Chapter 7.25
ICT and Gender Inequality in the Middle East

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INTRODUCTION

Information communication technologies (ICT) have become an effective force for accelerating political, economic, and social development, decreasing poverty, and fostering trade and knowledge; however the uneven distribution, usage, and implementation of ICT resulted in what is known as the "digital divide" between those who have access to and utilization of information resources and those who do not (Internet.com, 2004).

The Middle East, with the exception of Israel, is the least ICT connected area worldwide with only 1.4% of the global share (less than half of the world average of 5.2%). ICT adoption and access in the Arab world are far from adequate; only 6% of the Arab world population uses the Internet, while the penetration rate of personal computers is 2.4%, and less than 4 % of the Arab population has access to a ground telephone line (Ajeeb, 2006; NUA, 2005).

The trend of globalization forced Arab countries to realize the power of ICT as one of the most important factors in achieving sustainable growth. During the past decade, genuine efforts have been implemented by Arab governments to utilize ICT; as of May 2005, every country in the Arab world (as seen in Table 1)—except Iraq and Libya—has a clear strategy or at least a plan for promoting ICT (Dutta & Coury, 2003).

In her book, *Technology Strategies for Putting Arab Countries on the Cyber Map*, Reem Hunaidi (2002) stated that despite Arab world efforts to utilize ICT, Arabs are still far from bridging the digital divide. Hunaidi stated that the Arab world is still scoring low on the Digital Access Index (as seen in Table 2), adding that bridging the digital divide requires commitment from all development stakeholders, not only Arab governments.

The Hunaidi study concluded that development should start within the Arab society through liberating Arab human capabilities, especially those of women questioning how a society can compete in an increasingly globalized world if half of its people remain marginalized (Hunaidi, 2002).

The UNDP 2004 report on human development in the Arab world added to Hunaidi's question stating that the first step in human ICT develop-

Table 1. ICT in the agenda of the Arab world

Country	ICT Strategy Spelled Out	ICT Implementation Plan Articulated	Operational ICT-Dedicated Research Facilities	Plan of ICT Dedicated Research Facilities	Operational Technopole Initiative	Plan of Technopole Initiative	Existence of Technology Incubator	Planned Technology Incubator
Bahrain	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Kuwait	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓
Oman				✓				✓
Qatar	✓							✓
Saudi A.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
UAE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Algeria		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Egypt	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jordan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lebanon	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Morocco	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Syria				✓				
Tunisia	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓

ment is to bridge the gender divide within the Arab world and make use of the latent 50% of the Arab population.

The Arab world has the lowest Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) worldwide next to Sub-Saharan Africa. Nancy Hafkin and Nancy Tagger (2001), in their study "Gender, Information Technology, and Developing Countries", stated that the degree of gender bias can be vividly seen across the Arab region. Figures indicate that Arab users constitute 4% of Internet users in comparison to 22% of users in Asia, 25% in Europe, 38% in Latin America, and 50% in the United States.

Hafkin and Tagger (2001) concluded that several challenges of socio-cultural, political, economic, and education disparities need to be addressed towards advancing Arab women's active participation in the new networked information society.

Table 2. Digital access index (DAI)

UAE	0.65
Bahrain	0.58
Qatar	0.55
Lebanon	0.48
Jordan	0.45
KSA	0.44
Oman	0.43
Libya	0.42
Tunisia	0.41
Egypt	0.40
Palestine	0.38
Algeria	0.37
Morocco	0.33
Syria	0.28
Yemen	0.18
Sudan	0.15

Source: ITU, 2004

BACKGROUND

ICT Diffusion in the Arab World

The Arab world is generally known as laggard in adopting and utilizing new technologies, and ICT are no exception. The Internet first arrived in the Arab world in 1992 when Egypt established a 9.6k network connection through France. Next, several Arab states started joining the new net-