

ARAB YOUTH: THE CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Ghada Barsoum ^a

^a Department of Public Policy and Administration, American University in Cairo, Cairo, Egypt.

^a Corresponding author: gbarsoum@aucegypt.edu

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Abstract: This paper argues for an urgent youth-focused policy agenda in the Arab world. The paper focuses on three areas of challenge facing Arab youth. These are the failure of education systems in the region, constrained employment opportunities and blocked channels for civic engagement. The paper shows that despite the diversity of lived experiences among Arab youth, there are notable similarities of the problems facing them along these three areas. Arab youth today are more educated than their parents and are more likely to attend universities and other tertiary education institutions. However, the education systems in the region. However, there are concerns about education quality as best captured by the results of Arab students in international aptitude tests. Education outcomes are highly gendered in Arab countries with the literacy rates among female youth continuing to lag behind those of male youth in most Arab countries. Despite increased access to education, the Arab region has one of the highest rates of youth unemployment in the world. With very few exceptions within the region, youth unemployment in Arab countries is much higher than the global youth unemployment rate. Young women are at a particular disadvantage with their unemployment far exceeding the unemployment rate among male youth in different countries. Female Arab youth are also more likely to be out of the labor force than male youth. Job quality issues are also

central employment challenges in the region. The economic difficulty facing young Arabs in their transition to adulthood are further exacerbated by the blocking of channels of civic engagement and their exclusion from the decision making process. While the social media has been celebrated as part of the Arab spring, access to this tool is limited to the urban and educated. The paper concludes with a discussion of a youth-focused policy agenda. The paper builds on country-level macro data drawn from different resources on the three areas in addition to qualitative data collected as part of a larger study on Arab youth.

Keywords: Arab Youth, Education, Employment, Civic Participation

1. INTRODUCTION

On December 17, 2010, a young street vendor in Tunisia called Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest of the precarious conditions of his poverty and police brutality. Narratives of what came to be described as the Arab Spring consider Bouaziz's act of frustration the spark that ignited demonstrations in Tunisia followed by Egypt, Libya, and other countries in the region. The Arab Spring is one of the most momentous changes in the Arab region's recent history. Bouaziz's narrative highlights economic difficulties, police brutality, oppression and blocked channels for civic engagement as central factors to the political

upheavals that continue to shape the face of the Arab world.

This paper seeks to tell the story of scarcity of opportunity facing Arab youth, despite pockets of wealth in the region. This is a story of failed education systems, constrained labor markets and blocked channels of civic engagement of youth. The elements of this story have not changed despite the celebration of the Arab spring and the role of youth in making such changes. The paper seeks to support the case for the urgency of bringing youth issues high on national agendas in Arab countries.

This paper eschews imposing a monolithic view of Arab youth, but highlights the similarities of the constrained opportunities they face. Arab youth are a very diverse group. They include some of the richest and poorest youth in the world. Stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the West to the Arabia Sea in the East, this vast territory of twenty two countries includes some of the wealthiest oil-rich countries in the world and some of poorest conflict-ridden resource-deprived countries. This wealth disparity is reflected in a disparity of the life opportunities of youth in the region. Despite the diversity, this paper shows that there are notable similarities in the three areas of education, employment and civic participation. Issues of education quality persist even in oil-rich countries; youth unemployment figures are consistently high as we look at cross-country data; and data on young people's channels of civic engagement speak of constrained opportunities across the region.

The choice of the three areas of focus is justifiable. Employment is a priority policy area identified by young people in every focus group discussion and interview undertaken with youth groups as part of this study. This should not be surprising in the region with one the highest rates of youth unemployment in the world.[1] Because education is closely related to employment, a discussion of education issues in the region is relevant. The main concerns about the education system in the Arab world now relate to education quality. International standardized aptitude tests such as the Third international math and science survey (TIMSS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that Arab students do not fare well in comparison to students around the world, with the highest achieved scores not exceeding the intermediate level. Skill mismatch issues continue to be highlighted by the business community, despite the large pool of unemployed youth. Finally, youth in the Arab region continue to face blocked channels of civic engagement. The amazing energy of Arab

youth in stirring the wave of democracy in the region challenges earlier research conclusions that young people in the Arab world are apathetic and politically disengaged.[2] The social media has been a celebrated tool that helped facilitate the mobilization of youth during the momentous days of the Arab Spring. This paper provides stylized data on the level of penetration and use of social media websites along with the views of young people who have been active in the recent events on the role of this mobilization tool. Despite the celebration of these tools, even activists downplay their role in the process. Access to social media remains a privilege to an educated urban sub-group of youth, with the masses of youth in rural areas unable to access such technology.

The paper concludes with a discussion of worst case scenarios for youth in the region, focusing on youth in conflict-ridden areas and concludes by highlighting the urgency of a policy focus on education, employment and civic participation issues building on international experience and reports from different sources.

The methodology of this paper is anchored on two main sources of data. First, macro country-level indicators have been compiled from different sources about the situation of Arab youth in relation to education, employment and civic participation. Stylized data on youth employment issues are compiled from the ILO statistical data center website (LABORSTA). Country-level data on education and gender is drawn from the Millennium Development Goals Indicators Database provided by United Nations Population Division, and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics Database. Data on education also includes the scores of participating Arab countries in two international aptitude tests: the Third international math and science survey (TIMSS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which are a major source for internationally comparable data on students' ability and education quality. The paper also utilizes data from the Survey of Young People in Egypt, which was undertaken in 2009.[3] This stock-taking exercise seeks to provide an overall picture of the situation of Arab youth with regards to the three dimensions of focus. Second, the analysis in the paper is supported by qualitative data collected in 2011 as part of a larger study on Arab youth. Focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in Egypt with Arab youth from a number of countries attending regional meetings organized in Cairo. Overall, thirty five participants from young people took part in this study. Most of these young people came from urban centers from Tunisia, Egypt, Iraq, and Sudan. All discussions were conducted in Arabic.

This study addresses youth related issues with focus on those aged 15-29. This extends beyond the regular UN definition that limits youth to age 24. The reason for extending the age bracket relates to the delayed transition to productive employment and marriage, particularly among urban males in the Arab region due to limited opportunities.[4] However, different data sources use different age brackets. These are identified in the analysis for the sake of clarity.

This paper has six sections. This first introductory part is followed by Section 2, which discusses the challenges and benefits of studying Arab youth as a group and relates the approach of the paper to sociological literature on youth. Section 3 focuses on the failings of the education systems in the Arab region, as a precursor to the discussion of Arab youth employment issues in Section 4. Section 5 discusses issues related to youth civic participation. Section 6 concludes the paper with an alarming note about the situation of Arab youth in conflict areas, making the case for the urgency of an Arab youth-focused strategy.

2. STUDYING ARAB YOUTH

Studying Arab youth is very similar to studying a “global generation” to borrow the term from Beck and Beck-Gensheim.[5] The life experience of Arab youth is rife with paradoxes. Arab youth include some of the most affluent youth in the world. Born in oil-rich countries, some Arab youth get access to education in well-equipped better-staffed schools, live in spacious luxury houses, buy luxury consumer brands, and are served and catered for by migrant workers. Arab youth also include some of the poorest youth in the world. These are born in conflict ridden countries or in countries with sparse resources and are faced by poor education quality and limited access, poor job prospects, economic uncertainties and limited life opportunities. The diversity among Arab youth reflects the income level diversity among countries in the region. The Arab region is a geopolitically and economically diverse region.

Despite the different income levels among countries, there are benefits in looking at Arab youth taking a cross-country approach. Aside from a cosmopolitan elite in some oil-rich countries and a thin crust in other middle- and low-income Arab countries, one striking observation relates to the similarities in issues facing Arab youth that is confirmed by both qualitative and quantitative data. Young Arabs across the region face employment challenges and continue to express concerns and their limited channels of civic and political engagement. The cross-country analysis allows for a clarification of similarities and

specificities. Youth in conflict areas in the Arab region, as will be discussed in this paper, provide a warning message to the importance of addressing the needs of young people in other countries before situations deteriorate to reach such point.

There are many reasons for the urgency of focusing on Arab youth, even prior to the Arab Spring. First, the Arab region is facing an unprecedented ‘youth bulge’, where those within this demographic group are larger in numbers than younger and older age groups. About two thirds of the Arab region’s population is below the age of 24 and that and about one in five people living in MENA region is between the ages of 15 and 24.[6] Arab youth accounted for nearly 95 million people in 2005. In Egypt, it is anticipated that the country will have 17.8 Million youth in 2050[6]. This youth bulge is highly related to the demographic transition in the region and to reduced fertility rates from the 1980s to date. Second, investment in young people in region is essential to turn this large demographic group into dividend instead of being a drain on growth. Third, years of youth determine the successful transition to adulthood. Investment in youth leads to positive impact on the individual’s economic and social integration and the society at large. Investment in youth is central to expanding lifetime opportunities. Finally, youth are a political power to be reckoned. The Arab Spring has been an eloquent reminder of this fact. Research has repeatedly connected youth integration with economic and social stability. Successful investment in youth could lead to a virtuous cycle of economic growth as best exemplified by countries in South East Asia. Limited resources and opportunities, political volatility and a youth bulge are considered as prerequisites for social and political unrest[6].

Writing on Arab youth at the wake of the Arab Spring is full of challenges, however. The first challenge relates to the timing of writing this paper, which witnesses a highly volatile political scene with some Arab Spring movements in gestation and others taking fledgling steps in the transition to democracy. The political stability of these countries is crucial for investment in youth. Youth in conflict areas suffer tremendous hardships and their learning, health and employment potentials are compromised. The second challenge relates to the uneven evidence base about youth in Arab countries. While a number of countries have had youth-specific surveys, such as Egypt, other countries have very little evidence base on youth. The third challenge relates to the fact that despite the similarity of issues facing Arab youth, they are a very

diverse group. The life opportunities of an Arab youth are determined by her/his gender, legal and nationality status, her/his ethno-religious background, or her/his residence in an urban or rural area. These specificities require that generalizations be made with caution acknowledging variations and similarities. Unfortunately, the cross-country analysis does not allow for a nuanced analysis looking at differentiated life opportunities along these factors. The only exception relates to gender disparity, where some available indicators are disaggregated by gender.

There is a central debate in youth sociology around the issue of individual agency and the determinism of social and economic structures[7]. The analysis in this paper shows that the life transitions that take place during youth are mediated by social structures and institutions related to gender, socio-cultural and economic characteristics. Living in conflict-affected zones, as repeatedly documented and as highlighted in this paper, negatively affects the life opportunities of young people. It is unfortunate that with the Arab spring, more conflict-affected zones are being created. The cross-country data on Arab youth show that in societies with constrained economies and hierarchical social structures, the space within which young people make choices is also constrained. This paper follows the theoretical approach in youth studies that individualization is constrained by forces that are fundamentally social, cultural and structural in nature[8]. This does not mean that the agency of Arab youth should be overlooked. The life opportunities of a young person are shaped by the interaction between what is personal, relating to her/his own choices and willingness and ability to fight adversaries and the structural socio-economic environment of this person in the form of family, community and society at large. Youth individualism is strongly emphasized by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck[9]. This paper does not seek to downplay youth individualism in the region, however it seeks to highlight the fact that Arab youth in middle- and low-income countries transition to adulthood in constrained economic environments that limit their choices and life opportunities.

3. EDUCATION SYSTEMS FAIL ARAB YOUTH

“We are all self-educated in a context of failing education systems”, notes a Tunisian young man in a meeting in Cairo (November 2011). His statement finds resonance to the different studies that look at education issues in Arab countries. For instance, a recent World Bank report notes: “The education systems of the region are not yet fully equipped to produce graduates with the skills and expertise necessary to compete in a world where knowledge is

essential to making progress”[17]. Even Arab policymakers came to highlight this issue. The Doha Declaration on Quality of Education in the Arab World (September 2010) highlighted the importance of education quality issues in the region and the importance of bringing such issues to public debate. The meeting also highlighted the fact that lack of appropriate skills is an obstacle to business growth in the region[18].

Concerns about education quality are best captured through the results of participating Arab countries in international aptitude tests implemented in a number of Arab countries: the Third international math and science survey (TIMSS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). TIMSS is a major source for internationally comparable data on the mathematics and science achievement of students in the fourth and eighth grades. PISA is also a primary source for internationally comparable data on the mathematics and science literacy of students in the upper grades at age 15, which is near the end of compulsory schooling in most countries.¹ The scores of participating Arab countries in both TIMSS and PISA tests do not show any country with students reaching the advanced international benchmarks. TIMSS results show that none of the country scores of reach the high benchmark of 550 points[19]². Variations exist between countries, with Yemen scoring the lowest among Arab countries and Jordan and Bahrain scoring the highest.

A fewer number of Arab countries administer the PISA test to its students. PISA tests are described by its developing agency, OECD, as “measuring what students know and can do”. Among Arab countries participating in PISA, the highest scores were reached in Dubai, at 459 points in the overall reading scale, 445 points on the mathematics scale and 454 points on the science scale[20]. To understand these scores, it is relevant to note that Shanghai-China had the highest score in overall reading scale (556 points), in mathematics (600 points) and in science (575 points). Tables 2 and 3 show the scores for both TIMSS and PISA.

¹ PISA is administered to students 15 years and 3 months to 16 years and 2 months at the beginning of the testing period and who were enrolled in school, between the grades of seven and twelve. The objective of PISA is described by its providers as measuring the “yield” of the education process and skills and competencies acquired and can apply to real-world contexts by those aged 15. The focus in PISA on yield and the application of competencies in real-world contexts distinguishes it from TIMSS, which aims at measuring school-based curricular attainment more closely

² TIMSS conducted a scale anchoring analysis to describe and interpret student achievement at the Advanced (625), High (550), Intermediate (475), and Low (400) International Benchmarks.

Table 1: TIMSS Average Mathematics and Science Scores of fourth- and eighth-grade students in Participating Arab Countries, 2007

Country	Mathematics Scores		Science Scores	
	Students in Grade Four	Students in Grade Eight	Students in Grade Four	Students in Grade Eight
Algeria	378	387	354	408
Bahrain		398		467
Egypt		391		408
Jordan		427		482
Kuwait	316	354	348	418
Lebanon		449		414
Morocco	341	-	297	
Oman		372		423
Palestinian		367		404
Qatar	296	307	294	319
Saudi Arabic		329		403
Syria		395		452
Tunisia	327	420	318	445
Yemen	224	-	197	

Table 2: PISA Scores for Participating Arab Countries

Country	On the overall the reading scale	On the mathematics scale	on the science scale
Tunisia	404	371	401
Dubai	459	445	454
Jordan	405	387	415
Qatar	372	368	379

Source: PISA Technical Report 2009

Table 3. Education Indicators in Arab Countries by Gender

	% Literate Ages 15-24,		Primary School Completion rate		% Enrolled in Secondary School	
	2005/2008		2005/2010		2005/2010	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Algeria	89	94	91	90	86	80
Egypt	82	88	93	97	77	82
Libya	100	100	—		101	86
Morocco	68	85	77	84	51	60
Sudan	82	89	47	53	36	40
Tunisia	96	98	93	93	96	
Iraq	80	85	54	73	44	59
Jordan	99	99	100	99	90	87
Kuwait	99	98	93	94	91	89
Lebanon	99	98	87	83	87	78
Oman	98	98	81	80	87	90
Palestinian	99	99	81	82	90	84
Qatar	99	99	106	109	106	72
Saudi Arabia	96	98	90	95	90	104
Syria	93	96	111	113	74	75
UAE	97	94	98	100	96	95
Yemen	70	95	49	72	30	61

Source: Population Reference Bureau[22]

Like youth in other parts of the world, however, Arab youth today are more educated than their parents and are more likely to attend universities and other tertiary education institutions. The Arab region has made significant documented strides in increasing access to education. Comparing enrolment data in the 1960s and 1970s to date shows impressive achievements. With very few exceptions, Arab countries were able to achieve almost universal enrolment in primary education and even completion of fifth grade as a percentage of the age cohort[17]. Some Arab countries are also close to achieving universal secondary enrolment. Secondary education enrolment is the current global challenge for policymakers for its positive impact on creating healthy societies and spurring economic growth[21].

Education outcomes are highly gendered in Arab countries. Literacy rates among female youth continue to lag behind those of male youth in most Arab countries. As Table 3 shows, the literacy rate among female youth in Egypt is 82% compared to 88% among male youth. A similar pattern holds for Algeria (89% versus 94%), Morocco (68% versus

85%) and Sudan (82% versus 89%). The countries that bridged the gender gap in terms of literacy rate include Libya, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, UAE, and Qatar. Following the global pattern, gender gaps in primary education have closed in most Arab countries, with primary education completion rates for both male and female young people are comparable. Significant differences, however, exist in low-income Arab countries like Yemen and Sudan as shown in Table 3. In Yemen, only 49% of females complete primary education compared to 72% of males. Iraq is another country with an existing gender gap in primary school completion rate, with 54% of females completing this stage compared to 72% of males. In secondary education, the gender gap has been reversed in some countries, with girls outnumbering boys in secondary schools. This is the case in Algeria, Libya, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Palestine, and Qatar as Table 2 shows. Middle-income countries like Egypt, Oman and Syria are nearing to closing the gender gap in secondary education enrolment, with the enrolment of male youth still higher than those of female youth. However, the gender gap exists in countries like

Yemen (with a gross enrolment rate of 30% among female youth compared to 61% among male youth). In Egypt, recent survey data show that school non-enrolment is primarily an issue of female youth, with 13% of female youth having never been to school, compared to 3% of male youth[3]. The common pattern is that out-of-school young people are primarily female, rural, and coming from low-income families.

Education failings are a precursor to the problems that face Arab youth as they transition to adulthood and seek employment. Education outcomes are also central for the active civic participation of young Arabs. Many Arab youth are deprived from entering to school, are forced to leave school before finishing secondary education either for financial reasons or due to service quality, or are cheated of the quality of education they receive. Illiteracy, low-skill levels, unemployment or low-income jobs are all interrelated issues that obstruct the economic integration of Arab youth. They also lead to the further exclusion of Arab youth leading to anger and protests.

4. ARAB YOUTH EMPLOYMENT ISSUES

Employment is the central and most important issue that young people in the Arab region raise as they discuss their concerns and hopes in different focus group discussions as part of this study. It is practically the case that any discussion with youth groups seems to start and end with a focus on employment issues. The Arab Region has one of the highest unemployment rates in the world[1]. While worldwide youth unemployment rate was estimated at 12.6% in 2011, the rate in North Africa and Middle East region hovered around 26%[1]. It is not surprising that in all discussion with youth, employment issues come to the fore as central to youth inclusion in the region. To many young people, finding a job remains a major challenge to their transition to financial independence and to their economic integration. Participants in focus group discussions repeatedly note notions that *“there are no jobs”* and that *“finding a job is a dream”* and that *“it is not like jobs are everywhere and youth are choosing”* (Cairo, 2011).

Young people's economic stability and successful integration in the labor market are closely tied to their life opportunities and other life transitions, particularly marriage. Singerman [10] notes that lack of economic stability for youth is the major reason for delaying age at marriage in the Arab world. Increasing urbanization and the erosion of the extended family living arrangement made marriage more expensive than it was for earlier generations.

Limited employment opportunities and lack of economic stability delay marriage, particularly in urban areas where the extended living arrangement is not a possibility. Assaad and Barsoum [4] highlight this multi-dimensional nature in discussing youth exclusion in Egypt.

With the exception of Qatar and UAE, country-level data disaggregated by gender show that in all Arab countries, the youth unemployment rate is higher than the worldwide youth unemployment rate as the following table shows. country-level data shows that youth unemployment rates are particularly high in the countries that witnessed the Arab Spring and those that lack political stability due to conflict[11]. In Tunisia, almost one third of Tunisian youth in the labor force were unemployed throughout the period between 2006 and 2010. The unemployment rate increased in Tunisia from 27.7% in 2006 to 29.4% in 2010. In Syria, youth unemployment rates hovered around 20% between 2006 and 2010. The West Bank and Gaza Strip region is known to have the highest unemployment rate in the world, reaching 40.2% in 2008. Iraq is the only other Arab country with similarly high unemployment rate that even exceeded the rate of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, reaching 43.5% in 2006[11]. However, youth unemployment is also high in some oil-rich countries in the region. Saudi Arabia, despite efforts for the Saudization of the labor market, had a youth unemployment rate that was as high as 29.9% in 2009[11]. In all Arab countries, youth constitute a significant proportion of the unemployed of all age groups. Youth constitute 80% of the unemployed in Egypt and 40% of the unemployed in Lebanon[12].

Young Women are at a disadvantage in Arab labor markets. The gender disparity in access to employment is highest in the Arab region[1]. Unemployment affects female youth at much higher rates than male youth. The region with one of highest unemployment rates in the world is by far the region with the highest unemployment rates among female youth. In Algeria, while the total youth unemployment rate was 21.5%, the female youth unemployment rate was 37.4%. This means that out of every three women in the labor market, one is searching for a job without success. In Egypt, female youth unemployment rate was more than double that of male youth (55.2% compared to 20.6%). In both Syria and Jordan, the unemployment rate among female youth reached 46.1% and 46.8% respectively in 2010. This means that almost one of two young women in the labor market in these two countries remains unemployed.

Table 4: Youth Unemployment Rate in Some Arab Countries by Gender

Youth Unemployment Rate (%)						
		2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Algeria	Total	24.3	27.4	23.8	21.3	21.5
	Male				19.0	18.6
	Female				34.6	37.4
Egypt	Total	29.9	24.8			
	Male	20.6	17.2			
	Female	55.2	47.9			
Iraq	Total	43.5				
	Male	42.9				
	Female	46.2				
Jordan	Total	28.7	29.3	27.4	27.0	28.1
	Male	25.3	23.9	22.7	22.7	23.9
	Female	45.4	47.7	48.9	45.7	46.8
Lebanon	Total		22.1			
	Male		22.3			
	Female		21.6			
Morocco	Total	16.6	17.2	18.3	17.9	17.6
	Male	17.5	17.9	19.1	18.5	18.1
	Female	14.1	15.5	16.1	16.2	16.1
Qatar	Total		1.7		1.2	
	Male		0.7		0.5	
	Female		8.0		7.0	
Saudi Arabia	Total	34.0	29.8	29.3	29.9	
	Male	29.7	25.5	24.1	23.5	
	Female	49.3	45.6	50.0	54.9	
Syria	Total	19.2	16.7	22.4	19.1	18.3
	Male	15.3	12.1	17.2	13.1	12.7
	Female	40.2	43.0	47.6	49.1	46.1
Tunisia	Total	27.7	27.9	28.4	30.9	29.4
	Male					
	Female					
UAE	Total			12.1		
	Male			7.8		
	Female			21.8		
West Bank and Gaza Strip	Total	35.7	35.1	40.2		
	Male	34.4	34.0	38.8		
	Female	43.2	41.5	47.3		

Source: Extracted from ILO/LABORSTA provided statistics accessed in December 2011. Data is compiled by the ILO from published national reports on youth unemployment in different Arab countries.

Table 5. Economic Activity Rate by Age in Some Arab Countries, different years

COUNTRY	Year	Age Group	Youth ACTIVITY RATE		
			Total	Male	Female
			%	%	%
Egypt	2007	[20-24]	49.8	66.2	29
Morocco	2008	[25-34]	62.4	95	32.3
Kuwait	2005	[20-24]	61	76.5	40.6
Lebanon	2007	[20-24]	45.2	59.4	29.8
Syria	2007	[20-24]	45.3	71.1	17.7
UAE	2008	[20-24]	67.9	83	48
West Bank and Gaza Strip	2008	[20-24]	44.2	67.5	19.7

Source: Extracted from ILO/LABORSTA provided statistics accessed in December 2011

Figures of unemployment, however, provide only one aspect of the employment situation of youth in the Arab World. Unemployment figures fail to capture two major issues that are central to understanding the economic opportunities for Arab youth. The first issue relates to economic inactivity or joblessness. By definition, unemployment figures include those who do not work but actively search for jobs. Those who are discouraged from searching for a job are not included in national unemployment statistics. For this reason, researchers are increasingly focusing on the joblessness rate as a more accurate measure of employment status in developing countries. The rate is defined as "population neither working nor in school"[13]. A relevant measure to joblessness is the statistics provided by the International Labor organization on employment-to-population ratios. The economic activity rate covers those who are employed, unemployed and self-employed. The following table shows the economic activity rate in a select number of Arab countries. The table shows that the total activity rate in Egypt for those aged 20-24 has been 49.8% in 2007. This means

that the remaining half of the population in this age group is economically inactive. These young people are not employed, self-employed nor searching for jobs. Economic inactivity is also high in Syria, with only 45.3% of those aged 20-24 being economically active. It is also high in the West Bank and Gaza strip, with an economic activity rate of only 44.2%.

Female youth have a much lower economic activity rate than male youth as shown in Table 1. In Egypt, female economic activity rate for those aged 20-24 was less than half that of male youth (29% compared to 66.2%). A similar pattern holds for Syria, with only 17.7% of female youth being economically active compared to 71.1% of male youth. This data shows that women's achievements in obtaining education, as will be noted in more details in the following section, have not been matched by economic opportunities. Young women are crowded out of the labor markets in Arab countries, despite their increasing access to education. Writing about Egypt, Barsoum[14] argues that job quality issues remain central to women's economic participation, particularly for educated women. With the stagnation

of government hiring due to structural adjustment policies, the only jobs available are those offered by small-scale private sector companies, which constitute the bulk of the private sector in most Arab countries. These jobs are low pay and do not provide social protection. For young women, a workspace that is not open to the public and that allows for privacy with a few number of male colleagues is culturally frowned upon and could have a negative impact on a woman's reputation. This raises the reservation wage for educated young women who prefer to "respect themselves and stay at home"[14].

The second issue missed in unemployment figures is the quality of the jobs of those who are employed or self-employed. Many young people are caught in low-pay low-productively jobs in the informal economy. The informal economy has been the sponge that absorbs surplus labor in low- and middle-income level countries. While low-pay less-secure jobs held by youth are increasing worldwide, the specificity of the situation of Arab youth is that the graduation from these jobs to formal better-paying jobs is not the commonly anticipated path. There is a dearth of cross-country data on this important aspect of youth employment in the Arab world. In Egypt, the informal sector provided more than 65% of jobs for youth in 2009[3]. Good jobs that offer financial stability, employment security and social protection are rare to find in the region. Favoritism and corruption limit access to such jobs to those from privileged backgrounds. Decent work deficit within the private sector explains data from Egypt, where the majority of youth (72%) noted that their preferred employer is the government or the public sector[3]. Job stability, social protection and access to social insurance, paid leaves and other job-quality issues are central to this choice, despite its limited income. Retrenchment of the government sector due to structural adjustment policies makes this an untenable choice for young Arabs in low- and middle-income Arab countries. This is particularly the case for female youth.

The issue of decent work deficit for youth should be raised and forcefully brought to the policy agenda in Arab countries. If work is the only asset of the poor, low-income jobs that do not provide social protection or income stability devalue this asset. It is important to remember that Bouazizi who sparked the Arab spring in Tunisia and the rest of the Arab world was a street vendor frustrated at the precarious conditions of working within the informal economy. According to a participant in a youth meeting in Cairo: *The deterioration of living conditions is one of the main reasons for Arab revolutions. These were the starting*

spark and the common denominator for all revolutions where youth called for social justice and the improvement of living conditions plus other demands of freedom and democracy (Young Arab participant, Cairo, November 2011)

The above comment closely links the anger that perpetuated the Arab spring with low income and job quality issues that have a direct impact on the living conditions of the working poor. A discussion of channels of grievances and the engagement of youth in the decision making process in the region further shows the necessity for a policy change in the region.

5. CIVIC PARTICIPATION ISSUES FOR ARAB YOUTH

"Democracy has to do with the youth proving themselves; a young person cannot express himself or herself without a democratic environment" (focus group discussion, Cairo, 2011)

The pivotal role of youth in the momentous events of 2011 urged a question posed recently in the World Bank's Arab Youth and Views Conference: how to use this youthful power to seek reform in Arab countries through the active citizenship of youth[23]. Creating channels for the active citizenship of young people remains one of the most crucial issues for youth in the Arab region. Anger about economic exclusion is compounded with the blocking of channels for grievance, participatory policy making, transparency and accountability. Ageism stands in the way of opening venues for young people to participate in decision making[24]. Similarly, hierarchal social structures that favor those with resources to the poor allow little space for the latter to be choosers or to express views that are different from the hegemonic mainstream.

The civic participation of Arab youth is a nascent fast-growing area of research. Documentations of the Arab Spring continue to be the backbone of this new area of literature, with journalistic coverage providing most of its evidence base. Prior to the Arab Spring, it was repeatedly noted that young people in the region are generally disengaged politically due to exclusionary channels of participation[25]. In Egypt, survey data collected in 2009 showed that only 16% of eligible Egyptian youth voted in prior elections and that only 3% of all youth noted that they participated in voluntary activities[26].

Researchers are now more attuned to the brewing mobilization factors that prepared for the Arab Spring. Writing about Egypt, Ibrahim and Hunt-Hendrix[27] note that youth-led charity organization that started to evolve in the decade prior to the revolution in Egypt created a social space that prepared young participants for mobilization during

and before the revolution. It is important to note that these youth organizations operate within a stifling legal environment that strictly constrain interventions to issues related to poverty, slum area development, education and raising awareness. Politics, however, continued to attract a select elite. These are primarily urban initiatives. Interviewing one of the young activists in Egypt's April 6 Movement, a political group that has large youth representation, El-Taraboulsi highlights the motivations for this group. The following quote, taken from her study, shows the distance of this actor to the "backward and ignorant":

[...] the different forms of corruption that exist in Egypt; there are so many forms of corruption that I can't even categorize them. There's cultural political corruption that has rendered the Egyptian people backward and ignorant and defeatist[24].

The distance that the above quote reflects between those who politically active and the "backward, ignorant and defeatist" masses confirms findings of research on Arab youth civic engagement prior to the Arab Spring. Despite the euphoria associated with the celebration of the role of young people in the Arab Spring, recently collected data continue to support the pattern that the majority of young people are still searching for channels for civic engagement as the quote shown early in this section shows.

A new development in the domain of the civic engagement of Arab youth that seems to challenge this situation is the use of social media. For some young Arabs, social media provided the tool to foster civic participation before, during and after the Arab spring. It primarily removed barriers to communication and collective action as Hammelman and Messard [28] argue. Cheap, immediate, easy to access for a digital generation and relatively anonymous, social media proved to be a tool for mobilization and whistle-blowing that is difficult to obstruct or control. In Egypt, the Facebook group "We are all Khaled Said" formed a symbolic public space with on-line participation eventually leading to off-line street-level demonstration that shaped the political landscape of the nation[28]. Blogs, in particular, opened venues for young people to express views. Many young journalists, frustrated about the over-censorship of state-dominated media channels and its exclusionary framework, found in blogging a public space to express their views. State-censored issues are freely discussed such as violations of human rights, police brutality and even sexuality issues. According to one informant, quoted in a recent study on the Arab Spring in Egypt:

Blogging created a new opposition, a new literary movement that started discussing the problems that

Egyptians face on a daily basis, problems that were silenced. It created a virtual reality, new virtual streets to demonstrate upon.[...] This is what became called new writing. Language there doesn't matter, all that matters is the act of expression itself[24].

"Thank you Facebook" was a sign that was shown in Tahrir Square during the eighteen-day demonstrations prior to the ousting of President Mubarak. The sign was shown by different news channels and was highlighted by the company in different venues. The Arab Social Media Report [29] provides some of the most recent data on penetration and uptake of social media in the Arab world. The report shows that there are about 36 million Facebook users in the Arab world (as of November, 2011), noting that the number of users of this social media website increased by 68% between January and November 2011. Oil-rich UAE remains the Arab country with the highest level of Facebook population penetration (at 30% penetration), followed by Lebanon (30%), Jordan (29%), Kuwait (24%), and Tunisia (26%). Egypt's users constituted about a quarter of total Facebook users in the Arab region but the penetration level in Egypt does not reach 15%, which supports the evidence that Facebook use has not been completely democratized in the country. However, Egypt has had over 4 million new Facebook users between January and October 2011.

Similar to employment and education, use of social media is gendered in the Arab region. The Arab Social Media report shows that the percentage of female users in the Arab region has been 33.5%, which is significantly lower than the global trend, where women constitute roughly half of Facebook users. More female users use English than male users. This reflects the class structure of female internet users, since access to foreign languages in the Arab world is tied to private schooling and hence reflects a higher socio-economic background.

However, most young people who have been active in the January 25th revolution in Egypt warn against over-emphasizing the role of social media. Both activists and researchers insist that social media has been a logistical tool that facilitated communication. According to a participant in a youth panel discussion organized in Cairo: "*We are both flesh and blood and virtual at the same time*" (November, 2011). This is particularly the case because social media has been heavily monitored by governments in the Arab world. Human rights organizations document numerous cases of blocking, control and detention of bloggers for expressing views deemed controversial by the monitoring authorities [33].

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS: ARAB YOUTH IN CONFLICT AREAS AND THE URGENCY OF YOUTH-FOCUSED STRATEGIES

Conflict is highly connected to youth unemployment, economic exclusion and blocked channels of civic participation for you. The *shabab* (meaning youth in Arabic) armed group in Somalia is an alarming example of young people lured to join armed groups for monetary reward, due to lack of other opportunities. In this situation, unemployment perpetuates armed conflict which in turn limits the economic opportunities in the country.

Armed conflicts have a lasting negative impact on youth. Conflicts deeply hamper the life opportunities of young people, with a negative impact on their health and psychological wellbeing, education, employment and livelihood opportunities, family formation and civic engagement. A recent UNESCO[21] reports highlights the negative effects of exposure to conflict on educational attainment and literacy. Analysis in the report shows that conflict often leaves an unfortunate legacy for the affected generations: smaller shares of the population with formal schooling, fewer average years of education, and decreased literacy rates, which persist over time. The data provided in the above sections show that young people in countries undergoing armed conflicts have the lowest indicators in the region. Youth in Iraq, Somalia and Sudan have lowest education achievement rates in the region, highest unemployment and lowest health indicators. It is now common knowledge that young people are the first victims of armed conflicts, often described as a "lost generation".

The situation of youth in Somalia and Sudan are needed reminders that issues related to youth cannot wait or be postponed. A youth-focused strategy, mostly lacking in Arab countries, should be central to the policy discourse.

This paper seeks to support the case for the urgency of bringing youth issues high on national agendas in Arab countries. Earlier reports on youth in the region made the case to for the intervention of governments to mainstream a youth-centered, inclusive approach and view exiting policies and programs through a youth "lens", noting that the cost of inaction towards youth issues can be very dear. The situation of young people in Somalia should be a reminder that as much as youth can be a dividend for growth, they can fall pawns in destructive armed conflicts. Consciously coordinated policies and strategies that more effectively manage investments in youth are essential for a youth-focused strategy. Because youth exclusion is multi-dimensional, interventions

targeting youth should take a multi-sectoral holistic approach[6]. This requires governments and international donor organizations to work beyond silos and to seek cross-cutting coordinated policies, with ministries of youth operating in active partnerships with ministries of education and labor.

Successful experience worldwide shows that programs for youth should have youth as partners rather than beneficiaries. Youth need to be identified as key stakeholders in decisions pertaining to them and their communities[30]. This enforces the agency of youth as opposed to being passive beneficiaries of programs and policies. In youth meetings, the notion of "*youth as a subject and not as an object*" was noted by a participant from Tunisia (Cairo, November, 2011).

Arab youth employment is perhaps the most important measure of their social and economic inclusion as it carries the weight of the failure of education systems and deeply impacts their other life transitions. There is an urgent need for pro-youth employment creation policies and strategies and for reforms to support decent job creation. Job creation, more accurately, the creation of decent jobs, remains the ultimate policy challenge for youth in the Arab region. This reflects in the need for pro-youth employment creation policies and strategies; and for reforms to support decent job creation. Different reports[see for example 6, 13, 30] show that this requires long-term concerted actions seeking growth and job generation with two vectors. The first relates to reforms of education to build the skills needed to compete in a global knowledge economy; and the second relates to improving the business climate for job creation. The latter requirement seeks to enable the private sector to provide more and better jobs through. Active labor market policies for youth inclusive employment are also central. These include labor market training for skills in demand; employment services; employment intensive public works and community services; employment subsidies; and entrepreneurship promotion. A youth-focused employment policy needs to address particularly excluded groups such as those in rural areas, young people with disabilities, the poor, ethnic and religious minorities, the uneducated, and those in conflict zones.

The Arab spring brought to the fore the power of young people's active civic engagement. Despite the celebration of the role of Arab youth in countries undergoing democratic transitions, young people continue to describe blocked channels against their participation. There are two sides to effective youth participation in the Arab region. The first relates to

fostering a culture of civic participation among Arab youth. Samia[31] argues that young people's active civic engagement requires concerted efforts on the part of educators. These efforts relate to instilling the values of being an "engaged individual". She highlights the role of educators in instilling "accepting and valuing diversity, building cross-cultural bridges, participating actively in public life and community service, developing empathy, social responsibility and philanthropy, promoting social justice"[31]. This also requires support from other institutions such as the media.

The other side to youth civic engagement relates to channels for their participation in policy making. Young people's participation in policy decisions and implementation is the necessary platform for their civic engagement in both state-sponsored and civil society channels. Broadening these opportunities has a direct impact on stability and also in developing the skills of these young people[13]. Social media will continue to be a tool for good governance, citizen feedback, and accountability. As noted earlier, the social media can be a tool for facilitating the "client power" of young people by allowing them the channels to voice concerns and raise issues of relevance to their lives. Making these tools available is not costly, however, it is important for governments to have the will to engage young people in the decision making process.

There are also many untapped potentials of social media other than their important role in citizen feedback and extend to areas of employment, health and skill building. These include job creation through job search tools and labor market information dissemination and a myriad of awareness activities related to young people's skill building, health and awareness.

The exclusionary measures of young male and female Arabs are gendered in nature. While female youth are increasingly getting access to education, their labor force participation rates are very low throughout the region. Even in countries with higher labor market participation rates in the Arab region, women are disproportionately represented among the unemployed and the underemployed. The World Development Report[32] highlights the a number of policies to address gender discrimination in the labor market including women-targeted active labor market policies, affirmative action programs to ensure that a women's threshold is reached in the workforce, support to the creation of women' networks, and removing discriminatory treatment in labor laws and regulations. Releasing women's time to allow for their economic participation has also been

highlighted as an important measure. This can be achieved by making child care accessible and by encouraging parental leave policies. Also, time can be released by improving infrastructure services such as electricity and water. In places without access to such services, women and girls are responsible for these tasks. This limits their education and employment potentials.

A youth-focused strategy is more urgent than timely in the Arab world. There are no single solutions for issues related to young people in the Arab region, or quick fixes. However, placing young people's issues of employment and civic engagement should remain top on the Arab policy agendas.

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