that the Arab region has the highest gender gap in globally in terms of holding a bank account.

Public Life and Decision-making

The empowerment of women requires that women have more say in all the decisions that affect their lives at the local, national and international levels. The constitutions of most Arab countries recognize that women’s and men’s civil and political rights are equal. Nevertheless, the existence of a constitution does not automatically guarantee the rights of women nor does it necessarily translate into women realizing their full civic, legal and political rights. More than 20 years since the adoption of the CEDAW women’s representation is still staggeringly low in decision-making positions.¹ As more women, however, climb into these seats of power, they are paving the way for the success of the women who come after them and laying the foundation for future generations.

Across the Arab region, there were far more men than women in decision-making positions. This was true across all sectors, both public and private. It included elected officials at all levels, the judiciary, the executive branch of government, private sector Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and board members, and senior officials

and managers. This situation was also common around the world.²

A. Voting rights

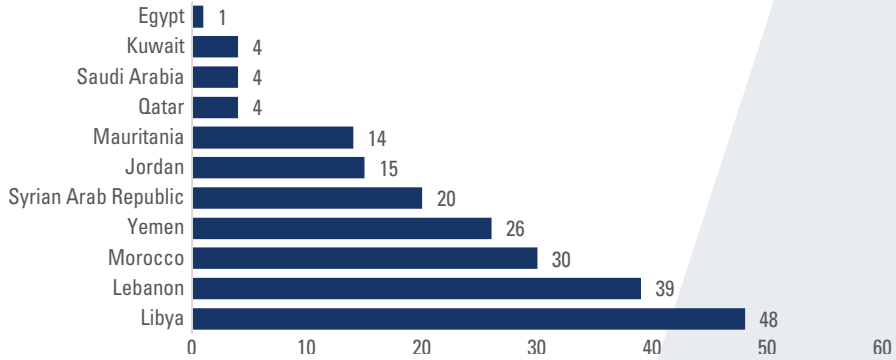
Eight Arab States had women appointed soon after the year of suffrage, that is to say there was no time lag between granting the right to vote in election and appointment to office, namely: Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Oman, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates. However, there was a lag time between women being granted



In **Lebanon**, it took **39** years and in **Libya** **48** years between being granted the right to stand for election and a woman being appointed to parliament

the right to stand for election and their appointment which exceeded 20 years in some countries, such as in Libya (48 years), Lebanon (39 years), Morocco (30 years) and Yemen (26 years) Figure 106.

Figure 106. Lag time between women being granted the right to stand for election and a woman being appointed to parliament, in years, latest available data



Source: IPU Parline, “Global data on national parliaments”.

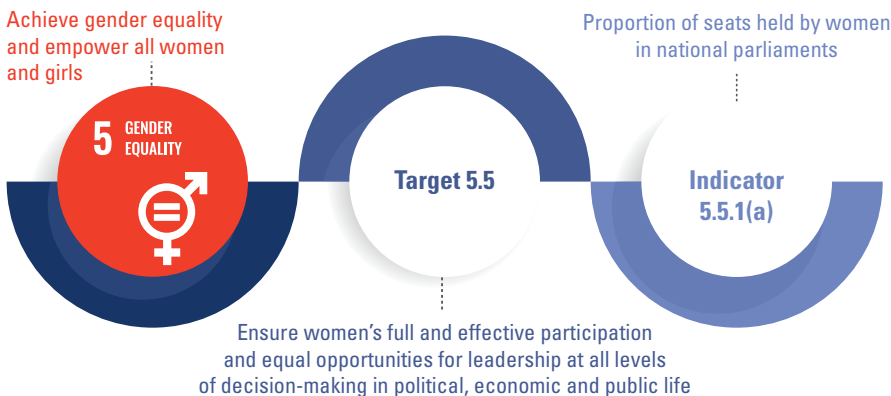
B. Women in parliament

Women's share of parliamentary seats is highest in Tunisia, Djibouti and Algeria

The goal of increasing women's representation in parliaments is a long-standing one agreed on by numerous international mandates and frameworks. Women's absence from national parliaments signals that women are not accepted as equal partners in political decision-making for the country. There has been continued progress towards the 30 per cent representation target in a significant number of countries. Globally, the percentage of women in parliament has nearly doubled in the last 20 years, and increased nearly 11 percentage points, growing from 13.9 per cent in 2000 to 24.6 per cent in 2019.

In 2015, 74 countries around the globe had implemented some form of gender quota for the single or lower houses of national parliaments.³ Reserved seats are used in 20 countries that are all in developing regions.⁴ There are currently 10 Arab States that do not have an electoral quota to promote representation of women in parliament: Bahrain, Comoros, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

In only 12 Arab States, all members of parliament were directly elected; namely Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the Sudan, the



Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, and Yemen. Seven of those countries had an electoral quota which boosted women's representation in parliament.

The region's average has more than quadrupled from 3.8 per cent in 2000, the lowest of any region in the world at that time, to 18 per cent in 2019, narrowing the gap of reaching the regional target of 30 per cent. Women's share in the Arab region has increased proportionally more than any other region and is currently almost the same as in Asia and the Pacific regions. Among Arab countries,

the most impressive gain in women's representation in lower and single houses of parliament in 2018 occurred in Djibouti (15.4 percentage points increase).⁵

In the majority of Arab States, women's share in parliament is still below 20 per cent, and 18 countries are below the global average; Yemen had the lowest representation of only 0.3 per cent. The latest data show that there were only four countries that had high representation, namely: Tunisia (31%), Djibouti (26%), Algeria (26%) and Iraq (25%)
Figure 107.

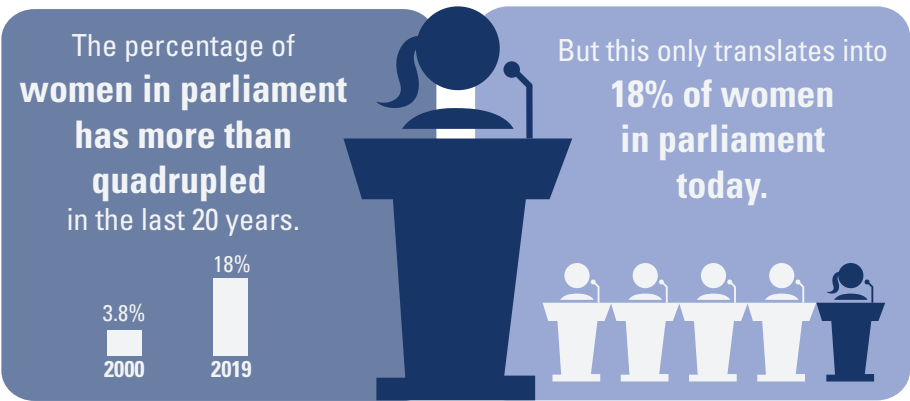
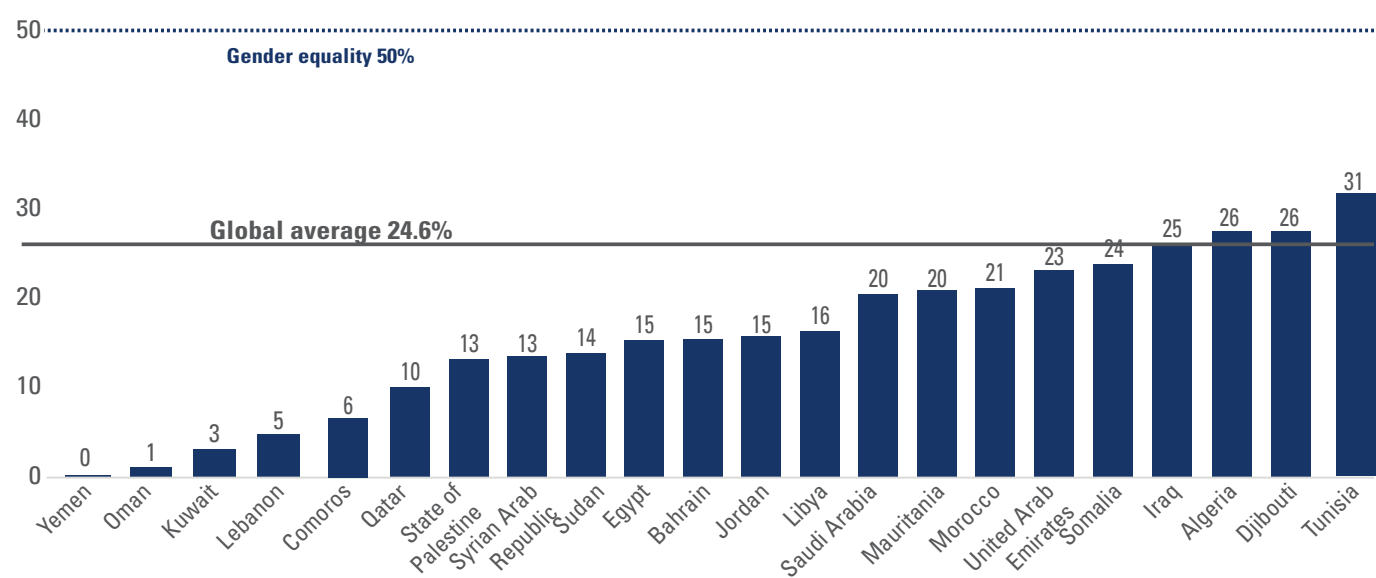


Figure 107. Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments, latest year (percentage)



Source: IPU, “Women in National Parliaments” (situation as of 1st January 2019).

Historic gains for Bahraini women and losses for Mauritians in parliament

Bahrain recorded historic gains for women’s share in single house of parliament (lower chamber), doubling its share of women parliamentarians, from 7.5 per cent to 15.0 per cent. The kingdom’s first elections in 2002 did not result in the election of any women, and in the 2006 and 2010 elections, only one woman gained a seat. The first breakthrough came in 2014, when three women entered the lower house – making the 2018 elections truly historic, with six women Members of Parliament. A further milestone was achieved in late 2018, when Fouzia Zainal became the first woman to serve as the speaker of a parliamentary chamber in the country and only the third woman in the Arab world to hold this position.

Mauritania, by contrast, saw the biggest setback in the Arab region, as women’s representation fell from 25.2 per cent to 20.3 per cent. In 2012, a quota system was introduced whereby 13 seats are reserved for women running on a single nationwide list and constituency lists with more than three seats are required to include equal numbers of women and men, listed in alternating order. While the gender quota ensured women’s participation in parliament, high levels of party fragmentation were likely detrimental to women’s electoral successes.⁶

The patriarchal structure of political, social, economic and legal realms of life in most Arab countries are largely controlled through informal and personalized networks.

For every 5 parliamentary seats there is only 1 woman representative



Women’s educational advancement over the last decades has not witnessed an equally paced and simultaneous advancement in their political representation in the formal realm of government. It is interesting to point out that, paradoxically, countries where women have achieved highest rates of female educational attainment were among the countries with the poorest representation of women in public life.

In 2016, Qatar’s female tertiary gross enrolment ratio was at 47 per cent, 7 times greater than that of men (6%), yet the share of women in parliament seats was only 10 per cent. Qualified Arab women are still being marginalized from the formal political arena because it is hard to break the political and institutional networks that are largely controlled by men.

C. Women head of states and ministers

Across the world, countries struggle when it comes to women’s representation in governing bodies. At the global level, in October 2017 there were 11 women who occupied the office of Head of State or and 12 who are Head of Government.

None of them were in the Arab region.

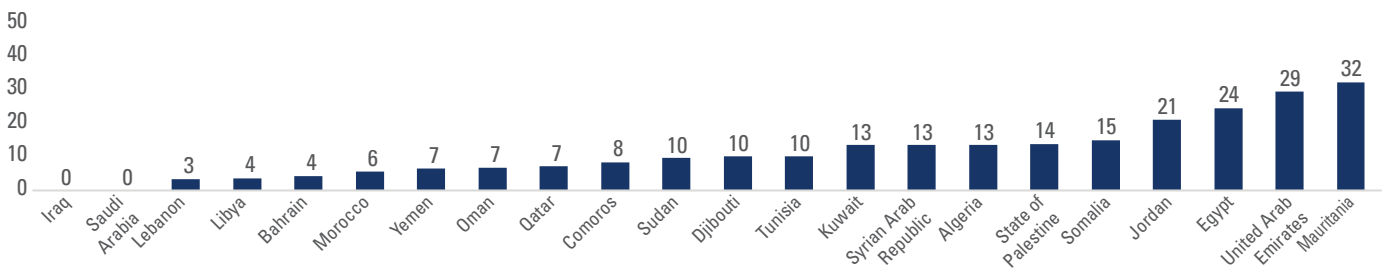
Women’s representation in political decision-making continues to rise slowly, but the proportion of women ministers was highest at 20.7 per cent (812 out of 3922 in 2019), 2.4 percentage points higher compared to 2017.⁷

In 1990, eight Arab countries had at least one, and some of them two, women ministers, namely: Algeria, Comoros, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia. In 2001, Yemen appointed a women minister to head the Ministry of State for Human Rights and by 2003, Qatar named its first women as Minister of Education and appointed a woman as Executive Secretary of the Higher Council for Family Affairs. Oman also appointed its first women ministers in 2003.⁸

The latest data show that three Arab countries were above global average in women’s representation in political decision-making. In 2019, Mauritania had the highest women’s representation in political decision-making at 32 per cent, followed by the United Arab Emirates at 29 per cent and Egypt at 24 per cent. The countries with the lowest rates (below 5%) were Bahrain, Libya and Lebanon followed by Saudi Arabia and Iraq with no females. In the past, Iraq had female ministers, but there were none in the present Iraqi Government. It is worth noting that Lebanon raised its representation from 3.4 per cent in 2016 to 13.3 per cent in 2019 by appointing four female ministers in the 30-seat cabinet, among whom was the first woman in the Arab world to hold the position of Minister of Interior

Figure 108.

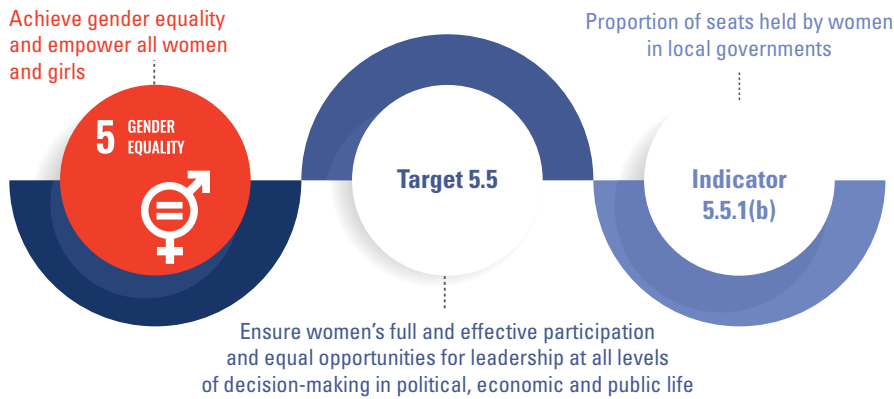
Figure 108. Share of women in government ministerial positions, 2019 (percentage)



Source: IPU, “Women in Politics: 2019” (situation as of 1st January 2019).

D. Women in local government

Women’s participation in elected decision-making positions is very important in local government. Not only does local government often provide a feeder group for national government, but at this level, the focus is very much on local policies



and issues. The work is also closer to the community and local support networks, which can make it easier for elected officials to balance their work and family life. In every country in the world for which data is available, men outnumber women by a significant margin in terms of elected representatives within local government.

There are some success stories emerging in the Arab region. In Tunisia, women make up 48.5 per

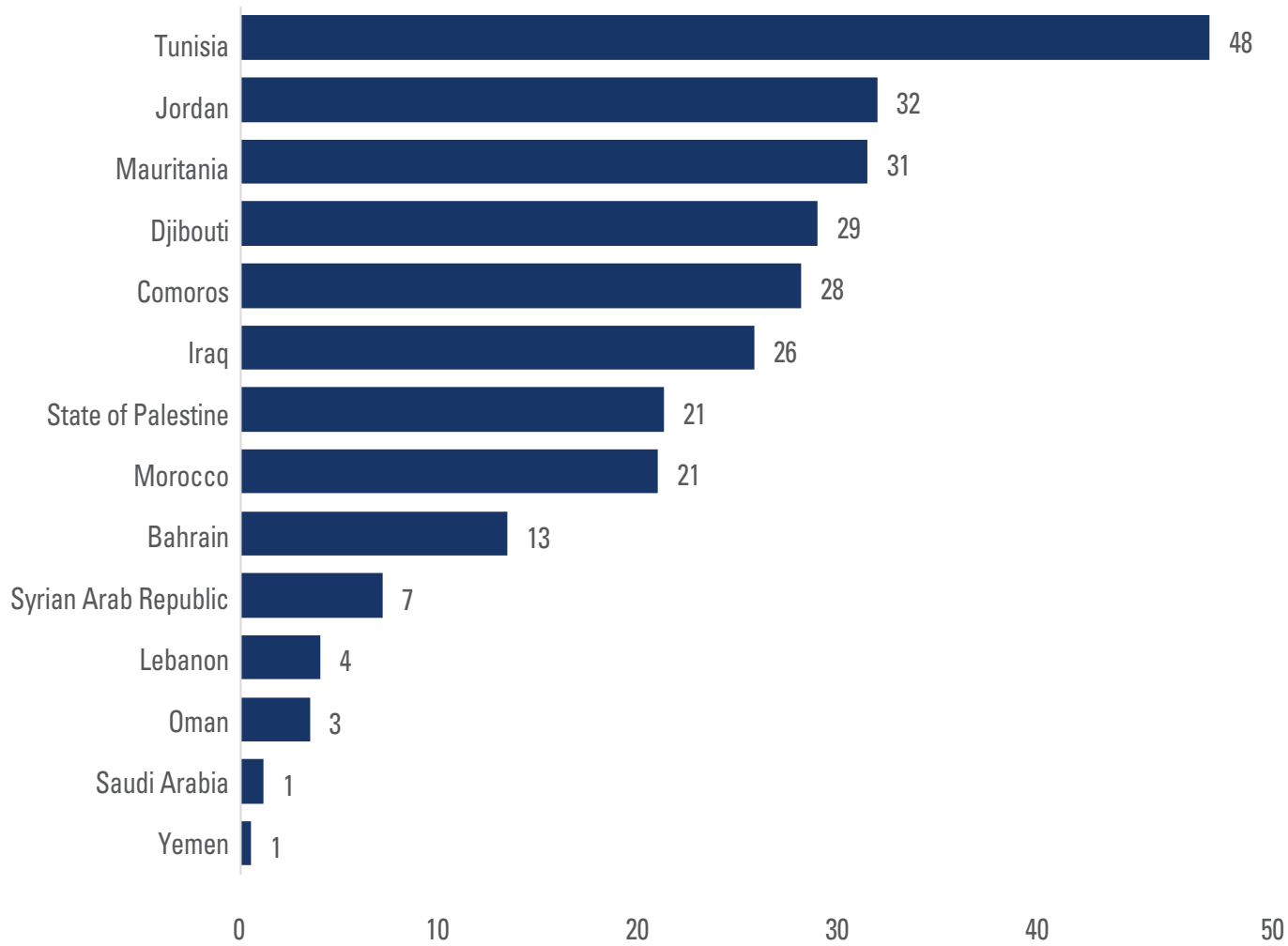
In Mauritania and the United Arab Emirates, more than one third of local government representatives are women



cent of municipal councillors. Rates were also relatively high in Jordan (32%) and in Mauritania (31%) in 2018. Moreover, Lebanon

and Morocco have launched initiatives to increase women’s participation in local governance⁹ Figure 109.

Figure 109. Proportion of seats held by women in local governments, 2018 (percentage)

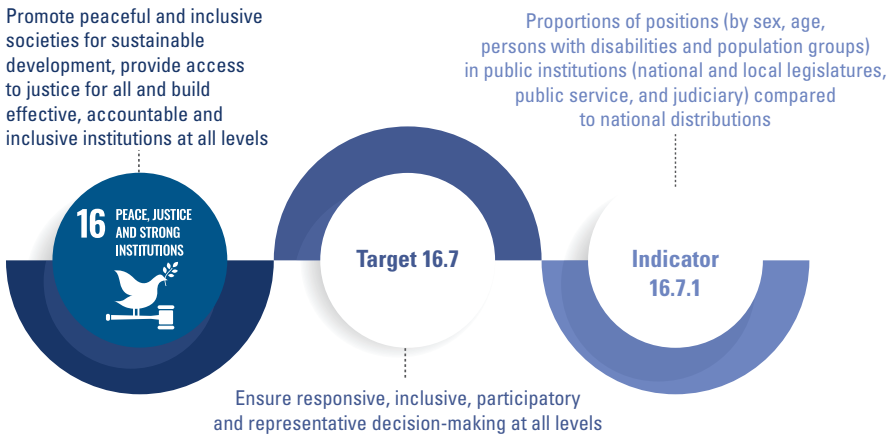


Source: Data are compiled by ESCWA Statistics Division and UN Women; and data for Comoros and Djibouti are compiled by UNECA and UN Women.

E. Women in the judiciary

Progress is being made, albeit slowly, in the share of female judges out of the total number of judges in Arab countries. Tunisia recorded the highest percentage of female judges in 2018 at 46 per cent. In the same year, rates were also relatively high in Morocco at 24 per cent, in Jordan at 22 per cent, in the State of Palestine at 18 per cent and the Sudan at 15 per cent.

Interestingly while there is no law precluding women becoming a judge in Kuwait and Oman, there are no female judge in these countries. In Kuwait, it only became possible for women to become judges in 2013.¹⁰ In contrast, in Egypt the first female judge was appointed in 2003.¹¹ From 2003-2007, a woman held the position



of Vice President of the Supreme Constitutional Court which was the highest court in Egypt. However, female judges in Egypt made up less than 1 per cent (0.7%) of the bench in 2018.¹² Data show that small number of female judges in Bahrain (11%), Yemen (7%), Qatar (6%), Iraq (4%), the United Arab Emirates (3%) and Saudi Arabia (3%) Figure 110.

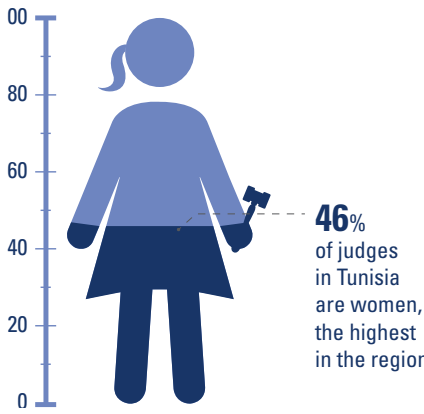
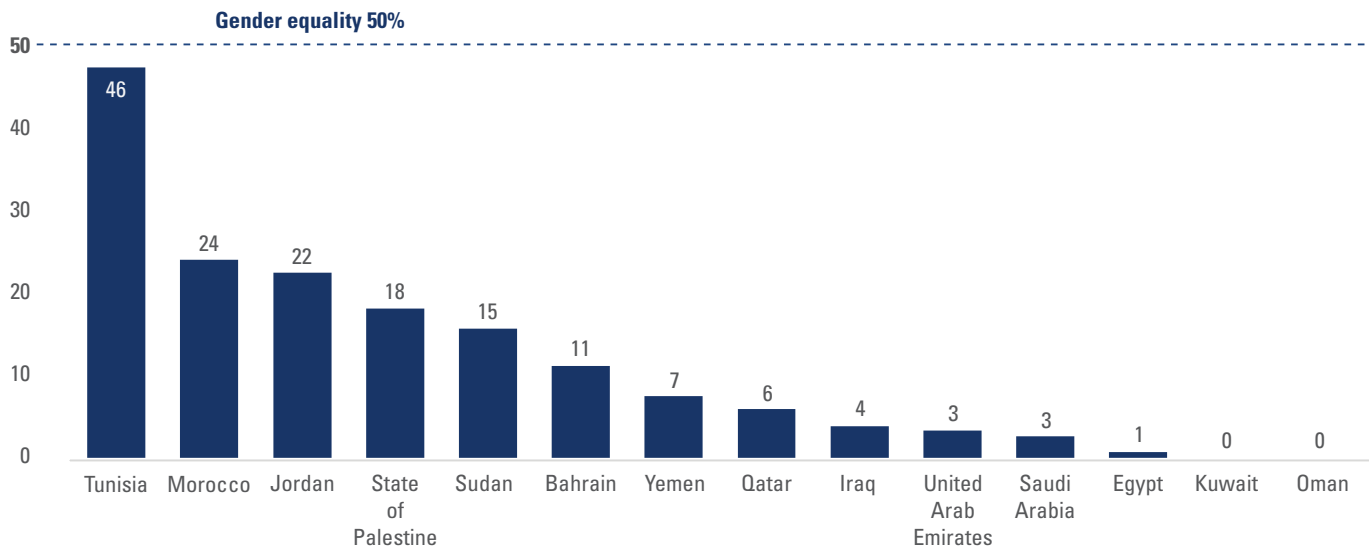


Figure 110. Share of women judges, latest available data (percentage)



Source: E/ESCWA/SD/2019/TP.1.

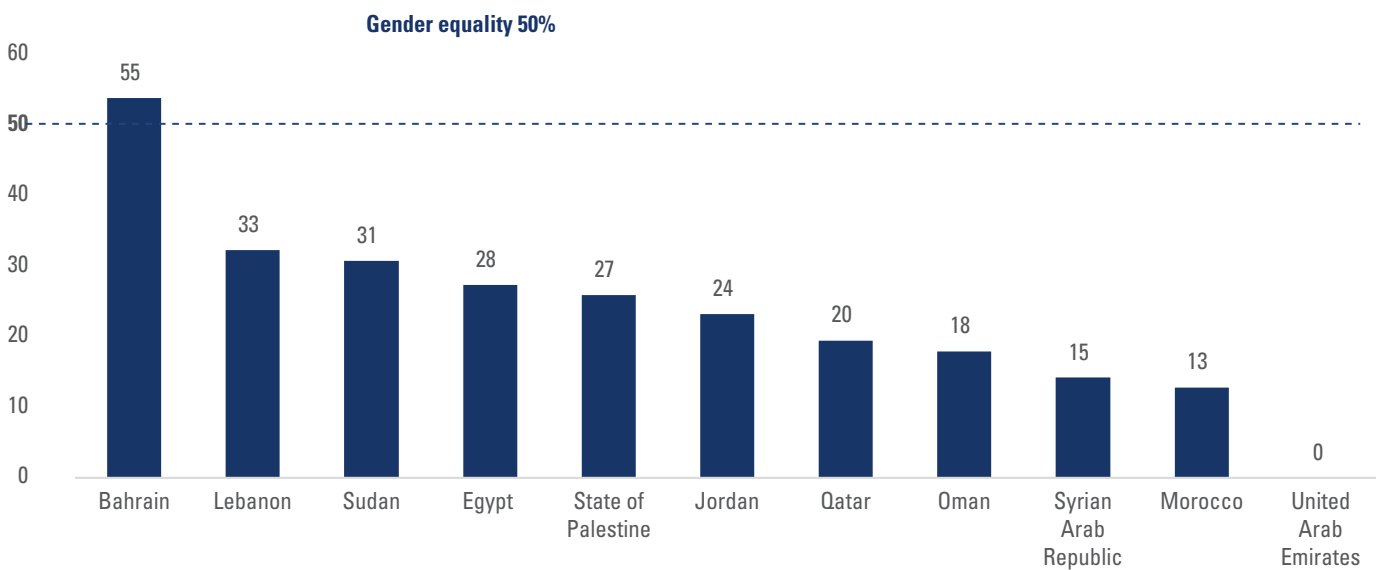
F. Women lawyers

Although there are not many judges in Bahrain, more than half of the lawyers are women. Female lawyers make up 55 per cent of the profession compared to 45 per

cent male lawyers. In Lebanon, the Sudan and Egypt almost one third of the lawyers were women. There is roughly one female lawyer to every four male lawyers in the State of Palestine and Jordan. The numbers were even less in the rest of the Arab countries. For example, in

Qatar for every two female lawyers there were ten male lawyers and the number of female lawyers was even less in Oman, the Syrian Arab Republic and Morocco. There were no female lawyers in the United Arab Emirates **Figure 111.**

Figure 111. Share of women lawyers, latest available data (percentage)



Source: E/ESCWA/SD/2019/TP.1.

G. Women as managers

Women's share in management positions was highest in Iraq in 2012 (22%), although it is still considered low in comparison to men. Rates were also relatively high in the State of Palestine (15% in 2012) and Qatar (11% in 2010). Where data were available it suggests the region was lagging well behind developed and other developing regions with less than 20 per cent of women in

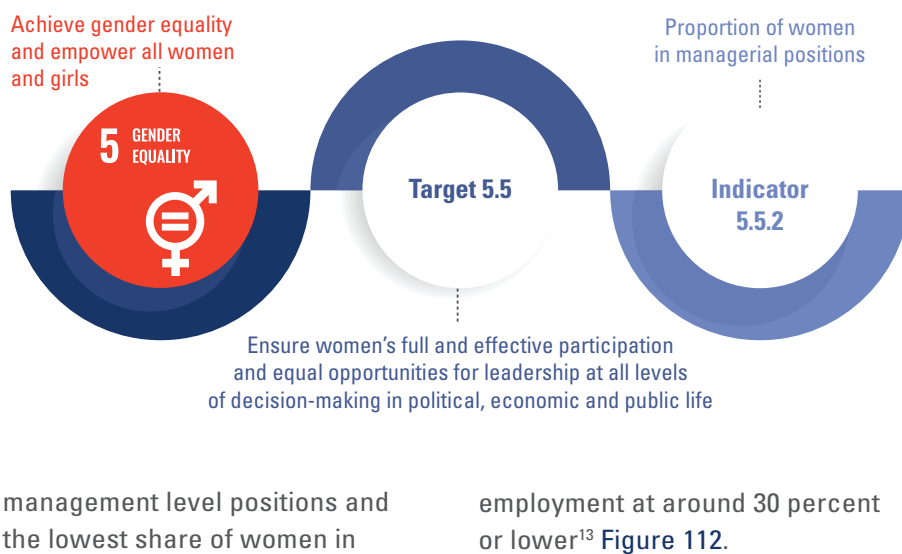
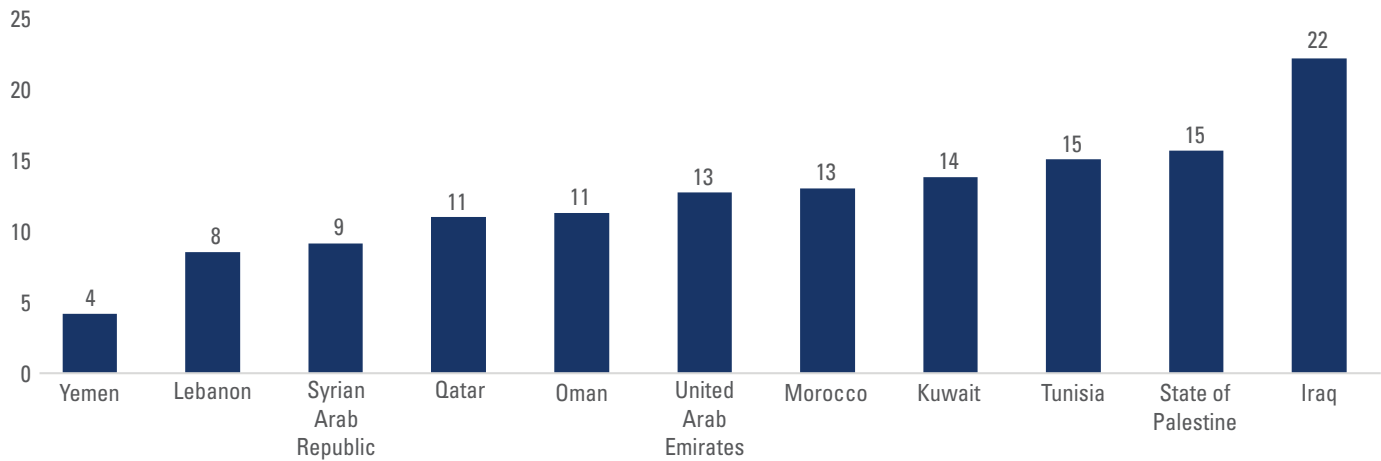


Figure 112. Share of women in managerial positions, latest available data (percentage)



Source: ILOStat database.

H. Women as CEOs and board members

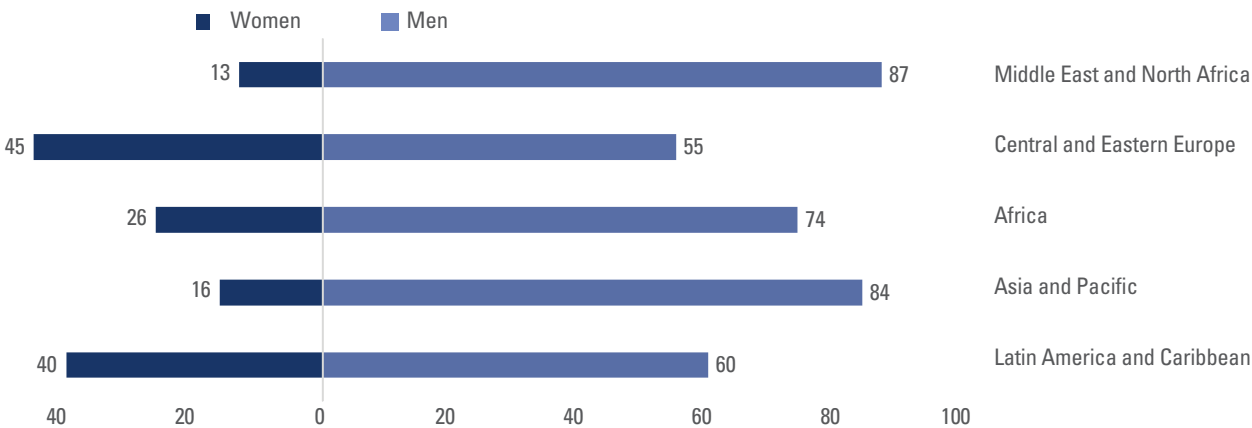
Globally, women make up about one quarter of all Chief Executive Officers (CEOs). The MENA region rate had the fewest women at these levels with only 13 per cent of women CEOs. In Central and Eastern Europe, the rates were the highest in the world at 45 per cent Figure 113.

The glass ceiling appears to be most impenetrable in the world’s largest corporations with less than 4 per cent of CEOs women and the gender composition of executive boards of private companies far from parity.¹⁴ Research conducted by the Pearl Initiative indicates that 32 per cent of family-owned companies in the Gulf region had women on their boards and a similar percentage had women with executive roles. In the United Arab

“While women have been progressing and positioning themselves into leadership roles in the MENA region, the percentage of women in these roles remains unacceptably low in abstract terms as well as in comparison to other countries and regions; and far from our aspirations.”

Omar Fahoum, CEO, Deloitte Middle East

Figure 113. Share of women in Chief Executive Officer positions, world and by region, latest available data (percentage)

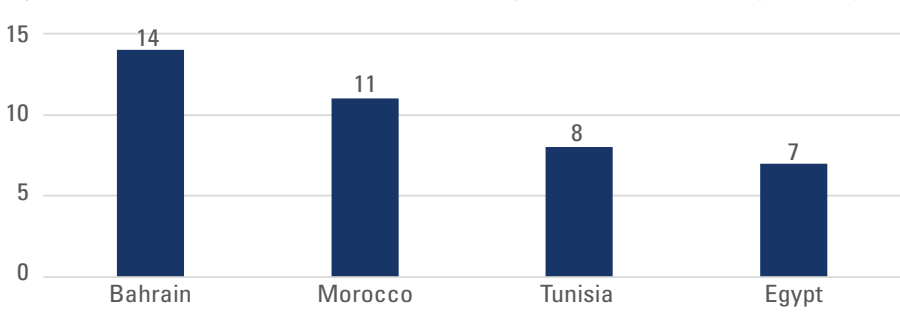


Source: ILO, *Women in Business and Management: gaining momentum in the Middle East and North Africa*.

Emirates, a law was passed in 2012 that made it mandatory to have female board members in all government agencies and companies.¹⁵

Women’s Share of Board Membership positions was highest in Bahrain at only 14 per cent in 2014, followed by Morocco (11%) in 2013 and Tunisia (8%) in 2013. Egypt had the lowest rate at 7 per cent in 2011 **Figure 114.**

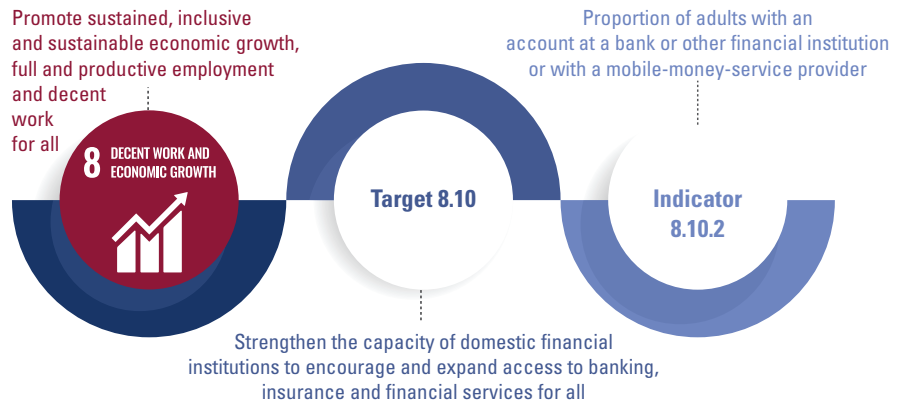
Figure 114. Share of women in board membership, latest available data (percentage)



Source: ILOStat database.

I. Women and economic power

Access to formal financial services such as savings, insurance, payments, credit and remittances is essential to the ability of people—regardless of income level, gender, age, education or where they live—to manage their lives, build their futures and grow their businesses. Having access to an account is an important starting point for people to access arrangements of financial services. The proportion of women with an account at a formal financial institution was lower than the proportion of men in all regions of the world.¹⁶



The gender gap was highest in the Arab region in comparison to other regions. In the Arab region, 26 per cent of women and 48 per cent of men had an account (a gap of 23 percentage points) in 2017. Among countries

in the Arab region, the gender gap was 20 percentage points or higher in Jordan (30%), Algeria (27%), Morocco (25%), Saudi Arabia (22%), Lebanon (24%) and Oman (20%)

Figure 115.

Figure 115. Proportion of adults, aged 15 years and older, with an account at a financial institution or mobile-money-service provider (percentage)



Source: World Bank, “Global Financial Inclusion Database”.