Overview

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is currently undergoing profound changes and the World Bank is striving to ensure that women in the region are able to play a greater part in the social and economic spheres in their countries. By building capacity for research and analysis on gender issues, the Bank is helping governments better integrate the gender issues in policy formulation.

Challenge

In 2003, the World Bank report “Gender and Development in the MENA Region – Women in the Public Sphere,” revealed a paradox: While women had made significant progress on education indicators, and in eleven out of 18 countries women outnumbered men in universities, education had not led to the expected result of greater economic and social empowerment of women.

This report also pointed to a dearth of quality economic research on gender related issues. Filling this gap was important to inform economic policymakers how to integrate gender dimensions sufficiently into the economic planning and budgeting process. Furthermore, there were few gender advocacy groups that could advise policy makers and promote and disseminate ideas that would be helpful to women in the economic realm. Existing gender agencies (such as ministries or councils) were weak and had to spread thin across diverse public and private institutions.

Approach

These findings became the basis for the World Bank initiative “Sustainable Advancement of Gender Equality and Empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa (SAGE),” that aimed to broaden expertise and to encourage capacity building in the region. To carry out the initiative, the World Bank drew on the expertise of an important regional non-governmental organization (NGO), The Center for Arab Women Training and Research, which was founded by the Arab Gulf Fund (AGFUND, supported by Prince Talal bin Abdul Aziz) and the Government of Tunisia. This NGO is the
most recognized regional voice among civil society for gender issues in the Arab world. Its legal status, mandate, and region-wide outreach make it well-placed to work across all stakeholders, themes, and organizations.

Results

SAGE built up considerable sustainable capacity within the MENA region to produce high quality gender analysis and research that helped better incorporate the gender dimension in policy formulation and implementation—such as obtaining citizenship and legal rights. This will be particularly helpful at a time when the MENA region is undergoing historic and profound changes. SAGE has delivered the following results:

- Established a network of some 450 gender experts in 22 Arab countries across all disciplines including lawyers, sociologist, statisticians, parliamentarians, journalists, academicians, and entrepreneurs.
- Produced some joint regional reports on priority themes as set by network members.
- Established the parallel Persian Gender Network, which has around 160 members across disciplines.
- Promoted professional expertise in gender economic research and policy analysis, which has increased the number of cutting edge economic researchers from a handful prior to SAGE to about ninety by 2010.
- Granted funding totaling US$1.4 million for 52 proposals involving 108 researchers through research competitions, capacity building, mentoring of researchers by leading economists (including a Nobel Laureate), and refereed quality assurance.

Bank contribution

The World Bank conceived of the idea of establishing the various gender networks in order to capitalize on and leverage the thinly-spread expertise across countries on a topic of high cultural sensitivity. The Bank also provided the “seed money” to develop the knowledge products and fund knowledge sharing and capacity building activities. Additionally, the Bank used its convening power to invite high profile advisory and steering committees that gave the initiative immediate credibility and visibility, and used its partnership with various leading universities (e.g. Harvard and University of Chicago) to help researchers access cutting-edge resources. The Bank mobilized about US$500,000 million a year during 2002-2011 for this effort.

Partners

The Bank’s networking and research have attracted different sets of partners. The Arab Gender Network included partners such as Ford Foundation, UNIFEM, UNFPA, IPPF, Arab League, and bilateral, such as GTZ, IDRC, Spanish Cooperation, CIDA, etc. Their financial contributions have broadened and deepened the activities of the network. The Persian Gender Network also partnered with the Iranian International Economic Association. This intellectual partnership facilitated the promotion of gender themes at Association conferences. For gender economic research and policy analysis, the Bank partnered with Harvard University and the University of Chicago in providing expertise and mentoring to the researchers.

Toward the Future

An endowment is being established to carry forward the work of the Center for Arab Women Training and Research and make it sustainable. The Persian Gender Network will be
established as a standalone non-profit in the US and in Europe in order to tap into available funding. Several think tanks and foundations have also expressed an interest to use and fund the gender economic research and policy analysis infrastructure of researchers to highlight gender into their own studies and research.

**Beneficiaries**

There are three levels of beneficiaries. First, the men and women of the region are the ultimate beneficiaries, because the outcome of the research can lead to better-informed policies that will improve access to opportunities for all. Secondly, gender experts, researchers, and advocates who have developed a close knit community of practice and are able to work across disciplinary and geographical boundaries on issues related to women’s empowerment and equality. The third group of beneficiaries comprises policymakers who can rely on higher quality and more evidence-based research and findings on which policy options are base.