

Women and ICTs in the Arab World

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INTRODUCTION

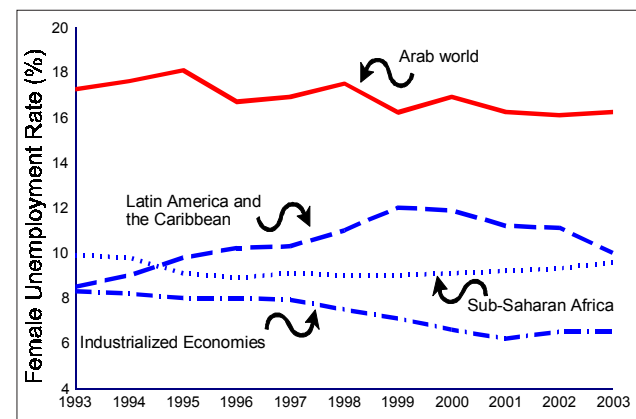
The digital divide manifests itself on the one hand in the lag in Arab world nations vis-à-vis other more developed countries and on the other hand in the existing inequalities between men and women. Although the United Nations and the World Bank publish a variety of reports on the differences between developed and developing nations, very little data is available to fully grasp the meaning of the gap between genders. In terms of information and communication technologies (ICTs), there are two distinct gaps that need to be recognized: the gap between Arab men and Arab women and the gap between Arab women and women from other nations around the world (Figure 1).

Much differs in the lives of men and women. For decades, researchers have published comparative reports, attempting to explain what distinguishes men and women in socio-professional environments. According to Meyers-Levy (1989) men tend to be more comfortable with ICTs and partake more often in gaming and programming. When they use computers, women are more inclined to use them as communication tools. Given women's presumed lack of experience with technology, their upbringing which is different from men's, and that the studies they most often pursue are not technology-oriented, it is not surprising that women are generally less inclined to adopt new technologies. Those who nonetheless have tried their hand at browsing the Web were either witness to or victims of offensive language used during interactive discussion sessions; in some cases, they were harassed via e-mail. In order to avoid this unpleasantness, some women assumed male aliases (Herring, 2003). However, since 2000, when men and women reached parity in Web use (Rickert & Sacharow, 2000), it would appear that

using the Internet is presently no more intimidating for females than for males.

An abundance of other differences between men and women exist. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) acknowledged that there does not exist a society in which women benefit from the same opportunities as men. Everywhere in the world, women are poorer, less educated, and less valued than men. These and other inequalities reduce women's ability to take advantage of the potential benefits of ICTs and to consequently contribute to their nation's economic and social development which is in fact facilitated by these same technologies.

Figure 1. Female unemployment rates by region from 1993 to 2003



Note: In 2003, 40% of the world's 2.8 billion workers were women, representing a worldwide increase of nearly 200 million women in employment in the past 10 years. In the Middle East and North Africa, the female unemployment rate of 16.5% was 6% higher than that of men.

Source: ILO, 2004

BACKGROUND

If a digital divide is known to exist between northern and southern nations, between developed and developing countries, between knowledge economies and emerging ones, and between the haves and the have nots, it also needs to be recognized that a greater, encompassing-all-of-the-above divide exists based on individuals' gender. In essence, a divide exists between men and women regardless of what other category into which they may fall.

The Gender Digital Divide

Although the gender digital divide may no longer be a concern for a few countries, namely Scandinavian nations, it is very much present in Arab countries where the effect is exacerbated: first, because of the general lag of Arab nations, second because this divide targets the gender which, according to most of the socio-economic-cultural criteria as defined by the UNDP in its 2002 and 2003 reports, is already at a disadvantage.

In December 1998, 34.2% of men and 31.4% of women worldwide used the Internet. In 1999, less women (48%) than men (52%) used the Internet, even in the U.S. In August 2000, it was reported that 44.6% of men and 44.2% of women were Internet users.

A 2002 study undertaken by eMarketer and appearing in the New York Times reported that from a professional perspective men preferred e-mail to the telephone; the opposite was found true for women. For both genders, face-to-face interaction was favored above all (54% of men and 47% of women). These results are in line with Herring's (2001) comments who argued that women prefer the Internet over face-to-face conversations since, traditionally, patterns of male dominance have been observed in face-to-face interaction. Similarly, Consalvo (2002) maintains that the telephone has come to be considered a "female medium" of communication.

In 2003, a study by Nielsen/Netratings revealed that equality between European men and women Internet users was still far from reality. In 2000, this parity had been reached in the U.S. (Figure 2). According to the report, the Internet user population is indeed becoming feminized, albeit slowly. In 2002,

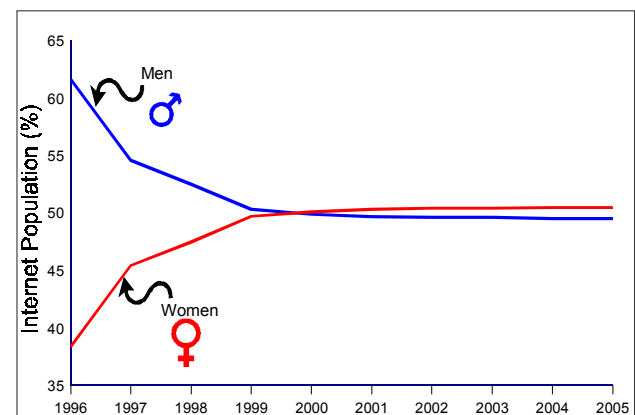
41% of European Internet users were women. In 2003, this number rose to 43%. At this rate, it will take until 2010 for equality in terms of the number of women and men Internet users in Europe to be reached.

Women in the Arab World

Arab countries have exhibited the fastest improvements in female conditions of any region of the world (UNDP, 2002). To illustrate, women's literacy rates have increased threefold since 1970 from 16.6% to 52.5% and female school enrolments have more than doubled. Today, women make up more than 70% of the student population in most Gulf-area universities. They represent more than 25% of judges in Tunisia (as compared with 20% of federal judges in the U.S.) and 10% of members in the Moroccan Parliament (as compared with 13% in the U.S. Congress) (Al-Hamad, 2003).

However, only 32% of women are active participants in their country's labor force, the lowest rate in the world (World Bank, 2004) (Figure 4). Though working women are generally more educated than their male counterparts, female unemployment is often highest among more educated women, who regularly leave the labor force to get married and have children (World Bank, 2004).

Figure 2. In the U.S., parity in Internet use between men and women was reached in 2000



See Rickert & Sacharow, 2000; and eMarketer, 2000

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