



SYRIA

MENA Gender Equality Profile
Status of Girls and Women in the
Middle East and North Africa

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1. BACKGROUND

Demographics	Value	Year
Total population (000)	21,906	2009
Total adolescent (10-19) population (000)	4,501	2009
Total under-18 population (000)	9,001	2009
Total under-5 population (000)	2,868	2009
Population annual growth rate (%)	3.5	2000-2009
Total fertility rate (births per woman)	3.2	2009
Under-five mortality rate (per 1000 live births)	16	2009
Life expectancy at birth (years), male	73	2009
Life expectancy at birth (years), female	76	2009
Singulate mean age at marriage, male	29	2001
Singulate mean age at marriage, female	25	2001
Economic indicators		
GNI per capita (current US\$)	2,640	2010
% share of income held by lowest 20 %	8	2004
% share of income held by highest 20 %	44	2004
Sources: UNICEF, The State of the World's Children 2011. Life expectancy and economic indicators from The World Bank, Data Catalog, http://data.worldbank.org/ , [accessed in May 2011] Marriage data from UNPD, World Marriage Data 2008, www.un.org/esa/population/		

Gender Gap Index 2010		
Rankings of MENA countries with available data	Score	Rank
United Arab Emirates	0.6397	103
Kuwait	0.6318	105
Tunisia	0.6266	107
Bahrain	0.6217	110
Lebanon	0.6084	116
Qatar	0.6059	117
Algeria	0.6052	119
Jordan	0.6048	120
Oman	0.5950	122
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	0.5933	123
Syrian Arab Republic	0.5926	124
Egypt	0.5899	125
Morocco	0.5767	127
Saudi Arabia	0.5713	129
Yemen	0.4603	134
Source: World Economic Forum, The Global Gender Gap Report 2010 (rankings of in total 134 countries)		

2. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Legal system. The legal system in Syria is based on French, Ottoman and Islamic law (Shari'a).¹ Shari'a is applied in matters related to personal status (including inheritance, marriage, divorce, and child custody). The court system includes both secular and religious courts. In the civil and criminal courts (which are secular) a woman's testimony has the same evidentiary worth as a man's, in the Shari'a courts, however, a woman's testimony is worth only half of a man's. For religious minorities (e.g. Christians, Druze and Jews) the communities' own laws are applied in many personal status matters.²

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Syria acceded to the CEDAW in 2003 with reservations against several of articles of the convention: 2 (policy measures), 9 (2) (equality with regard to nationality), 15 (4) (freedom of movement and of residence and domicile), 16 1 (c), (d), (f) and (g) (equality in marriage and family life), and 16 (2) (child marriage) as well as 29 (1) (an article related to the administration of the convention; i.e. arbitration in the event of a dispute).³ Several of these articles are considered to be at the core of the purpose of the convention. The CEDAW Committee indicated in 1998 that: "...reservations to article 16, whether lodged for national, traditional, religious or cultural reasons, are incompatible with the Convention and therefore impermissible..."⁴ Syria still maintains the reservations made to the CEDAW upon accession despite the fact that progress in removing some of them was reported in the initial State party report (2005), including agreements in the People's Assembly.

¹ Hauser Global Law School Program, New York University School of Law, GlobalLex, Foreign Law Research, (electronic publication, www.nyulawglobal.org/Globalex) [accessed in May 2011]

² Freedom House, Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 (report, online version, www.freedomhouse.org)

³ See United Nations Treaty Collection (<http://treaties.un.org>) for declarations and reservations made by State Parties

⁴ Report of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Session, A/53/38/Rev.1, 1998, p.49

Convention on the Rights of the Child. Syria ratified the CRC in 1993 with a general reservation to provisions that are not in conformity with Syrian and Islamic law. Syria also made specific reservations to article 14 on the right of the child to freedom of religion and to articles 20 and 21, which relate to adoption, as adoption is not allowed according to Islamic law. Syria acceded to the two optional protocols to the CRC in 2003, and maintains reservations to article 3 (1) (a) (ii) and 3 (5) (which relate to adoption) of the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

Nationality rights. A child will have the nationality of his or her father. A Syrian woman married to a foreign man cannot pass her nationality to her husband or their children, while a Syrian man married to a foreign woman can do so.⁵ Efforts to change the law and grant men and women equal nationality rights are being made however the law remained unchanged as of August 2011.⁶ The nearly half a million Palestinian refugees in the country have the same rights as Syrian citizens, except for those rights dependent on nationality, since Palestinian refugees do not have citizenship.⁷

Divorce rights. A woman has the right to seek divorce given that she can provide a justification to the court, while a man does not need to provide any reason for requesting divorce. Women also have the option of requesting divorce without the burden of evidence but will then lose any right to maintenance and will have to return their dowry. In the case of a divorce initiated by the husband, the wife has the right to financial support for a short period of four months.⁸

Guardianship and custody rights. The father is the guardian of the children according to the personal status law that applies to Muslims. In the event of divorce, Muslim women may be granted custody of their sons until the age of 13 and of their daughters until they reach 15. The father remains the guardian of the children. In the Christian communities, depending on the community, guardianship is either the right of the father or it is shared between the mother and the father.⁹

Inheritance rights. As previously mentioned, there is no unified personal status law in Syria. For example, in 2006 a Catholic personal status law was adopted which gives men and women equal inheritance rights, while under Islamic law a woman will inherit half of her brother's share of the parental estate.¹⁰

Freedom of movement. A Syrian woman has the right to obtain a passport and to travel. The permission of her husband is not required. Syria maintains its reservation to CEDAW article 15 (4) (freedom of movement and of residence and domicile), as the choice of domicile is considered to be a decision of the husband.¹¹

Protection from child marriage. According to the personal status law that applies to Muslims, the eligible age of marriage is 18 years for boys and 17 years for girls. A marriage below these ages can be authorized; for girls the minimum age is then 13 and for boys the minimum age is 15.¹² Polygyny is legal under Islamic law.

Protection from gender-based violence. The Syrian penal code still allows lenient sentences for crimes committed in the name of "honour" despite a recent reform which brought increased penalties and abolished the possibility of complete exoneration for certain "honour crimes". Syrian law offers the possibility that a rapist can escape punishment if he marries the victim. There is no law prohibiting rape within marriage, in fact the penal code's definition of rape specifically excludes the rape of a spouse. In addition, there is no law that prohibits domestic violence.¹³

5 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Initial periodic report of Syria, CEDAW/C/SYR/1, 2005

6 Freedom House, Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 (report, online version, www.freedomhouse.org), information on the current status of the reform of the nationality law provided by UNICEF Syria

7 U.S. Department of State, 2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (report, online version <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/>) [accessed in September 2011]

8 Freedom House, Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 (report, online version, www.freedomhouse.org)

9 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Initial periodic report of Syria, CEDAW/C/SYR/1, 2005

10 Freedom House, Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 (report, online version, www.freedomhouse.org)

11 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Initial periodic report of Syria, CEDAW/C/SYR/1, 2005

12 Ibid.

13 Freedom House, Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 (report, online version, www.freedomhouse.org)

3. INSTITUTIONS AND MECHANISMS

Governmental response. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs was established in 2003 and is the government body responsible for promoting and protecting women's rights. The Commission for Family Affairs prepared the initial State party CEDAW report. Syria is party to the CEDAW since 2003 and to date there is no law that specifically prohibits gender-based discrimination and no mechanism is available to receive complaints of rights violations.¹⁴

Strategies and services responding to gender-based violence. The CEDAW Committee raises concern in its concluding observations to Syria's initial CEDAW report regarding the lack of shelters and services to women who are victims of violence.¹⁵ The 2010 Freedom House report "Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010" also points to a lack of services and points to the need to establish easily accessible mechanisms allowing women who are victims of domestic violence to file complaints. According to information provided by UNICEF Syria, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs recently opened a shelter for battered women.

4. WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political representation. Syrian women gained the right to vote and stand for election in 1953. The first time a woman was elected to parliament was in 1973.¹⁶ At present women are occupying 31 out of 250 seats in the lower house of parliament (12 per cent of the seats).

Representation in the legal system. Women have been allowed to practice law since 1975. The number of female professionals in the legal field still remains low. According to the 2010 Freedom House report 13 per cent of the judges and public prosecutors in Syria are female.

Civil society. The only legal women's organisation in Syria is the General Union of Syrian Women (GWU). The GWU is affiliated with the Ba'ath Party and receives state funding. There are independent groups, such as the Syrian Women's League, which operate despite their illegal status.¹⁷

5. EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

Education. In Syria the literacy rate among female youth is 93 per cent and among male youth 96 per cent. The enrolment ratio in primary education is somewhat higher for boys than for girls (97 per cent compared to 92 per cent for girls) according to available data from 2002. In secondary school, net enrolment ratios are roughly equal for girls and boys (69 per cent for girls and 70 per cent for boys).

Access to financial credit. The law makes no distinction between men and women with regard to access to bank loans and other forms of financial credit, thus an adult woman does not require the consent of her husband or father to obtain a loan. There are loan schemes that specifically target women with the aim to increase their economic participation.¹⁸

Participation in the labour market. Globally, women's labour force participation rate (that is, the proportion of the working-age population that actively engages in the labour market either by working or looking for work) is 52 per cent.¹⁹ The labour force participation rate of women age 15 and above in Syria is only 21 per cent, well below

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Syrian Arab Republic, CEDAW/C/SYR/CO/1, 2007

¹⁶ UNDP, Human Development Report 2007/2008

¹⁷ Freedom House, Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 (report, online version, www.freedomhouse.org)

¹⁸ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Initial periodic report of Syria, CEDAW/C/SYR/1, 2005

¹⁹ United Nations, DESA, The World's Women 2010, p. 76

the global average. Among men (age 15 and above) the rate is 80 per cent. Despite the fact that literacy rates as well as enrolment ratios in secondary school are roughly equal for girls and boys, only 20 per cent of female youth compared to 61 per cent of male youth participate in the labour market. The unemployment rate among female youth is of concern: 49 per cent of young women compared to 13 per cent of young men are unemployed, according to data from 2007.

6. GIRLS' AND WOMEN'S HEALTH

Maternal health. Syria is categorized as “making progress” towards improving maternal health (MDG5), according to analyses of the reduction of the Maternal Mortality Ratio conducted by the Maternal Mortality Estimation Inter-agency Group (MMEIG). The 2008 MMEIG MMR estimate for Syria is 46 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births.²⁰ The overall antenatal care coverage (at least once) is 84 per cent, with marked differences between the poorest 20 per cent and the richest 20 per cent (68 and 94 per cent coverage, respectively). The coverage in skilled attendance at delivery, which is one of the most critical interventions for safe motherhood, is 93 per cent. Also for this indicator disparities by wealth quintiles exist: among the poorest 20 per cent the coverage is 78 per cent and among the richest 20 per cent the coverage is 99 per cent.

Early childbearing. No data exist on the percentage of young women aged 20–24 who gave birth before the age of 18 in the global databases. In Syria, the Adolescent Birth Rate is 75 births per 1,000 adolescent girls aged 15–19.

7. KEY INDICATORS ON THE SITUATION OF GIRLS AND WOMEN

MATERNAL AND NEWBORN HEALTH	YEAR	TOTAL	URBAN	RURAL	POOREST 20%	RICHEST 20%	SOURCE
Contraceptive prevalence (%)	2006	58	64	52	42	68	MICS3 2006
Antenatal care coverage at least once by skilled personnel (%)	2006	84	90	78	68	94	UNICEF global database/ MICS3 2006
Skilled attendant at birth (doctor, nurse or midwife) (%)	2006	93	98	88	78	99	UNICEF global database/ MICS3 2006
Adolescent birth rate (number of births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19)	2004	75					UNFPA, UNPD, MDG database http://unstats.un.org [accessed in May 2011]
Maternal Mortality Ratio (adjusted) (maternal deaths per 100,000 live births)	2008	46					WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank, Maternal Mortality Estimation Inter-agency Group (MMEIG) / UNICEF global database
Lifetime risk of maternal death, 1 in:	2008	610					

²⁰ WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA and The World Bank, 2010, Trends in Maternal Mortality: 1990–2008 (Countries with MMR ≥ 100 in 1990 are categorized as “on track” if there has been 5.5% decline or more annually, “making progress” if MMR has declined between 2% and 5.5%, making “insufficient progress” if MMR has declined less than 2% annually, and having “no progress” if there has been an annual increase in MMR. Countries with MMR < 100 in 1990 are not categorized)

EDUCATION	YEAR	MALE %	FEMALE %	GENDER PARITY INDEX (F/M)	SOURCE
Net enrolment ratio primary school (%)	2002	97	92	0.95	UIS, online database, http://stats.uis.unesco.org [accessed in August 2011],
Net enrolment ratio secondary school (%)	2009	70	69	0.99	UIS, online database, http://stats.uis.unesco.org [accessed in August 2011],
Youth (15-24) literacy rate (%)	2009	96	93		UIS, online database, http://stats.uis.unesco.org [accessed in September 2011], UIS estimates
	YEAR	TOTAL			SOURCE
Share of females among teaching staff (%) in primary education	2008	66			UNESCO, Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011, UIS estimate
Share of females among teaching staff (%) in secondary education	2008	60			UNESCO, Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011, UIS estimate

CHILD PROTECTION	YEAR	TOTAL	URBAN	RURAL	POOREST 20%	RICHEST 20%	SOURCE
% of women aged 20-24 who were married/ in union before the age of 18	2006	13	15	12	11	10	UNICEF global database/ MICS3 2006
Female genital mutilation/cutting among women 15-49 (%)		-	-	-	-	-	
	YEAR	TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE			SOURCE
% of children aged 5-14 engaged in child labour	2006	4	5	3			UNICEF global database/ MICS3 2006

ATTITUDES TOWARDS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE	YEAR	% WHO AGREE WITH AT LEAST ONE SPECIFIED REASON	SOURCE
Women (15-49) who think that a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife under certain circumstances (%)		-	
Adolescent girls (15-19) who think that a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife under certain circumstances (%)		-	

HIV/AIDS	YEAR	TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE		SOURCE
HIV prevalence among young people (15-24)		-	-	-		
% of young people (15-24) who have comprehensive knowledge of HIV	2006		-	7		UNICEF global database/ MICS3 2006

USE OF ICT	YEAR	TOTAL		SOURCE
% of young women (15-24) who used a computer during the last 12 months		-		
% of young women (15-24) who used the internet during the last 12 months		-		

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION	YEAR	TOTAL		SOURCE
Number of women in parliament (single/ lower house)	2011	31		IPU, http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm (data updated as of 31 March 2011) [accessed in May 2011]
% women in parliament	2011	12		
Legislated quotas for women for single/ lower house (yes/no)	*	No		Syria is not listed in The Quota Project database on www.quotaproject.org [accessed in August 2011*] which lists all countries with legislated quotas
Quota type		n/a		
Number of women in ministerial positions	2010	2		DAW/DESA, IPU, Women in Politics: 2010 (reflecting appointments up to 1 January 2010)
% women in ministerial positions	2010	6		

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION	YEAR	TOTAL		SOURCE
Labour force participation rate (%), male 15+	2009	80		ILO, Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KILM), 6th Edition http://kilim.ilo.org Table 1a (ILO estimates), [accessed in May 2011]
Labour force participation rate (%), female 15+	2009	21		
Labour force participation rate (%), male 15-24	2009	61		
Labour force participation rate (%), female 15-24	2009	20		
Total unemployment rate (%), male 15+	2007	5		ILO, KILM, 6th Edition, Table 8a, [accessed in May 2011]
Total unemployment rate (%), female 15+	2007	26		
Youth (15-24) unemployment rate (%), male	2007	13		ILO, KILM, 6th Edition, Table 9, [accessed in May 2011]
Youth (15-24) unemployment rate (%), female	2007	49		

MATERNITY LEAVE	YEAR		SOURCE
Maternity leave duration	2004-2009	50 days	United Nations Statistics Division, http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/indwm/tab5g.htm#tech , Table 5g, [accessed in May 2011]. Data compiled between 2004-2009.
% of wages paid in covered period	2004-2009	70	
Provider of benefit	2004-2009	Employer	

Notes:

The UNICEF global databases are available on www.childinfo.org

For indicator definitions and further information on data sources please see "Guide to MENA Gender Profiles"

n/a = not applicable

8. RATIFICATION OF TREATIES

TREATY	YEAR OF SIGNATURE	YEAR OF RATIFICATION, ACCESSION (A), SUCCESSION (S)	RESERVATIONS
Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1953)			
Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (1962)			
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)		1969 (a)	Article 26 (1)
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)		1969 (a)	
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)		2003 (a)	Articles 2, 9 (2), 15 (4), 16 (1) (c), (d), (f) and (g), 16 (2), 29 (1)
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1999)			
Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)	1990	1993	General reservation made to provisions that are not in conformity with Syrian and Islamic law. Reservations to: articles 14, 20, 21.
Amendment to article 43 (2) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1995)	n/a	2000 Acceptance	
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (2000)		2003 (a)	
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography (2000)		2003 (a)	Article 3 (1) (a) (ii) and 3 (5)
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)	2007	2009	

n/a = not applicable

Source: United Nations Treaty Collection, <http://treaties.un.org> [accessed in April 2011]

