

School is Not Just for Boys: A Look at Girls' Education in Egypt and Yemen

Isabella Grande

Abstract

This article looks at gender parity in the education systems of Egypt and Yemen. Although Egypt has seen an increase in the percentage of girls attending school, there are still a variety of constraints (including geography, culture and poverty) that prevent complete gender equality in schooling. Yemen is considered to have one of the widest gender gaps in the world, and although there have been sustained efforts to increase the percentage of girls in school, the same barriers that hold back Egypt have been difficult to overcome in Yemen. This article looks at how Egypt has gradually overcome most of the gender gap in schools and how Yemen attempted to combat the issue by examining specific barriers to educating girls.

I. Introduction

This article explores the nuances of female education in the Republic of Egypt and the Republic of Yemen. Over the past few decades, Egypt has adopted a variety of initiatives to promote girls' education, which drastically increased the percentage of girls being educated. Yemen has also implemented initiatives and programs for girls' education, but gender parity lags far behind Egypt and other countries.

This article is structured into five sections. Following this introduction, Section II provides a brief literature review, which is followed by some political and socio-economic background (Sections III). The discussion (Section IV) provides first some information on the degree and evolution of gender gap in literacy rates and school enrollments. It then reviews three specific hindrances to girls' education: geographical constraints, cultural constraints, and poverty constraints. Both countries have tackled the gender gap in education in unique ways. Finally, the reasons for why girls' education is important are explained, and this commentary offers reasons to why this topic of conversation is imperative.

II. Brief Literature Review

There is a huge amount of literature on issues related to girls' education in Egypt and Yemen, especially in more recent years. However, girls' education was already discussed in the literature some decades ago. Two of the relatively early contributions are Sultana (2008) for Egypt and Al-Mekhlafy (2008) for Yemen. Two of the more recent contributions are Megahed (2017) and Yuki (2013), respectively covering Egypt and Yemen. The following are short summaries of these

publications.

- A United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) report written by Sultana (2008) details the standing of Egypt in regard to girls’ education. It describes the benefits the country has seen with regards to programs promoting gender equity, as well as the problems Egypt is still facing on this issue. The benefits to educating girls include less maternal deaths and—as is illustrated by a story about a young village girl—the empowerment of females. There are still concerns that impede the maximum success of the country’s programs. These include local beliefs and practices that a girl’s education will make her less desirable to potential grooms and that only boys should be educated because they alone can lift families out of poverty.
- Al-Mekhlafy (2008) gives an overview, starting in the 1960s, of the development and attitudes toward girls’ education in Yemen. The author begins by explaining that due to how rural Yemen is, using education as a form of development has always been difficult. In the 1980s, the country decided to fix the wide gap between student attendance in urban schools versus rural by employing an involved, integrated, multidimensional, and persistent approach. This plan worked for the most part, and they had narrowed the gap by 5.5 percent in 2007. Because it was still difficult to get attendance in rural areas, they started access programs that involved school construction, financial incentives, school supply kits, and more female teachers to provide role models. Despite its success, these programs are not sustainable. The author predicts that Yemen will need international support to overcome the education crisis entirely.
- Megahed (2017) describes the programs employed throughout Egypt, and the diversity of each educational opportunity. She mentions the country’s implementation of UNICEF’s ‘Girl Friendly Schools’ as well as their community school initiative. Both are targeted at school age girls, but the community initiative is specifically aimed at disadvantaged, rural females. The author also looks at Egypt’s response to the low literacy levels. She discusses their project called “Successful Transition to Work” which empowers rural women by teaching them how to run a business.
- Yuki (2013) includes a descriptive analysis of Yemen’s BRIDGE model. Yuki offers reasoning as to why it is successful in some areas and not in others. The BRIDGE program is essentially an effort to empower female students in pilot schools across Yemen. Phase 1 of the plan utilized a new school management model, and this lasted 3.5 years. Phase 2 was to support 70 schools in the Midwest of Yemen and 117 schools in the Southwest of Yemen through school improvement plans, but this phase was suspended due to security threats. Yemen has still not been able to reach phase 3, but it would be to facilitate and monitor initiatives and continue to review and improve. This model relies heavily on community engagement.

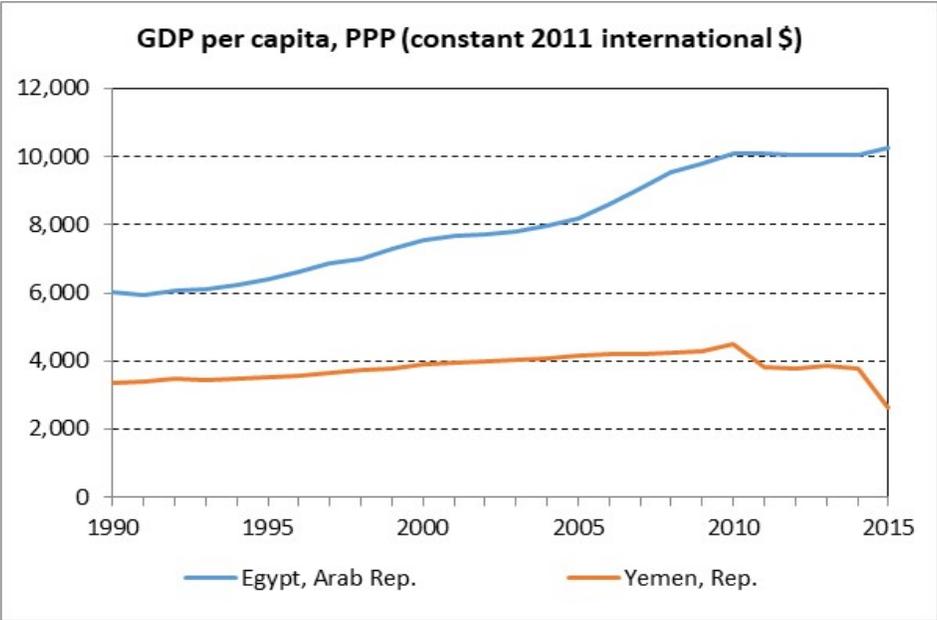
III. Political and Socio-Economic Background

The Arab Republic of Egypt is currently a lower-middle income country. With a population of 97 million, it is the most populous Arab country, of which about 90 percent identify with the Muslim religion. After the Tunisian revolution in 2010, Egypt’s opposition groups ousted then President Hosni Mubarak, who served as the fourth President of Egypt from 1981 to 2011. In 2012, Egypt’s

military assumed leadership until later that year, Mohammed Morsi won the presidential election. However, his government was greeted with more violent protests and in 2013, the Egyptian Armed Forces removed Morsi from power. Following the 2014 presidential election, the current President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was elected. At the end of 2015, a new legislature was also elected, which resulted in the first permanent parliament since 2012.¹

The Republic of Yemen is currently a low-income country with an estimated population of 28 million, of which 99 percent are Muslim. It is a relatively newly established country that began as two nations (North Yemen and South Yemen), but became officially unified in 1990. Four years later, an attempt at succession by the South was stopped by the then national government, led by President Saleh. However, in 2007, President Saleh faced wide-spread demands for his resignation. When he refused, an Initiative by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) proposed to give him immunity, which he at first rejected but eventually agreed. Yemen then launched a National Dialogue Conference to discuss the establishment of a new government. However, a group called the Houthis, was displeased by the conference’s outcome. The Houthis demanded that President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi resigns. Threatened by Houthis, who took over parts of the country, President Hadi fled in March 2015, but returned in September 2015, as Saudi-backed government forces recaptured parts of the country. Despite various ceasefire attempts, the country continues to be in a state of civil war between two factions: the incumbent Yemeni government (led by President Hadi), and the Houthi militia.²

Figure 1: PPP-adjusted GDP per capita (in constant 2011 international \$), 1990-2015



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2017).

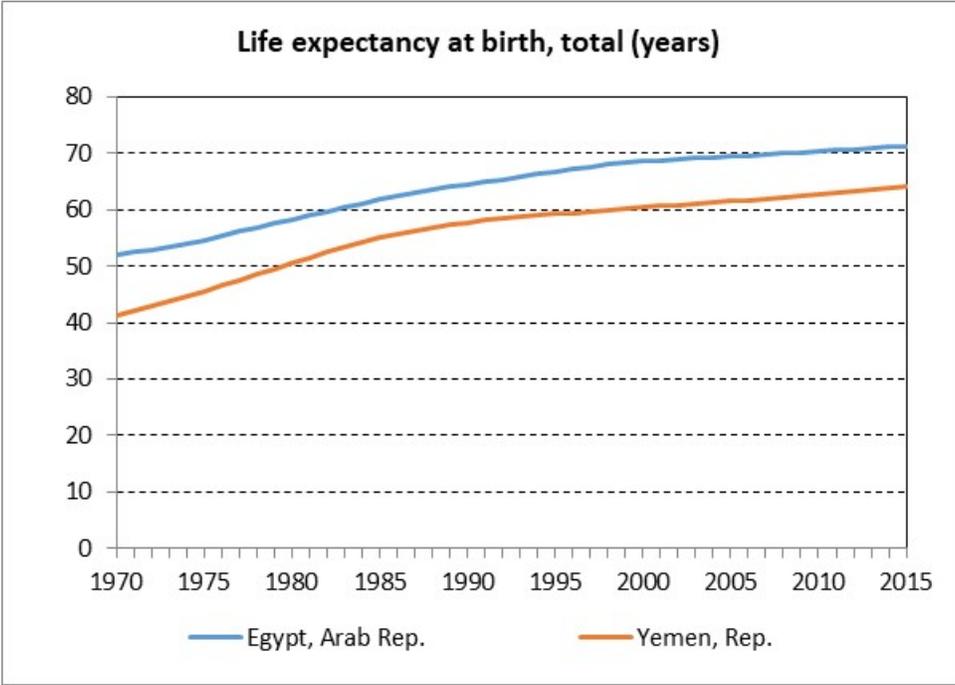
¹ This paragraph is based on the CIA World Factbook – Africa: Egypt and World Bank (2017).

² This paragraph is based on the CIA World Factbook – Middle East: Yemen and World Bank (2017).

Figure 1 above displays the differences in GDP per capita, adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP), between Egypt and Yemen from 1990 to 2015. In 1990, Egypt reported an average of \$6,014 per capita, and it steadily grew with only minor dips in the overall positive trend until 2015, when it reached an average of \$10,249. In contrast, Yemen’s GDP per capita grew more steadily but at a very low rate until 2010, after which it dropped off due to the initial political crisis and subsequent civil war. Starting with a GDP per capita of \$3,353 in 1990, it reached a maximum of \$4,481 in 2010, but ended up with only \$2,649 in 2015.

Figure 2 shows the life expectancy of citizens living in both Egypt and Yemen from 1990 to 2015. Both countries started with birth rates within 11 years of each other, and this rate continues until 2015. Egypt started at an average of 52 years, and in 2015, they had an average of 71 years. Yemen started at 41 years, and in 2015, had improved it to 64 years. Both countries have a steady incline in their life expectancy and have no declines in the data.

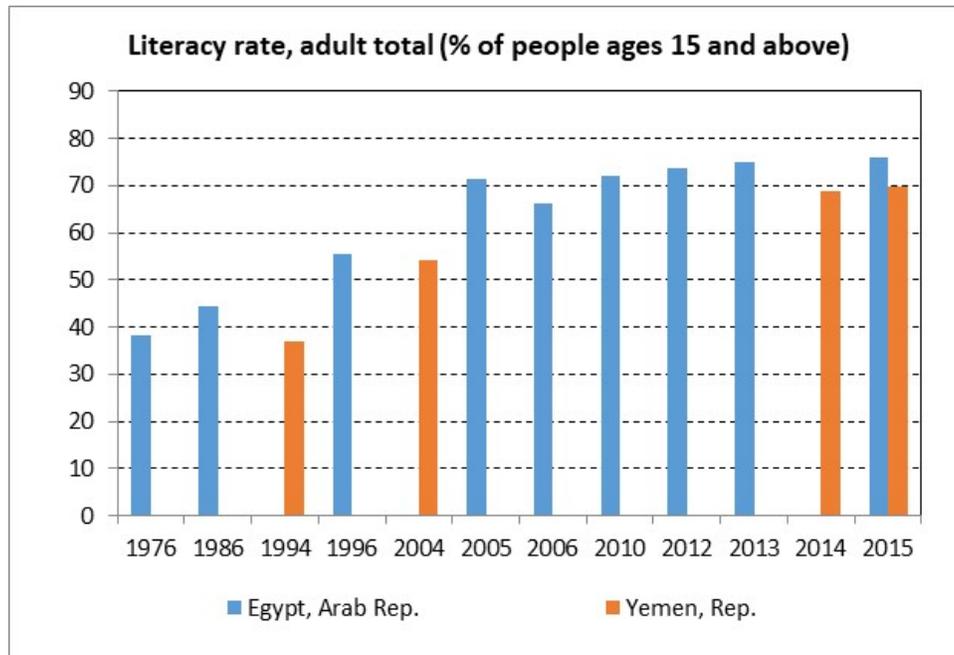
Figure 2: Life Expectancy at Birth (in years), 1970-2015



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2017).

Figure 3 shows the adult literacy rates for all available years for Egypt and Yemen. It shows that Egypt has made significant progress from 1976 to 2005, during which the literacy rates nearly doubled from 38.2 percent to 71.4 percent. However, Egypt has made very little progress since 2005, reaching a literacy rate of only 75.8 percent in 2015. Yemen had a far lower literacy rate than Egypt in 1994 (which is the first year such data is available for Yemen), but nearly caught up with Egypt in 2015, increasing its literacy rate from 37.1 percent (in 1994) to exactly 70.0 percent (in 2015).

Figure 3: Adult Literacy (all available years).



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2017).

IV. Discussion

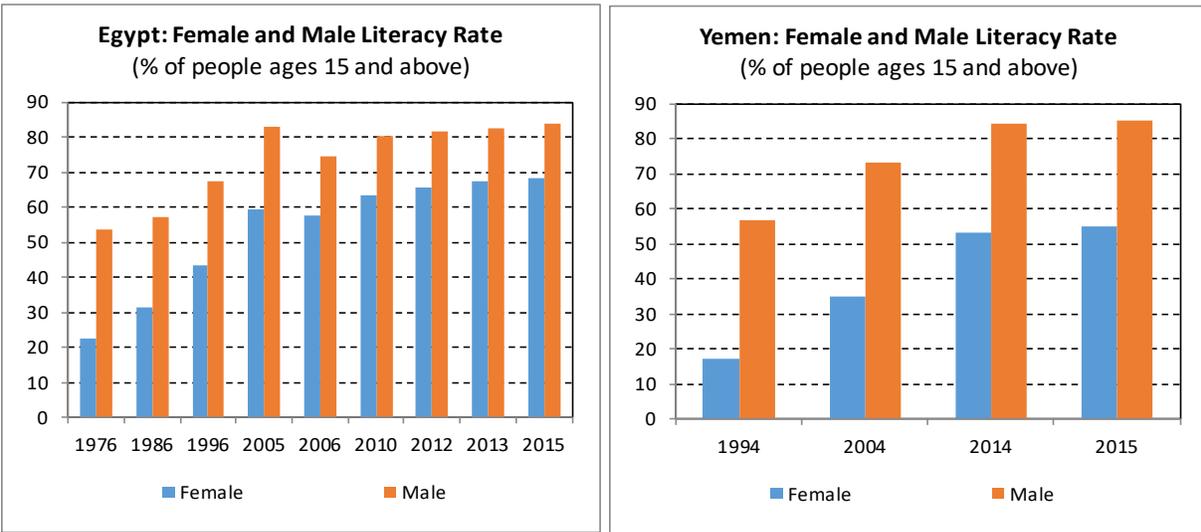
Already some decades ago, Egypt and Yemen agreed to address the gender gap in education in order to make strides with their economy and their human development. Yemen started in the 1980s, especially via the so-called BRIDGE program, while Egypt started mostly in the 1990s, via the Girl Friendly Schools Initiative and the Education Enhancement Program. Following some illustrations of how the gender gap evolved in Egypt and Yemen, this section examines three key hindrances to progress: geographical constraints, cultural constraints, and poverty constraints.

IV.1. Degree and Evolution of Gender Gap in Literacy and School Enrollment

Building on Figure 3 above (which showed the total literacy rates for the two countries), Figure 4 shows the female and male literacy rates for Egypt (left panel) and Yemen (right panel). Both countries had huge gender gaps some decades ago. In 1976, 53.6 percent of the Egyptian males were literate, while only 22.4 percent of the Egyptian females were literate. Hence, in 1976, Egypt's female literacy rate was less than half of Egypt's male literacy rate. While the gender gap declined over time, Egypt's female literacy was still 15.6 percentage points below Egypt's male literacy in 2015.

In 1994, Yemen's female literacy rate was less than half of Yemen's male literacy rate. Though Yemen's gender gap also decreased, it decreased far less than that of Egypt. In 2015, Yemen's gender gap was still 30.1 percentage points, with 85.0 percent of the males being literate but only 54.9 percent of the females being literate.

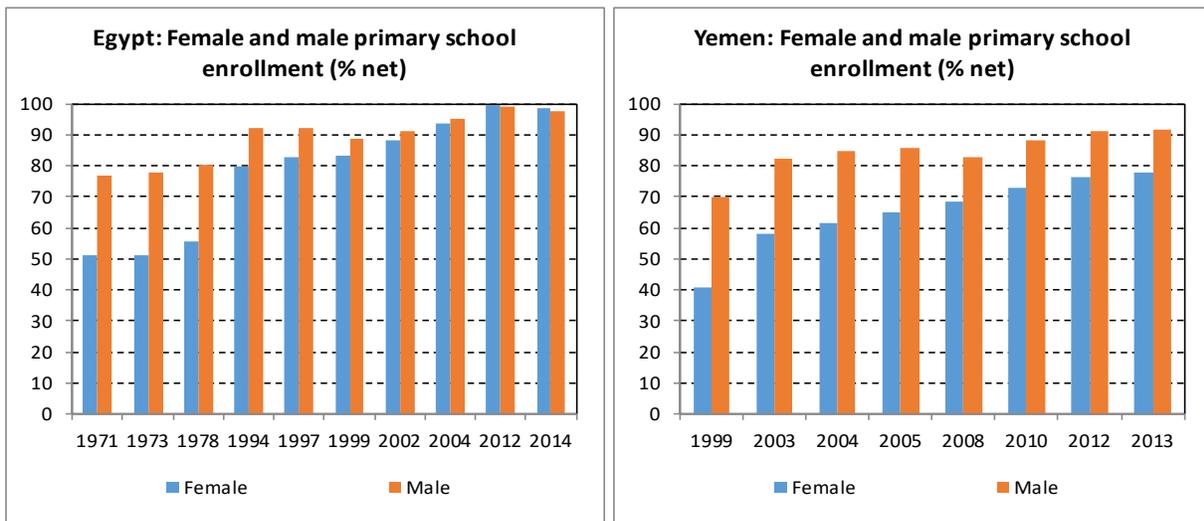
Figure 4: Female and Male Literacy (all available years)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2017).

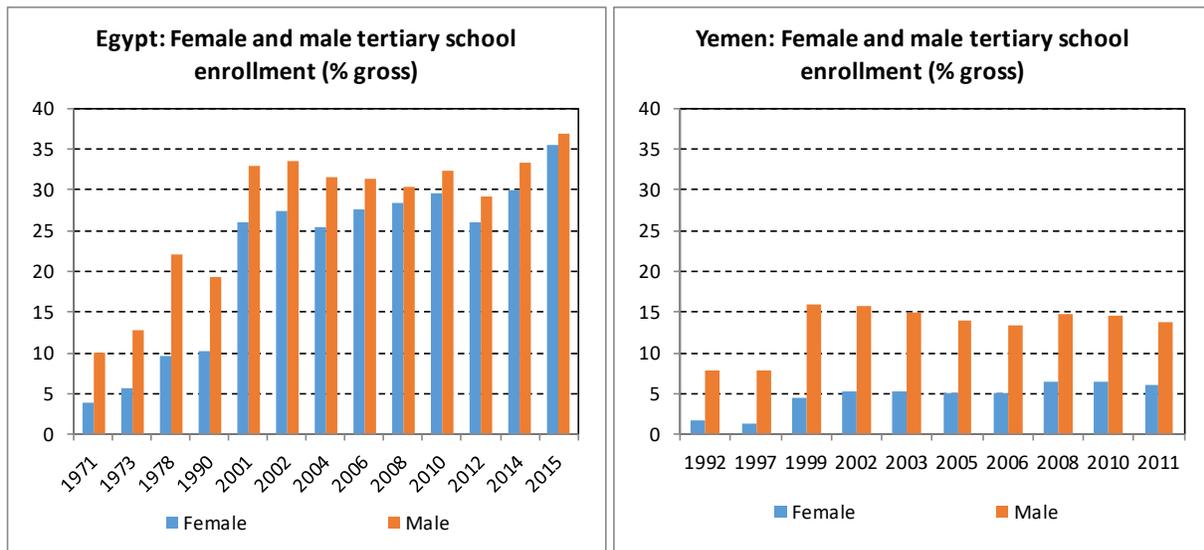
Given that it may take decades for literacy rates to improve and gender gaps to disappear, Figure 5 provides the available data on net primary school enrollment in Egypt and Yemen. It shows that Egypt has actually eliminated the gender gap in primary school enrollment by at least 2012, while there remains a considerable gender gap of more than 10 percent in Yemen. However, as Figure 6 shows, neither Egypt nor Yemen have eliminated the gender gap in tertiary education. Egypt has narrowed the gender gap in tertiary education to 1.3 percentage points, while Yemen’s gender gap is still huge, with female tertiary school enrollment being less than half of male tertiary school enrollment in 2013.

Figure 5: Female and Male Primary School Enrollment



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2017).

Figure 6: Female and Male Tertiary School Enrollment



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2017).

IV.2. Three Key Hindrances to Achieve Gender Parity in Education

IV.2.a. Geographical Constraints

Egypt has had a remarkable upward trend in regard to girls in school, but this change was very recent. In the 1990s girls’ enrollment in primary school was low, and many believed it was primarily due to the rural nature of Upper Egypt. Policymakers decided to implement practical changes to the education system that could make a significant difference. It was called the Education Enhancement Program, and it increased the number of schools in rural areas, funded community awareness campaigns, and gave girls who had dropped out of school a second chance at primary school. By 2003 this program was being implemented in 15 governorates.³

Yemen’s progress, though not as dramatic as Egypt’s, has been particularly remarkable considering the country is one of the world’s poorest countries. Many policies have been implemented to ensure that school is not just for those who can easily afford it, and the expansion of education projects have helped reach the poor in rural areas. In the 1990’s, low-cost standardized schools were introduced, and this helped increase the amount of schools available.⁴ This was a helpful response to the issue because three-quarters of the Yemeni population live in remote, rural communities, so access to schools can be scarce.

One program called BRIDGE (Broadening Regional Initiative for Developing Girls’ Education), was also used to promote a female friendly school atmosphere in rural communities, they did this by building girl’s restrooms and extra classrooms. It had many organizations funding its success, but ultimately the project was not sustainable. The BRIDGE initiative was modeled after the Girl Friendly School (GFS) Initiative, which had been successful in Egypt. However, the GFS Initiative was financed by the Egyptian government, which made it a more long-term option than Yemen’s

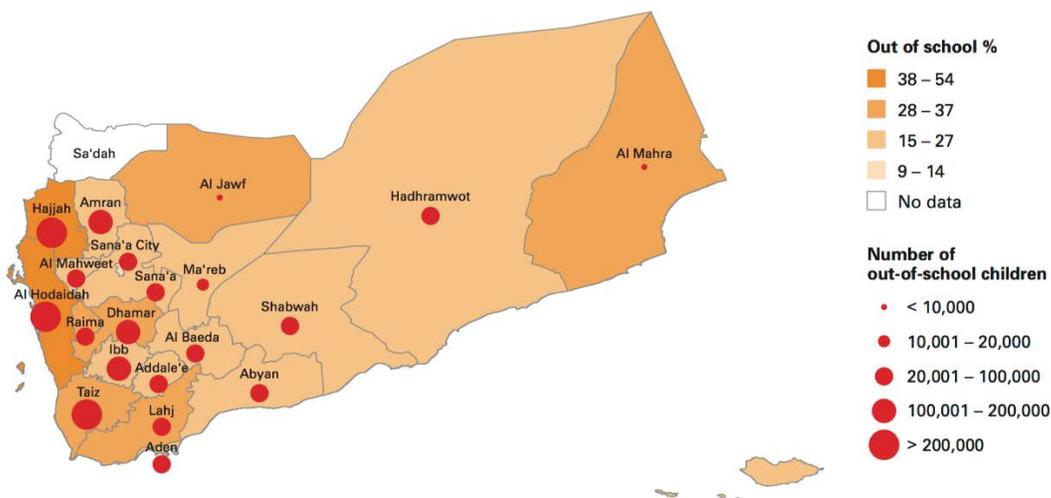
³ Iqbal and Riad (2004).

⁴ Education for All (2010).

BRIDGE program.⁵ Egypt also had an initiative focusing specifically on vulnerable girls in hard-to-reach communities, called the Community School Movement. With the help of UNICEF, the Community Schools Movement had become established in 1992 in three governorates. It gained nation-wide recognition by 2000. Hence, it was then rolled out to seven Governorates, which had an education gender gap between 2.5 percent and 15.7 percent.

Figure 7 depicts out-of-school children in Yemen's governorates by number (using a red dot) and as a percent (using gradients of orange). Although it may seem contradictory to see a large dot on a lighter colored governorate, it is important to keep in mind that the governorate could have an enormous population. According to the United Nations (2018), Abyan, Hajjah, Hudaydah (Al Hoodaidah), and Lahj are Yemen's most rural governorates, and according to this graph, those are several of the governorates that also have the highest number of children out-of-school.

Figure 7: Out-of-School Children in Yemen's Governorates



Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2014).

IV.2.b. Cultural Constraints

In countries like Egypt and Yemen it is still common for girls to take on what society details as female responsibilities, such as housework and childcare, and due to the fact that child labor does not include the use of domestic labor, female children are regularly ignored when examining statistics. Understandably this is an impediment to their education. A study done in Egypt showed that girls typically do not start household duties until they are about ten. This means that they could attend primary school, but until the recent decade they did not. It is argued that reasons for this was that parents saw no point in paying for school if they would end up just taking on household roles or simple chores.⁶

In the past few years, the rate of girls continuing on to secondary school has grown to almost 100 percent in Egypt, and it is important to look at how this happened in order to study and predict

⁵ Yuki et al. (2013).

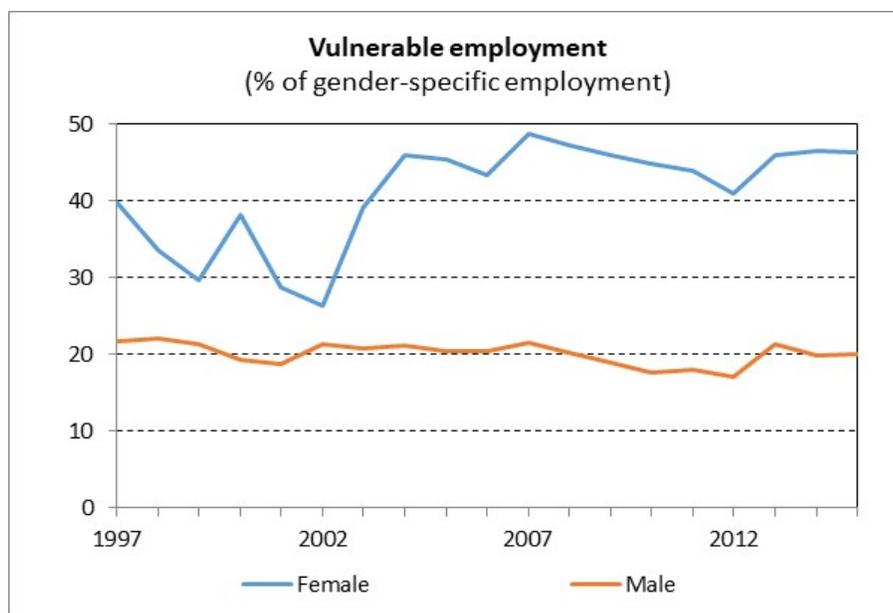
⁶ Assaad, Levison and Zibani (2010).

how female education may evolve in countries that are less developed than Egypt, such as Yemen. Similar to Egypt, Yemen experiences many of the same cultural constraints, but the belief that women should not go to school and instead get married is the main reason why their education is cut short. In Yemen there are very strict gender roles, and there is an immense amount of pressure put on young girls to have children. Understandably, this is a reason some girls may drop out of school.⁷

In recent years, both countries have seen a decline in the number of young girls who are married and the fertility rate for younger children has also gone down significantly. Despite this, there are still about 5 percent of female teenagers giving birth in Egypt and 6 percent in Yemen. These cultural constraints, while improving in terms of girls being allowed to go to school, do not encourage them to use their education after school. In fact, it is likely society will give them worse working conditions, even if they did go to school, simply because of their gender.

While there is insufficient data for Yemen, Figure 8 shows the evolution of females in vulnerable employment as a percent of female employment in Egypt. Vulnerable employment means that these women lack formal work and may be working in dangerous conditions. It shows that the percentage of women with vulnerable employment among the female workers is about twice the percentage of men with vulnerable employment among the male workers. While the percentage for male workers remained relatively stable around 20 percent from 1997-2015, the percentage for women declined shows some declining trend from 1997-2002, after which it increased sharply and then remained around 45 percent from 2004-2015.

Figure 8: Female and Male Vulnerable Employment (as percent of employed) in Egypt



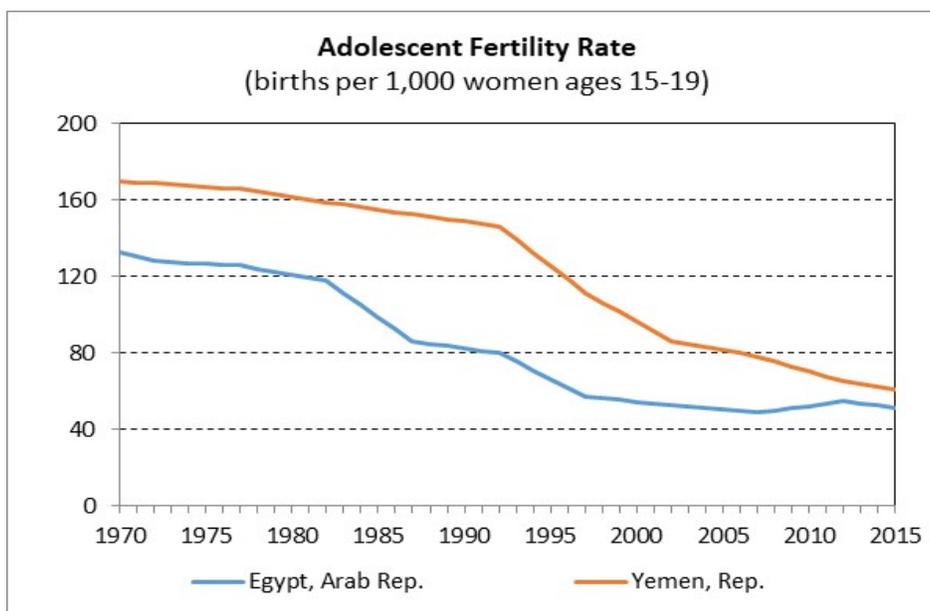
Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2017).

⁷ Mehrass et al. (2017).

One might argue that the one reason for these increasing percentage of females with vulnerable employment is due to the fact that employment of women has increased. However, given that this data is provided as a percentage of employed women (not of all women), the increase in women working does not explain this increase. On the other hand, discrimination against women does. Women typically also lack a voice in their work setting and, because of their gender, earn less than men.⁸ If these women continue to be given worse working conditions and less money for their labor than men, the entire community suffers.

Figure 9 depicts the adolescent fertility rate per 1,000 women ages 15-19 in Egypt and Yemen from 1970-2015. In 1970, Egypt reported that 132 out of 1,000 teenage girls gave birth, and in 2015 this dropped to 51 per 1,000 teenage girls. Though Yemen’s adolescent fertility rate was with 170 out of 1,000 teenage girls nearly 30 percent higher than that of Egypt in 1970, by 2015, Yemen caught nearly up with Egypt, reducing its adolescent fertility rate to 61 per 1,000 teenage girls.

Figure 9: Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women ages 15-19)



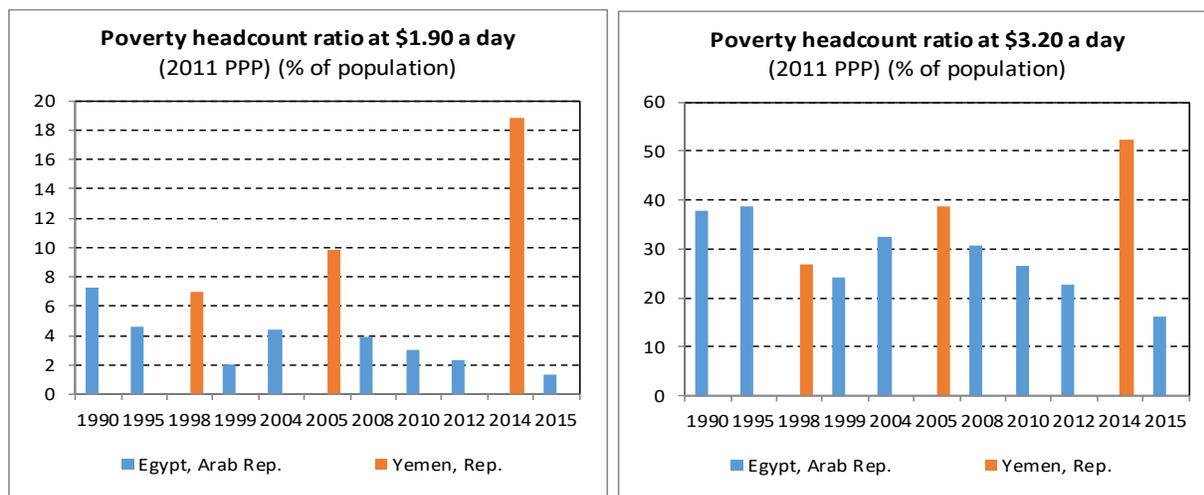
Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2017).

IV.2.c. Poverty Constraints

Figure 10 depicts the evolution of poverty in terms of the poverty headcount ratio at \$1.90-a-day and \$3.20-a-day for all available years. It shows that Egypt has made some progress with reducing poverty, though the progress is far from linear. As of 2015, only 1.4 percent of Egypt’s population lived below \$1.90-a-day, though 16.1 percent still lived below \$3.20-a-day. Though data is scarce for Yemen, the available data for 1998, 2005 and 2014 shows a clearly increasing trend in poverty, for both, the \$1.90-a-day and the \$3.20-a-day headcount ratios. And with the current civil war raging in Yemen, many more people are living in abject poverty today.

⁸ International Labour Organization (2010).

Figure 10: Evolution of Poverty in Egypt and Yemen (all available years)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2018).

The poverty constraint to girls' education goes hand in hand with the geographical constraints many girls face as rural poverty is overall higher in rural areas than in urban areas, in both, Egypt and Yemen. In Egypt, the most rural and most poverty-stricken areas are in Upper Egypt.⁹ In Yemen, the rural communities in the governorate of Amran suffer from the worst poverty in the country.¹⁰

In order to combat both, low female school enrollment and poverty, Egypt introduced the Education Enhancement Program, which reached out to the poverty-stricken schools as well as the rural schools, which in many cases overlapped. The Educational Enhancement Program dropped textbook requirements for girls in grade 1 to grade 6, in order to keep the costs down. They also gave cash incentives to families who sent their girls to school.¹¹ Yemen also had a similar approach. In 2007, the World Bank partnered with the Yemeni government to help fund a rural, female teacher project that resulted in the training of 550 teachers in order to offer girls a role model.¹²

V. Conclusion

Overall, Egypt and Yemen have made headway in procuring a brighter future for girls. They have implemented a variety of programs that are improving girls' education. However, the difficulty will lie in ensuring these programs are sustainable. Egypt has allocated more funds than Yemen for the advancement of girls' education. In Yemen, although initial efforts have been made, the government will have to continue to initiate community projects to push the message that educating girls is the right things to do.

⁹ Mohamed (2016).

¹⁰ World Bank (2010a).

¹¹ Iqbal and Riad (2004).

¹² World Bank (2010b).

Education is the best way to change a community for the better. It offers a plethora of benefits, not only for women, but the whole society. Educating girls delays child marriages and child birth which in turn allows girls to earn money and build self-esteem. Educating girls lowers the risk for domestic violence, and it also lowers the risk of HIV/AIDS, which leads to an overall healthier population. Educating girls has also shown to help lifting families out of poverty.

Egypt is an example of how initiatives, like the Education Enhancement Project, can work to improve girl's education. Egypt has achieved full gender parity in net primary school enrollment and is on track to also reach gender parity in tertiary school enrollment. Yemen can learn from Egypt as Yemen faces similar hurdles Egypt faced some years ago.

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