Gender and Transport in MENA Case Studies from West Bank Gaza and Yemen

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Introduction: Mobility is a major factor in access to economic resources, education, health and other key elements influencing women’s empowerment. In Middle East and North African countries, like in many other developing economies, women’s mobility is constrained not only by limited transport supply, but also by social factors reducing women’s access to the outside world as well as political realities.

The following brief is a summary of three studies that were implemented on Gender and Transport in the region, two in Yemen and one in West Bank Gaza. The goal was to better understand how transport infrastructure and services are facilitating or constraining women’s access to resources, markets, training, information, and employment. A key objective was also to identify priority areas for public intervention to improve women’s mobility and enhance their access to economic empowerment.

Methodology: All three studies were implemented from September 2008 to September 2009. All used a similar methodology. First, areas that best represented the population under study and the challenges faced were selected. In West Bank Gaza (WBG) multiple locations in the northern regions were selected to represent different types of human settlements (urban, rural, and refugee camps), and the challenges faced in WBG (location vis-à-vis the wall and checkpoints, diversity in population density, and access to public transportation). In urban Yemen, nine neighborhoods out of the 90 in Sana’a were selected to represent different types of urbanization in Sana’a (historical areas, planned city center and informal peripheral neighborhoods), and the different levels of access to resources (employment, markets, basic infrastructure, and services). In Rural Yemen, the selection took into account the regional diversity in terms of social norms, economic resources and topography as well as the provision of roads. Second, in each area, a number of randomly selected men and women were interviewed based on an established questionnaire. Interviewees were also asked to fill in a transport log, describing their transport activities for a certain number of days and for different types of activities. Focus groups were also held with men, women and transport providers. Finally, the data collected was analyzed in a comprehensive way, correlating quantitative indicators with testimonies given during the focus group discussions.

Conceptual Framework: Researchers who focus on the interaction between gender and transport conclude that in most countries without a special attention to the gender issue, transportation systems will not adequately serve women’s needs. The rational is that the gender distribution of roles in the family and

1 Middle East and North Africa Region, Sustainable Development Department, the World Bank.
2 The studies refer to i) Enhancing Women’s Mobility in the West Bank and Northern West Bank as a Case Study by Shuua Marar; ii) Gender and Transport in Urban Yemen – The Sana’a Example by Mohamed Noaman Sallam, Yemeni Center for Social Studies and Labor Research; iii) Gender and Transport in Rural Yemen by Khall Mansour Al-Shargabi, Yemeni Center for Social Studies and Labor Research.
3 Ventor, c.; Mashiri, M.; Denise, B.; Levy, C.; Overton, K.; Chant, S.; Gomez, L.
poverty are two factors that influence mobility needs and access to resources, but are unforeseen by planners.

In regards to the gender distribution of roles in the family, of note is the fact that women play multiple roles: they work outside their homes, but also need to fulfill family needs, and access education and health services for themselves and their children. Women’s multiple roles mean that they need to reach different places at different times. Lack of understanding of these roles leads to the design of transport services that focus on the journey to work. As a result public transport routes should give priority to linking residential and main employment areas. Transportation schedules are arranged according to the beginning and end of the working day. However, women need transport services at different times and different locations than those emphasized by planners because of the variety of roles they play.

**Income and Transport and Gender:** In most societies, women generally have less control over resources, and thus have less access to and ownership of private transport means. This leads women to use public transportation with all its challenges of cost, timing, and routing. Moreover, poor families usually live at the outskirts of towns, far from public transportation lines. In these families, women control even less resources, and mostly work in the informal sector. These women are unable to easily access transportation. As a result, they are forced to look for jobs and other opportunities in a restricted geographical area close to their homes, decreasing their chances to enhance their living conditions.

**General Findings From the Studies:** It is clear that when transportation systems are not well designed to serve public needs, they tend to hinder, rather than facilitate, the country’s economic and social development.

Although WBG has the highest female literacy rate in the region (over 90%) and Yemen has the lowest (less than 30%); female participation in the work force is the lowest in WBG (ranked 19 out of 19). Yemen is closer to the regional average ranking 10th out of 19. These rates can be explained by the prevailing political situation as well as prevailing social constraints on women and their activities. However, the three studies show similarities and highlight the positive impact of the provision of pedestrian facilities, transport infrastructure and transport services on women’s access.

**The Special Case of Rural Yemen:** Social constraints imposed on women’s mobility in rural Yemen are so high that the impact of provision of transport infrastructure and services is limited, and mostly indirect. In rural Yemen, women’s mobility is mostly restricted to areas they can reach walking. The use of motorized transport is restricted to accessing healthcare. And even then, women have to ride a covered car while accompanied by a male family member. Women are allowed to ride pick-up trucks, by far the most common means of motorized transport, only if they can be seated next to a male family member and in the covered part of the truck. Women’s use of intermediary means of transport is also greatly restricted by social norms: bikes and motorbikes are not allowed; donkeys can be used to transport loads but not for ride.

Further compounding the use of transportation for women is the fact that transport costs are significantly higher for women because they need special seating conditions, or they have to travel with a male family member. The combination of these two factors makes transport costs very high and sometimes unaffordable for women: 70% of interviewed women find transport costs too high; and 65% of them are not willing to pay for these costs.

**Impact of rural roads on women’s access:** In rural Yemen, a rural road is a critical asset: men can travel further distances, they access better employment opportunities and better pay, and goods reach the village at a lower cost. The data collected showed two tendencies in villages that have had a road for a long period: household income is higher than in other villages; and households tend to buy basic goods, such as water or firewood that otherwise women have to gather. This lowers women’s burden and frees their time. Some women use this time to engage in literacy classes or in productive activities.
With roads also come schools, basic health care centers; maybe even water and wastewater networks. The study finds that villages with roads have a higher female literacy rate and higher access to mother and child care. Given the positive impact that rural roads have, it is thus important to sustain efforts in providing Yemeni villages with roads.

**Figure 2- Provision of Roads and Access to Education**

![Figure 2](image1)

**Figure 3 – Women’s Access to Mother and Child Care**

![Figure 3](image2)

*Social Norms and Women’s Access Issues: The study also showed that social norms are a huge constraint to women’s access in rural Yemen. It is thus vital to actively seek a shift in this area. Schools, media and mosques can be used to send a message about women’s mobility needs and its positive impact on the family. The campaign can also present transportation systems that are compatible with the local culture and give women better mobility. In Sana’a for example, women tend to group their trips: they rent a car together and use it for their travel. This gives women the opportunity to move securely, without the presence of a male family member. This would also apply to rural areas in Yemen.*

The study also noticed that donkeys are important to women: they help them carry out household chores with less pain and more efficiency. Small entrepreneurs could be encouraged to propose donkeys for rent in rural areas.

**Urban Areas in WBG and Yemen:** The combination of social constraints and low economic resources result in a low female access to private and intermediary means of transport. Thus, women rely mainly on walking and public transport to get from one point to the other. In West Bank Gaza, public transport is by far the most important means, and covers more than 70% of women’s transport needs versus 20% for walking. In Urban Yemen, walking is more important and covers 55% of women’s trips, while public transportation covers 25% of women’s movements. The remaining trips are mainly covered by private cars and marginally by alternative transport means.

**Availability of Public Transport:** The availability of public transport, its affordability and adequacy of schedule are major factors enhancing women’s mobility and access to resources. When public transport means are available and affordable, when women feel safe and secure walking to their destination or waiting for public transport, when they can plan their transport activities with respect to their household chores, women will move to access higher education levels, jobs, and markets. They can then also get involved in productive activities, buying raw materials to transform into knitted wear or embroidered goods and selling them.

In Urban Yemen, the study led to a direct correlation between provision of transport infrastructure and services and women’s economic empowerment. In West Bank, the interaction between political constraints (separation wall and checkpoints), social constraints, and limited provision of public transport led educated, ambitious women to give up on their aspirations to access jobs.
Scheduling and transport access issues: Although their transport needs occur at different times than men’s, women have to arrange their schedule to access public transportation when these are available: early in the morning or at noon time. Second, the lack of fare integration leads to higher transport costs for women and people who live at the outskirts of towns, in refugee camps in Palestine or in the peripheral neighborhoods of Sana’a. Indeed, they are forced to take two, or three different transport means to go to their destinations. On average, women pay 15 to 20% more than men for public transportation.

Third, security is a major constraint for women in West Bank as well as in Urban Yemen. Walking or using public transport might be hazardous: thefts and verbal or physical harassments are not uncommon, and women are an easier target for all three. Women do not wait for the most adequate public transport means: they would rather take the one that comes first, because they might be verbally or physically harassed while waiting in the streets. When public transportation has a random schedule, women would rather not use these, thereby giving up on work or involvement in productive activities. Street lighting protects women from aggressions or thefts. When it is unavailable, as in the peripheral neighborhoods of Sana’a, women feel unsafe walking the slightest distance. Safety is also a concern for women in Yemen, especially those who travel with their children. In the study areas, safety is jeopardized by the lack of pedestrian facilities: sidewalks and pedestrian crossings are rare, and seldom respected. In Urban Yemen, safety is also a concern for public transport riders, as drivers rarely respect safety regulations, drive aggressively, and neglect to maintain the buses or even to close bus doors when moving at high speeds.

Steps to Enhance Women’s Access to transport Services:

Improving public transport: Predictable schedules will reduce waiting time - women will not have to wait for unpredictable periods in the streets; (ii) Integrated fares will allow riders to pay one fare if they are moving in a limited area but with different transport means. For women, who tend to take different transport means to reach their destination; this will reduce their transport costs; (iii) Appropriate Bus stops on bus routes should provide protection, from the weather, but also from misconceptions than can be formed when a woman is seen waiting in a random area on the bus route; (iv) Better managed public transportation terminals, including clean bathrooms would enhance women’s travel experience. This is especially true because women tend to travel with children; and (v) Designing bus routes closer to peripheral neighborhoods and enforcing these routes will give men and women who live there better access to public transportation and resources available in the city centers, enhancing this population’s chances to move upward in the society.

Better provision of pedestrian infrastructure: (i) Street lighting will improve safety at all times, allowing women to return home after sunset, or be able to go out in case of emergency; and (ii) Good sidewalks and pedestrian crossings should reduce traffic accidents to which women are subject to in crowded cities like Sana’a.

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