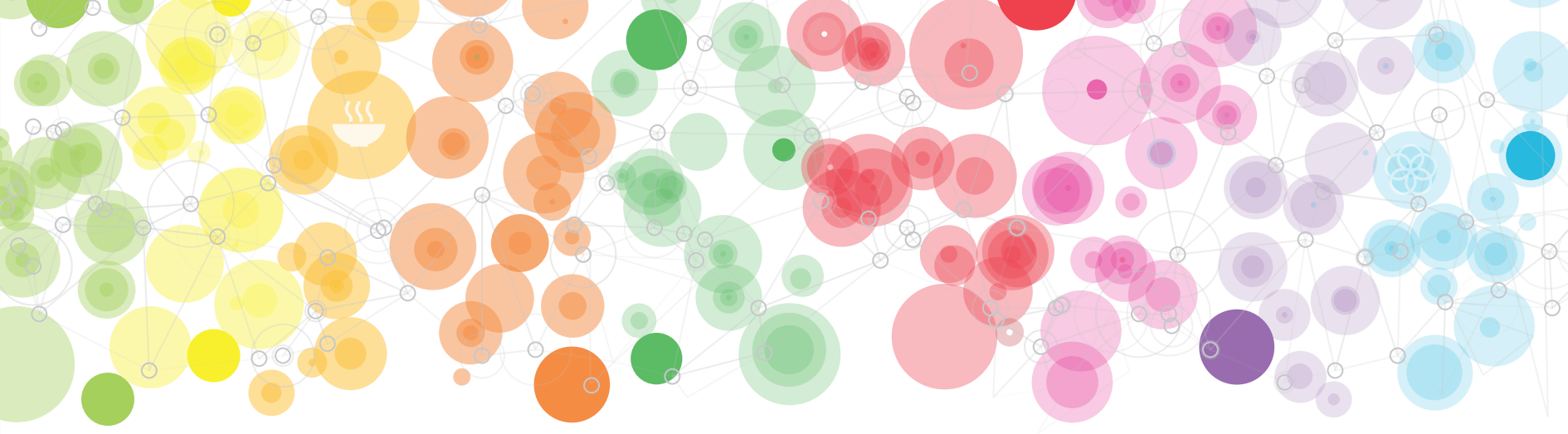




Chapter 2 Population

The Arab region has witnessed a large decrease in the mean age for childbearing, resulting mostly from an increase in early marriages among girls from poor families and with less education, mostly in conflict-affected or post-conflict countries.

The age dependency ratio provides an insight into the burden of unpaid care work, which most often falls on women owing to ascribed gender roles. The age dependency ratio was highest among countries with the lowest GDP in the region. High fertility rates in these countries further contributed to high dependency ratios.



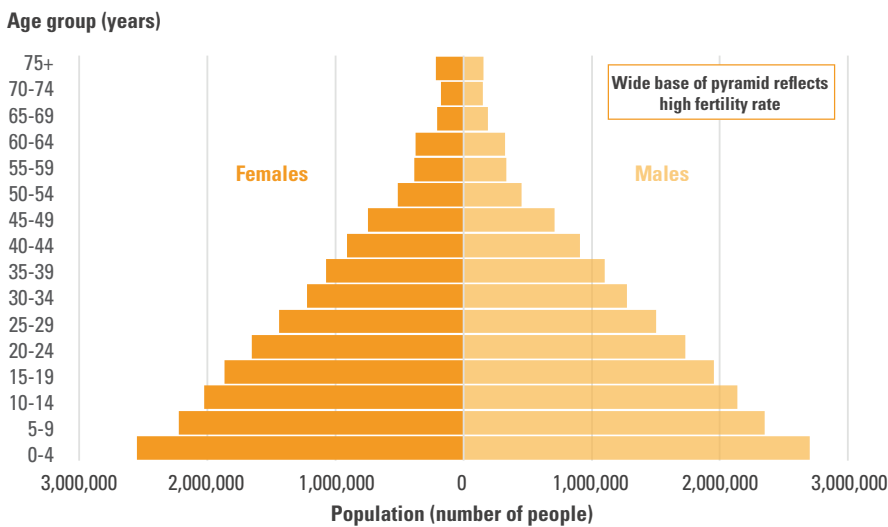
Population

Countries face varying challenges in pursuit of gender equality. Understanding the composition of the population is essential for planning current and future services and anticipating economic, social and environmental issues. Egypt is the most populous country with almost 100 million people while Comoros has the smallest population with almost 851,000 people.

A. Age and sex structure of population

The age and sex structure of the population varies between countries of the region. High fertility rates remain an issue in several countries, which when coupled with early marriage and high levels of teenage pregnancy, perpetuate the problem. Countries with high fertility rates such as Iraq, Mauritania, Comoros, Yemen, the Sudan, the State of Palestine and Somalia – also tend to have higher poverty, lower life expectancy and poor health outcomes. In these countries, the proportion of young people is usually much higher than older persons [Table 4](#). The population pyramid for Iraq, for example, has a wide base representing younger people while the peak of the pyramid is narrow representing older persons [Figure 6](#).

Figure 6. Population pyramid showing the age and sex structure, Iraq 2015



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), *World Population Prospects 2019* (New York, 2019).

Libya, however, has a much lower fertility rate, and, as a result, their population pyramid is much narrower at the base than Iraq’s [Figure 7](#).

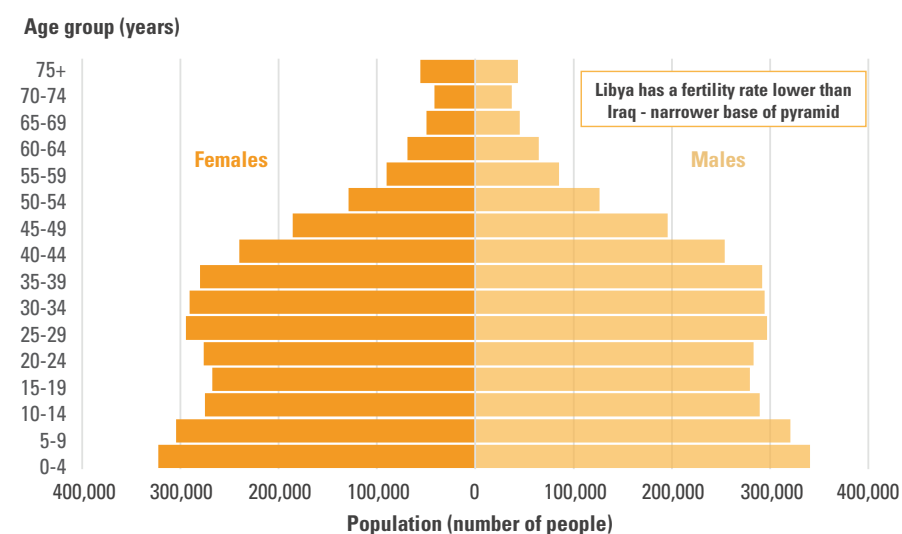
Population structure is not only influenced by birth and death rates; migration also plays an important role. In countries where the economy relies on recruiting a large number of migrant workers – such as Bahrain, Kuwait,

Table 4. Population estimates and sex ratio

Country	Population estimates 2019 (thousands)	Sex ratio	
		In total population 2015	At birth 2015-2020
Egypt	100,388	102	106
Algeria	43,053	102	105
Sudan	42,813	100	104
Iraq	39,310	102	107
Morocco	36,472	98	106
Saudi Arabia	34,269	132	103
Yemen	29,162	102	105
Syrian Arab Republic	17,070	102	105
Somalia	15,443	100	103
Tunisia	11,695	98	106
Jordan	10,102	103	105
United Arab Emirates	9,771	238	105
Lebanon	6,856	101	105
Libya	6,777	102	106
State of Palestine	4,981	103	105
Oman	4,975	187	105
Mauritania	4,526	100	105
Kuwait	4,207	143	105
Qatar	2,832	317	105
Bahrain	1,641	161	104
Djibouti	974	112	104
Comoros	851	102	105

Source: DESA, *World Population Prospects 2019* (New York, 2019).

Figure 7. Population pyramid showing the age and sex structure, Libya 2015

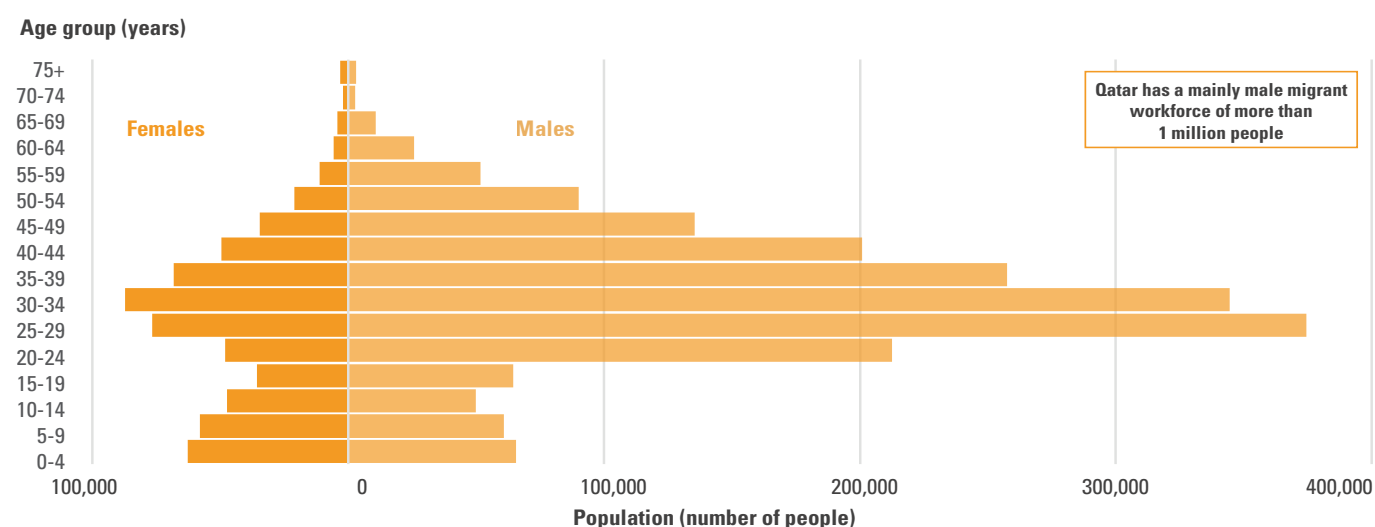


Source: DESA, *World Population Prospects 2019* (New York, 2019).

Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – the age and sex structure of the population looks completely different. In these States the large numbers of male migrant workers skew the population toward males, creating an imbalance in the sex ratio.

For example, Qatar's population pyramid shows the population is heavily skewed towards men. In fact, men outnumber women three to one. Such a population can create particular gender issues, with large numbers of men living without their partners, and limited job opportunities for women [Figure 8](#).

Figure 8. Population pyramid showing the age and sex structure, Qatar 2015



Source: DESA, *World Population Prospects 2019* (New York, 2019).

B. Gender roles by age and sex

Population pyramids are useful for showing the relative size of the total population by sex and age, but the sex ratio at birth is also an important gender-related indicator to track. It is a universal and naturally occurring phenomena that more boy babies are born than girls – around 105-107 boys for every 100 girls. When the ratio of boys to girls exceeds 107, it is likely a sign of son preference: the tendency for some cultures to favour having boys over girls in the family. For example, in China, where population policies have shaped family size for decades and there is a preference for sons, there are 116 boys born for every 100 girls. That said, son preference does not appear to impact fertility practices in the Arab States. The sex ratio at birth in the Arab States was between 103 and 107 boys for every 100 girls.

The proportion of children and older persons to the working age population provides an insight into the burden of unpaid care work, which most often falls upon women due to gender roles ascribed by most societies in the Arab States. The age dependency ratio is a measure of this, reflecting the number of children (age 0-14) and older persons (age 65 and above) for every 100 people of working age (age 15-64). The higher the ratio, the greater the burden of care and imbalance between those able to contribute directly to the economy and those reliant on support.¹

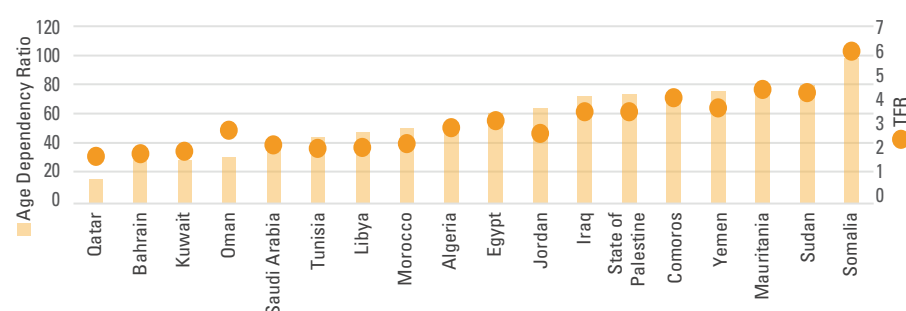
Age dependency ratio was highest in Somalia; every working age person had one dependent. There were 100 children and older persons for every 100 people of working age in Somalia. This was followed by the Sudan where there were 82 children and older persons for every 100 people of working

Each **working aged** person in Somalia had **ONE DEPENDENT**



age. Dependency was high in Comoros, Mauritania and Yemen, which also had lowest current Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in purchasing power parity (PPP) among countries in the region. High fertility rates in these countries further contributed to high dependency ratios. Conversely, dependency was low in the Gulf States, where the population was skewed towards working age due to large numbers of migrant workers [Figure 9](#).

Figure 9. Age dependency ratio and total fertility rate (live births per woman), latest available data



Source: DESA, *World Population Prospects 2019* (New York, 2019).

C. Age of marriage and childbearing

The Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages came into force in 1964. The Convention has been signed by 16 countries and there are 55 parties to the Convention, of which only five are Arab States: Jordan (1992), Libya (2005), the State of Palestine (2019), Tunisia (1968) and Yemen (1987). The Convention reaffirms the consensual nature of marriages and requires the parties to establish a minimum marriage age by law and to ensure the registration of marriages. Although Yemen signed the agreement in 1968, it did not establish a minimum age by law.² It is also worth noting that the rate of child marriages in Yemen was the highest among Arab States.

Globally, most countries have laws that set minimum age of marriage commonly at age 18. Nonetheless, many countries provide exceptions to this minimum age of marriage with parental consent or court authorisation. Other exceptions allow customary or religious laws to set lower minimum ages of marriage to take precedence over national law that is likely to undermine the legal protection.

According to the World Policy Analysis Centre, 93 countries legally allow girls to marry before the age of 18 with parental consent and 54 countries allow for girls to marry between one and three years younger than boys.³

There are nine Arab States where the law allows girls to marry before age 18, and in five of those countries boys also can marry before age 18 (Table 5). Saudi Arabia and Yemen have no minimum age of marriage for both sexes. In the Sudan, girls are allowed to marry at puberty, whereas boys can marry at age 10. The following countries allowed girls to marry between ages 9-17 years: Lebanon (9 years), Kuwait (15 years), Bahrain, Somalia and Qatar (16 years), and the Syrian Arab Republic (17 years). In addition to Saudi Arabia, the Sudan and Yemen where boys are allowed to marry young, two more countries allow boys to marry between ages 10-17. In Lebanon, boys can marry at 13 years, and in Kuwait at 17 years. Only two countries, Algeria and Libya, set their minimum age of marriage above 18 years. Both girls and boys can marry at age 19 in Algeria and at age 20 in Libya. In the remaining 11 countries, girls and boys are allowed to marry at age 18

Table 5. Minimum age of marriage for women with parental consent

Age < 10 years or no minimum age	Age <18 years	Age =18 years	Age >18 years
Lebanon (9), Saudi Arabia and Yemen (no minimum age)	Sudan, Kuwait (15), Bahrain (16), Somalia (16), Qatar (16) and Syrian Arab Republic (17)	Djibouti, Comoros, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, State of Palestine, Tunisia and United Arab Emirates	Algeria (19) and Libya (20)

Source: World Policy Analysis Centre, "Minimum age of marriage with parental consent for boys and girls, 2013". Available at <https://www.worldpolicycenter.org/policies/what-is-the-minimum-age-of-marriage-for-boys/what-is-the-minimum-age-of-marriage-for-boys-with-parental-consent> (accessed on 06 February 2019).

Data for the State of Palestine from: UNICEF, *Occupied Palestinian Territory: MENA Gender Equality Profile Status of Girls and Women in the Middle East and North Africa* (2011).

years old: Djibouti, Comoros, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.

The mean age at first marriage for women and men provides another relevant measure of gender concern. The average age for men at first marriage ranged from around 26 years old in Iraq and Yemen, to around 33 years old in Tunisia and Djibouti. For women, the average age was lowest in Somalia (21 years) and highest in Djibouti (30 years). Mauritania had the highest gender gap in age at first marriage among Arab States. There are almost eight years of difference between the average age for men (30 years) and that for women (22 years). The gender gap was also large in the Sudan by 6 years, where men marry at an average age of 29 years old compared to 23 years old

for women. Similarly, in Somalia the gender gap was at 6 years, Egypt was 6 years and Jordan was 5 years **Figure 10**.

According to United Nations estimates, the mean age for childbearing varies among Arab States. In the Arab States overall, there was a large decrease from 31 years in 1990 to 28.7 years in 2015, which is projected to decrease further to 28.1 years by 2030. The decrease is derived by increase of early marriages, mostly in states in conflict or post conflict. Iraq, for example, recorded the highest decrease

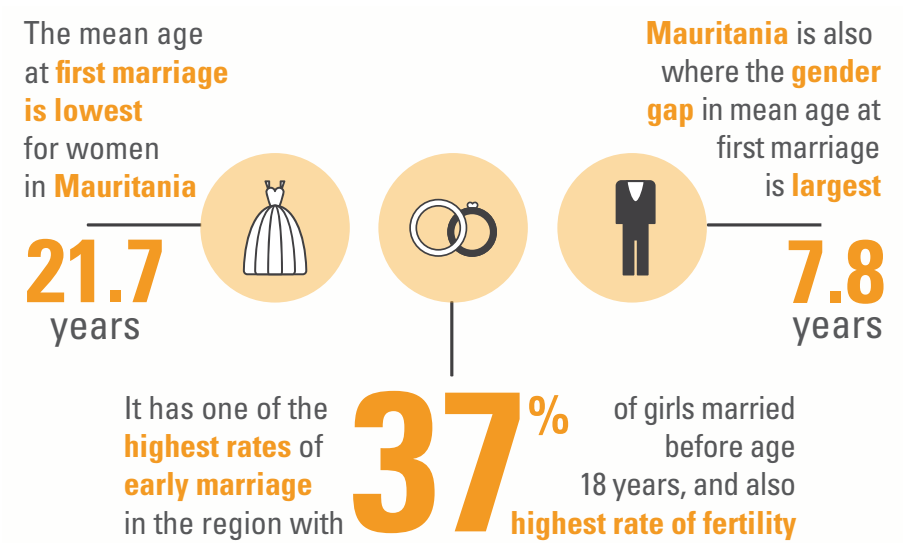
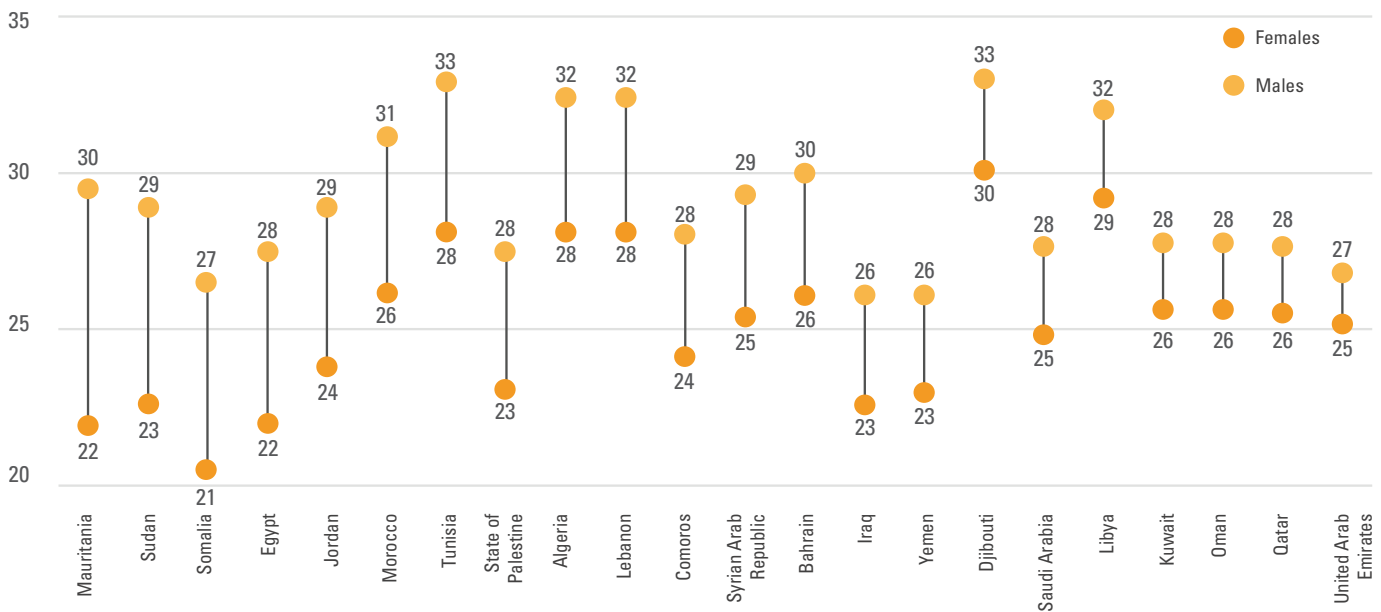


Figure 10. Gender gap in mean age at first marriage, in years, latest year



Source: DESA, Population Division, "World Marriage Data 2017".

in women’s mean age for childbearing. The rates expected to decrease by nearly 3 years between 1990 and 2030. A similar decrease in the mean age for childbearing in Somalia was estimated from 31.6 in 1990, to 29.7 in 2015, and to 28.9 by 2030.

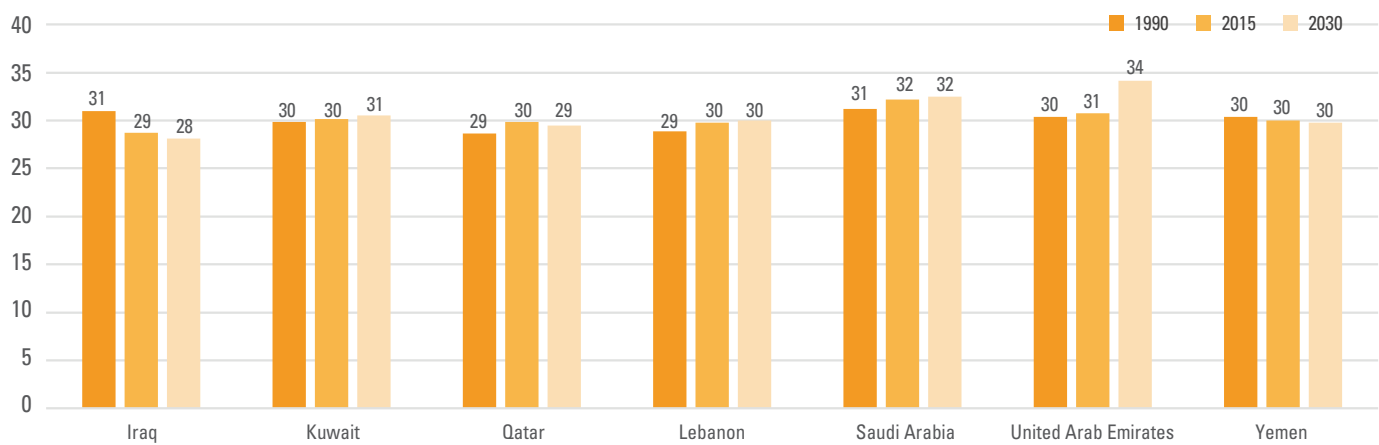
The highest estimated increase in the mean age for childbearing was by

3.7 years in the United Arab Emirates between 1990 to 2030: the mean age for childbearing increased from 30.4 years in 1990, to 30.7 in 2015 and is projected to be 34.1 years by 2030. In 2030 the United Arab Emirates would record the highest mean age for childbearing among Arab States. Smaller increases in the mean age for childbearing were estimated to

occur in Lebanon (1.1 years) and Saudi Arabia (1.3 years).

In the other Arab States, the mean age for childbearing stayed fairly steady over recent decades. Countries like Algeria, Djibouti, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, the Sudan and Tunisia are projected to increase by less than 1 year from 1990 to 2030 **Figure 11**.

Figure 11. Trend in mean age for childbearing in years



Source: DESA, *World Population Prospects 2019* (New York, 2019).

D. Head and size of households

Young age at first marriage and mean age for childbearing contributes to higher fertility and to larger family size. More than half of countries in the Arab States had five or more persons per household. Those countries were Algeria, Comoros, Djibouti, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic, the State of Palestine, the Sudan and Yemen.

Oman and Yemen had the highest rates, with 7 persons per household, followed by Iraq 6 persons per household. Egypt and Tunisia had the smallest size of household, with 4 persons, in the region **Figure 12**.

In most of the cases, divorce, singlehood or widowhood forces women to become head of their households. Although female-headed households have historically constituted a relatively small proportion of households in the developing world, they are becoming increasingly common.

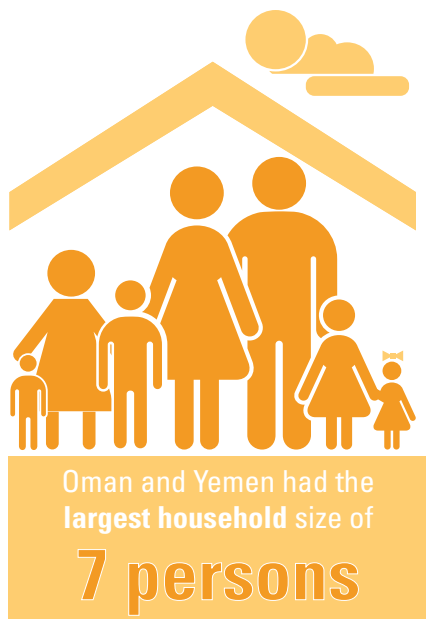
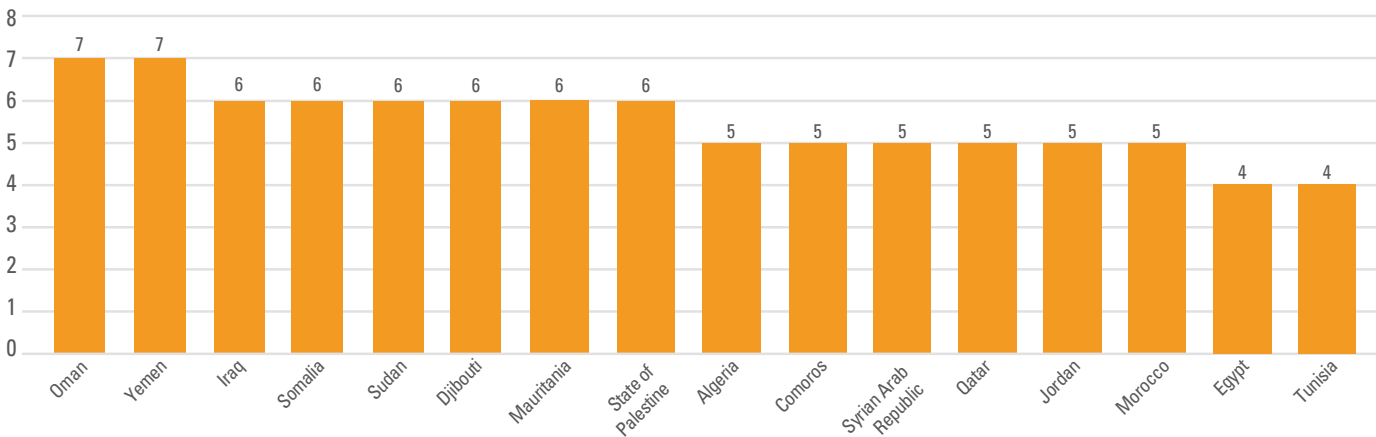


Figure 12. Average number of residents per household, latest available data



Source: Latest DHS and MICS surveys (see Annex- Marriage and Family).

Comoros recorded the highest proportion of female-headed household:

39%



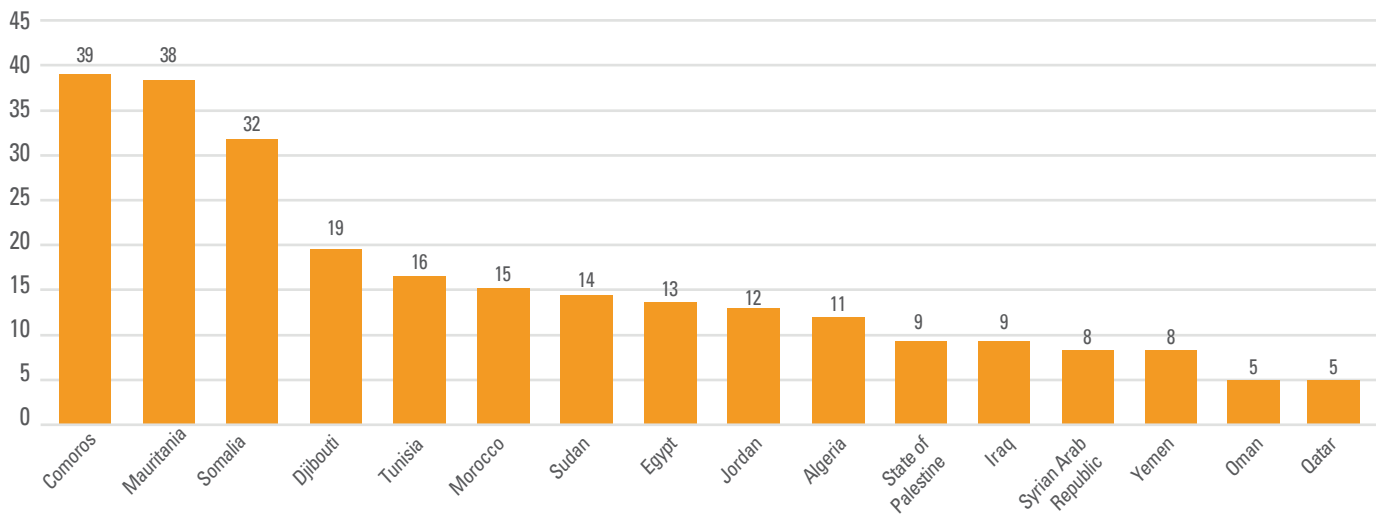
4 out of 10 households
headed by women

Available data show that the proportion of female-headed households, was highest in Comoros; out of 10 households four were headed by women. The next highest share of female-headed households was in Mauritania (38%) and Somalia (32%). Qatar had the least share of female-headed households in the region (5%) **Figure 13.**

E. Marital dissolution

Longitudinal studies, such as one done in the United States,⁴ on the effects of divorce and widowhood indicate that both types of dissolutions result in negative and prolonged consequences for women's economic well-being.

Figure 13. Share of female-headed households, latest available data (percentage)



Source: Latest DHS and MICS surveys (see Annex- Marriage and Family).

Women often bear the negative economic and other consequences of divorce, while marital dissolution for men often leads to an improved economic standard of living.

Divorce

As per available data, divorce rates (number of divorces per 1,000 persons aged 15 years and older) are generally low in the Arab States. Data show a consistent fall in the level in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia over time between the 1970s and mid-2000s.

Trends in divorce rates varies among Arab countries. Divorce rates in both Egypt and the State of Palestine nearly doubled during 2006 to 2017. Divorce rates in Egypt rose from 0.9 to 2.1 per 1,000, and in the State of Palestine from 1.0 to 1.8 per 1,000. In Qatar, however, divorce rates declined from 1.0 to 0.4 per 1,000 in the same period. Divorce rates, however, did not change in Jordan, Libya and the

United Arab Emirates during 2006-2017. In 2017 highest divorce rates were recorded in Egypt and Jordan (2.1 per 1,000) and the lowest in Qatar (0.4 per 1,000) **Figure 14.**

Gender analysis shows a difference between women and men divorce rates by age group. The proportion of divorced females between age 45 to 49 years was higher than divorced male in the same age group. There were seven times or more divorced females than divorced male in Saudi Arabia, Mauritania and Comoros.

In Somalia, the Sudan, Oman and Algeria for every divorced male there were five or more divorced females. While in the Syrian Arab Republic, the State of Palestine, Libya, Tunis and Lebanon there were two divorced females to one or no divorced males in the age group 45-49 years. This could be due to two factors; polygamy is still common in many countries and men remarry more frequently, while divorced women are stigmatized by divorce or are left to care for their children alone **Figure 15.**

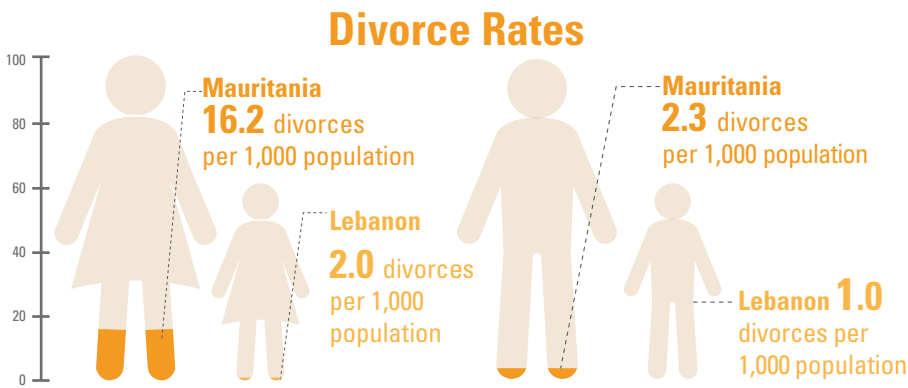
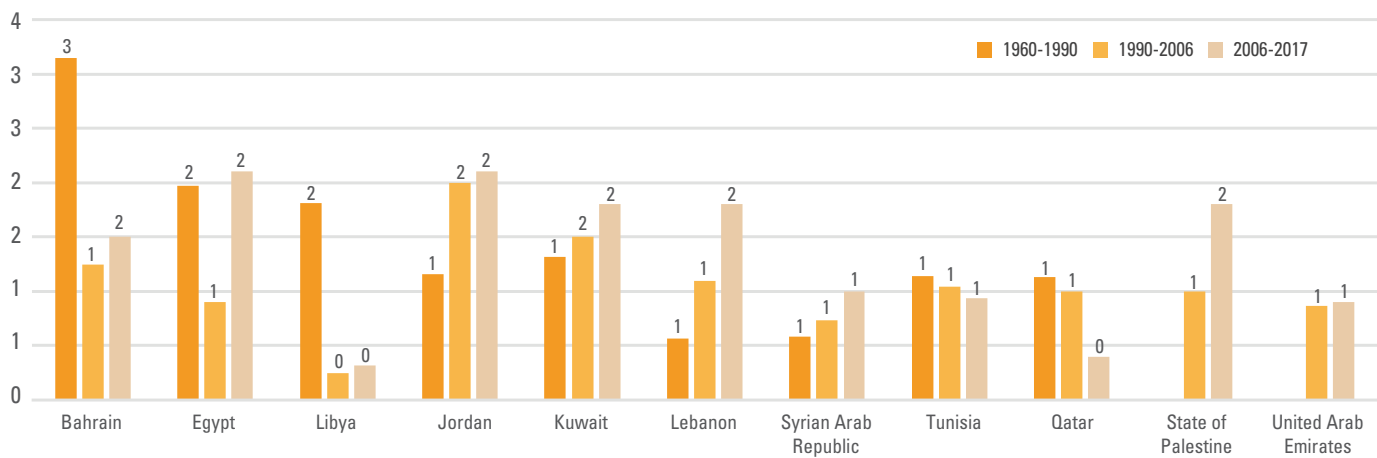
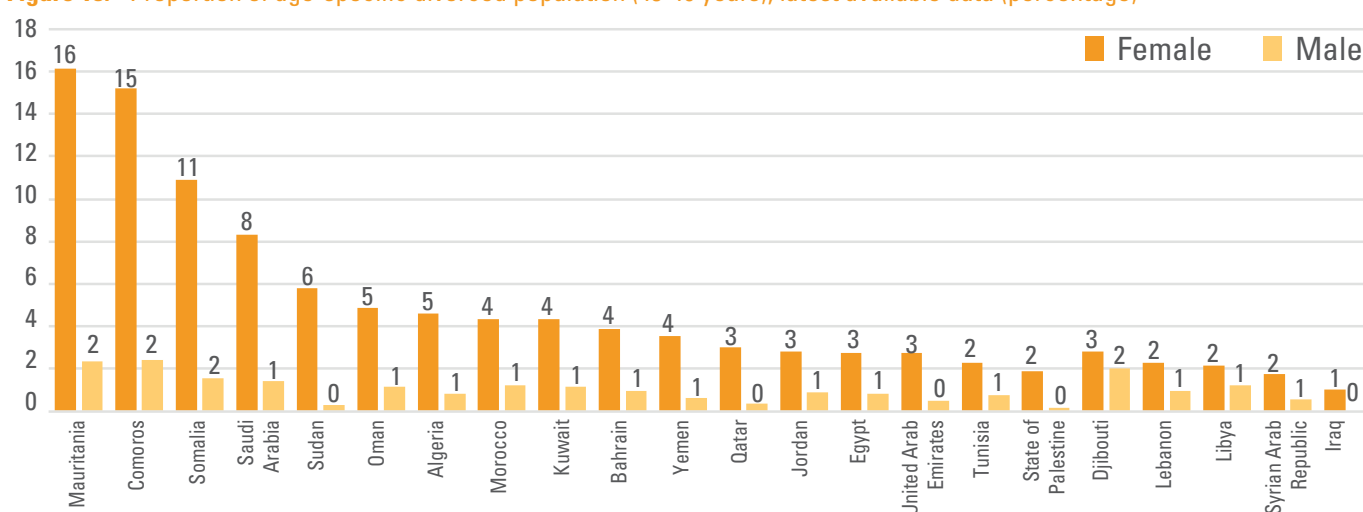


Figure 14. Trend in annual number of divorces per 1,000 population (percentage)



Source: UNSD, Demographic and Social Statistics, Demographic Yearbooks.

Figure 15. Proportion of age-specific divorced population (45-49 years), latest available data (percentage)



Source: DESA, Population Division, "World Marriage Data 2017".

Widowhood

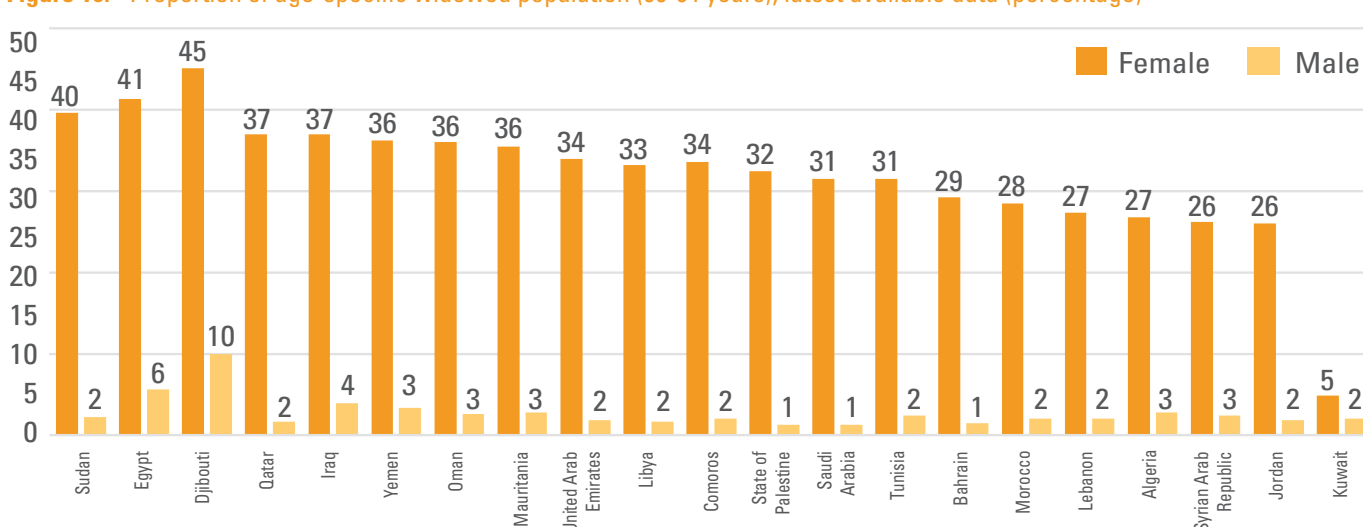
Widows have been historically identified as a disadvantaged group due to the lack of social protection floors, including laws regarding widow's access to pensions in many countries. Widows are particularly discriminated against and destitute.⁵ Given the higher average life

expectancy of women, it is expected that women would outlive their husbands.

The proportion of widowed females between age 60 to 64 years were higher than widowed males in the same age group. In Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, Qatar, Bahrain and Libya there were 20

or more widowed females for each male. While there were five to 13 widowed females for each male in Mauritania, Tunisia, Yemen, the Syrian Arab Republic, Algeria, Iraq, Egypt and Djibouti. Kuwait had the lowest proportion of widowed population with only two widowed females for one widowed male
Figure 16.

Figure 16. Proportion of age-specific widowed population (60-64 years), latest available data (percentage)



Source: DESA, Population Division, "World Marriage Data 2017".