



TOWARD AVAILABLE, AFFORDABLE, AND QUALITY CHILDCARE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Recognizing that childcare services can have a positive impact on women’s economic inclusion, *Women, Business and the Law* presents a novel and comprehensive pilot dataset on regulatory frameworks around the availability, affordability, and quality of childcare services in 95 economies around the world. In the Middle East and North Africa, data was collected in 13 economies: Algeria; Bahrain; Djibouti; Egypt, Arab Rep.; Iran, Islamic Rep.; Jordan; Kuwait; Malta; Morocco; Oman; Qatar; Tunisia; United Arab Emirates (Table 1).

The new data is a stepping-stone toward facilitating and informing policy dialogue around key demand and supply side avenues that limit or promote the formal provision of childcare services, their affordability, quality, and uptake by parents. The pilot data presents a framework showing a range of options that governments may support to meet the needs of working mothers and families, although international best practice frameworks have yet to be established.

Even when available, the provision of formal childcare does not always guarantee its uptake. Supply and demand side constraints, including convenience of services, costs, quality, and social and cultural norms, can limit any potential benefits (Figure 1).

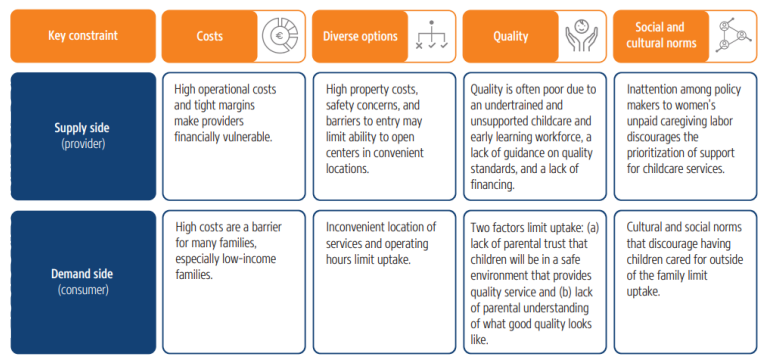
TABLE 1: COUNTRY COVERAGE AND KEY INDICATORS

Economy coverage	Income group	Main business city	Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+)	Paid leave for mothers (calendar days)	Paid leave for fathers (calendar days)
Algeria	LMI	Algiers	15.7	98	3
Bahrain	HI	Manama	42.4	60	1
Djibouti	LMI	Djibouti Ville	17.2	98	3
Egypt, Arab Rep.	LMI	Cairo	15.4	90	0
Iran, Islamic Rep.	LMI	Tehran	14.4	180	14
Jordan	UMI	Amman	13.5	70	3
Kuwait	HI	Kuwait City	47.4	70	0
Malta	HI	Valletta	53.1	126	1
Morocco	LMI	Casablanca	22.0	98	3
Oman	HI	Muscat	28.7	50	0
Qatar	HI	Doha	57.2	50	0
Tunisia	LMI	Tunis	25.5	30	1
United Arab Emirates	HI	Dubai	46.5	52	7

Sources: *Women, Business and the Law 2022* and World Development Indicators.

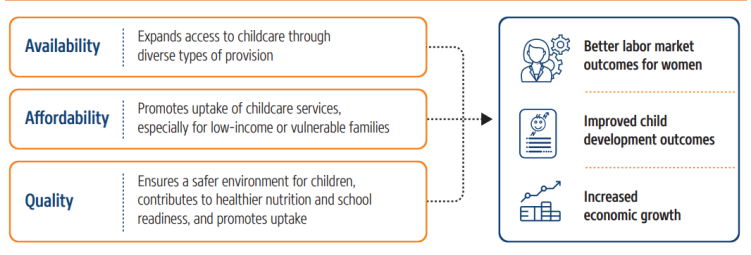
The enactment of policies to make childcare available, affordable, and of decent quality is a priority due to their potential to achieve better market outcomes for women, children, and the economy overall (Figure 2).

FIGURE 1: KEY CONSTRAINTS IN THE CHILDCARE MARKET



Sources: Devercelli and Beaton-Day 2020; Muller and Jaen 2020.

FIGURE 2: THE THREE PILLARS OF CHILDCARE



Source: *Women, Business and the Law 2022*.



International law has long recognized that working parents need access to outside childcare and called for making childcare facilities more readily available.

1976

The **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women** calls for establishing and developing a network of childcare facilities to enable parents to combine family obligations with work responsibilities.

1981

The **International Labour Organization's Convention on Workers with Family Responsibilities No. 156** calls for measures to develop or promote childcare services to enable equality of opportunity for working men and women.

1989

The **Convention on the Rights of the Child** mandates that "States Parties" ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from childcare services and facilities for which they are eligible.

2019

The **European Union** passes a new directive encouraging the use of funds to ensure a sufficient supply of high-quality, affordable childcare services and to help achieve better work-life balance and more equally distributed care responsibilities.



AVAILABILITY

When it comes to the availability of childcare services in the Middle East and North Africa, all 13 examined economies provide some form of outside childcare options for children below the formal preprimary school starting age (typically 3 or 4 years). The provision of childcare by the public sector is regulated in Algeria, Djibouti, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Malta (Table 2). Seventy percent of the examined economies in the region have laws governing the provision of outside care by the private sector only.

In Bahrain, the Arab Republic of Egypt, Iran, Jordan, and Kuwait, employers are also required to provide or support childcare for their employees' children. Generally, a minimum threshold of female employees (Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait) or employees regardless of gender (Jordan) triggers this enforcement. In Iran, the employer is obliged to establish childcare centers considering the age of children.

The minimum age at which parents become eligible to enroll their children in childcare facilities varies across economies in the region. In Algeria, Morocco, and Oman, childcare services are available from the age of 3 months, in Qatar and Tunisia from 2 months, and in Bahrain and Kuwait from 1 month. In the remaining six economies, children can be enrolled in outside care facilities at birth. An early opportunity for enrollment across the Middle East and North Africa can enable working mothers to avoid the childcare gap after the end of maternity leave and return to the labor force faster after having children.

The operating hours of childcare services must also be tailored to meet working parents' needs. Inconvenient operating hours that conflict with parents' working patterns may limit the uptake of outside care options. In Jordan and Malta, for example, childcare centers must operate for a minimum of nine and eight and a half hours per day, respectively (Table 3). Flexible or on-demand options are available to parents in nine out of 13 examined economies in the region. In Iran, different childcare operating modalities are available to parents to choose from, including full-time, part-time, night-time, and around the clock. In Tunisia, private nurseries' daily schedules are also set according to the parent's needs and their working hours. In the United Arab Emirates, beyond the minimum required seven hours per day, an option for extended operating hours is available with permission from the Department of Education and Knowledge.

TABLE 2: LEGISLATION GOVERNING THE PROVISION OF CHILDCARE SERVICES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Economy	Earliest age at which childcare services are available	Preprimary school starting age	Public provision *	Private provision *	Employer provided or supported
Algeria	3 months	3	✓	✓	
Bahrain	1 month	3		✓	✓
Djibouti	At birth	4	✓	✓	
Egypt, Arab Rep.	At birth	4		✓	✓
Iran, Islamic Rep.	At birth	4	✓	✓	✓
Jordan	At birth	4		✓	✓
Kuwait	1 month	4		✓	✓
Malta	At birth	3	✓	✓	
Morocco	3 months	4		✓	
Oman	3 months	3		✓	
Qatar	2 months	4		✓	
Tunisia	2 months	3		✓	
United Arab Emirates	At birth	4		✓	

Source: *Women, Business and the Law 2022*. Note: *public and private provision includes care services provided in center-based settings.



TABLE 3: REGULATION OF OPERATING HOURS

Economy	Minimum required hours	Flexible options available
Iran, Islamic Rep.	Unregulated	-Full-time: 7.30 am to 3.30 pm; -Part-time: 4 hours per day in the morning or in the afternoon, or less than 4 hours a day on all days of the week or only on certain days of the week; -Night-time: all days of the week from 5 pm to 8 pm; - Around the clock: 24 hours 7 days a week
Jordan	9 hours per day: 7 am – 4 pm	Unregulated
Malta	8.5 hours per day: 7:30 am – 4 pm	Unregulated
Tunisia	Unregulated	Nurseries' daily schedules are set according to the parents' needs and their working hours
United Arab Emirates	Nurseries must operate 7 hours per day: 7 am – 2 pm from Sunday to Thursday	Nurseries can extend their operating hours to 4 hours a day from 2 pm to 6 pm

Source: *Women, Business and the Law 2022*



AFFORDABILITY

Affordability of care is also a central concern that influences the demand for childcare services and the extent to which parents use it. Only one economy (Malta) in the region regulates public provision of childcare, where free services are available to parents who are employed or pursuing their education, with the aim of helping to achieve work-life balance.

In less than half of the economies examined in the Middle East and North Africa, strict rules governing fees for childcare services are in place. In Bahrain, licensed private childcare centers must notify the local administration of any price increase for enrollment. In Jordan, the amount of the monthly service fee that the nursery collects is determined by the date of the child's acceptance, with no further permission from the state to increase this allowance during the first year or to collect any additional amounts in excess. In Oman, fees set by private centers and their increases must be approved by the competent authority. Similarly, in the United Arab Emirates, childcare centers must obtain approval from the Ministry of Social Affairs before setting fees or amending them. By putting limits on how much can be charged for childcare services, governments reduce the risk of "capture" by private providers on the one hand. However, regulations that are too stringent can also reduce the supply of formal childcare on the part of private providers. Thus, finding the fine line between what constitutes affordable childcare without creating cumbersome regulatory burdens for private sector providers is a challenge.

Alternative financial measures to make childcare more affordable for parents are established in Jordan and Malta. Private childcare centers in Egypt and Malta are also entitled to government subsidies (Table 4). Overall, when it comes to financial support to parents or providers, room for policy expansion remains in more than 70 percent of the examined economies in the Middle East and North Africa (Figure 3).

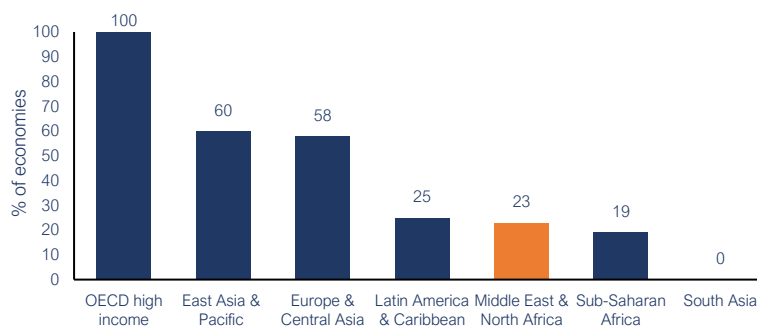
Preferential taxation is another policy that can be used to reduce costs for childcare for both parents and providers. The usage of tax measures remains limited across the region. In Malta, parents can claim personal income tax deductions for childcare expenses. Employers supporting childcare for their employees are also entitled to tax deductions for payments made to childcare centers for their employees' children. In Iran, kindergartens are exempt from property tax.

TABLE 4: OPTIONS FOR MAKING CHILDCARE AFFORDABLE

Beneficiary group	Financial support	Tax support
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Jordan, a childcare allowance is provided for 6 months. In Malta, parents are entitled to free childcare at a rate which is pro-rata to the mother's (or single father) employment hours. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Malta, personal income tax deductions are granted for expenses incurred for childcare services.
Private childcare centers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the Arab Republic of Egypt, subsidies to nurseries are determined based on the number of nurseries per region, class size, staff and their qualifications, quality, and type of services provided. In Malta, childcare centers are entitled to a subsidy equivalent to a uniform rate per hour per child from the government through public-private partnership agreements (PPPs). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the Islamic Republic of Iran, kindergartens are exempted from property tax.
Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unregulated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Malta, tax deductions are granted up to a limit on any sum paid by the employer to a licensed or registered childcare center for childcare services for the employees' children.

Source: *Women, Business and the Law 2022*.

FIGURE 3: FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR PARENTS OR PROVIDERS OF CHILDCARE SERVICES, BY REGION



Source: *Women, Business and the Law 2022*.



QUALITY

High-quality childcare services influence parental decisions to enroll their children in outside care. Setting and consistently enforcing quality standards in childcare facilities serves as a guarantee for a minimum level of health and safety. Quality of childcare is also associated with improvements in children’s health, cognitive and social development, and school readiness, leading to more promising long-term employment prospects and higher earnings. Definitions of high quality vary across contexts due to differences in economic development, resource availability, and cultural and social norms. However, there is some emerging consensus on the elements that determine high quality childcare, regardless of circumstances.

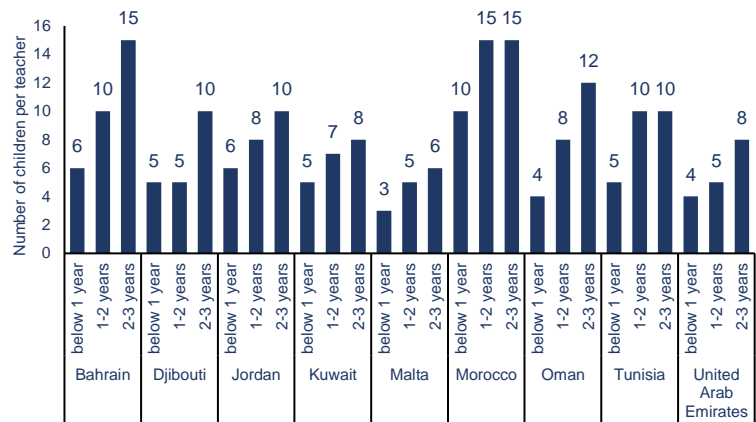
Structural quality, for example, is a critical element of early childcare services. Children can receive individual attention, and teachers can more effectively cater to diverse learning needs, with specified teacher-to-child ratios – typically 1:10 or 1:15 as recommended by international institutions. In the Middle East and North Africa, teacher-to-child ratios are regulated in over 80 percent of the examined economies and differ depending on the age of the child, but do not exceed 15 children per educator. The lowest ratio, of one provider per three children below the age of one, is in Malta. The highest ratio of one educator per 15 children aged 2-3 years is in both Bahrain and Morocco (Figure 4).

Improving quality of care also means professionalizing services, including investing in the professional development of the workforce. Empirical evidence links continuous training to better, more effective teaching, high-quality interaction between teachers and children, and improved learning, development, and well-being. Educators are required to undergo periodic professional training only in Bahrain and Tunisia.

By establishing quality assurance mechanisms through mandatory regular physical inspections of facilities or reporting of data by providers, governments can hold childcare providers accountable for any failure to comply with quality standards. In 10 out of 13 economies in the region, physical inspections are mandated. However, the frequency of such inspections is not specified within existing regulatory frameworks. Reporting of information is also required in five out of 13 economies. In Algeria and Oman, reporting of information must be carried out on an annual basis. In Jordan, private childcare centers must report every six months.

Penalties for noncompliance with applicable laws and regulations of an administrative or criminal nature are imposed in nearly all examined economies (12 out of 13). These penalties may take several forms and typically vary from warnings, fines, and administrative closures to revocation of license or operating authorization and imprisonment (Table 5).

FIGURE 4: MANDATORY TEACHER-TO-CHILD RATIOS IN CHILDCARE CENTERS, BY AGE OF THE CHILD



Source: *Women, Business and the Law 2022*.

TABLE 5: EXAMPLES OF SANCTIONS FOR NONCOMPLIANCE WITH QUALITY STANDARDS

Type of sanction	Economy
Warning	Algeria; Jordan; Kuwait; Tunisia; United Arab Emirates.
Fines	Djibouti; Egypt, Arab Rep.; Kuwait; Morocco; Qatar; United Arab Emirates.
Temporary or permanent administrative closure	Algeria; Bahrain; Iran, Islamic Rep.; Jordan; Tunisia; United Arab Emirates.
Revocation of license or authorization	Bahrain; Djibouti; Iran, Islamic Rep.; Jordan; Kuwait; Qatar
Imprisonment	Egypt, Arab Rep.

Source: *Women, Business and the Law 2022*.



REGIONAL TRENDS BY DATA POINT

AVAILABILITY	ANSWER (YES/NO)	
Does the law regulate public provision of childcare services?	31%	69%
Does the law regulate private provision of childcare services?	100%	
Does the law mandate employers to provide or support childcare services?	38%	62%
Does the law establish adequate operating hours in public childcare centers?	8%	92%
Does the law establish adequate operating hours in private childcare centers?	31%	69%
AFFORDABILITY	ANSWER (YES/NO)	
Does the law establish free provision of public childcare?	8%	92%
Does the law establish conditions based on which cost to parents is determined?	8%	92%
Are fees charged by public childcare centers regulated?	8%	92%
Are fees charged by private childcare centers regulated?	46%	54%
Does the government provide some form of financial or tax support to parents for childcare?	15%	85%
Is financial support to parents for the use of childcare unconditional?	100%	
Does the government provide some form of financial or tax support to private providers?	23%	77%
Does the government provide some form of support to low-income families for childcare?	100%	
QUALITY	ANSWER (YES/NO)	
Are public childcare centers required to obtain licenses or authorization of some form?	31%	69%
Are private childcare centers required to obtain licenses or authorization of some form?	100%	
Does the law mandate a teacher-to-child ratio for public childcare centers?	31%	69%
Does the law mandate a teacher-to-child ratio for private childcare centers?	85%	15%
Does the law mandate a maximum group size in public childcare centers?	8%	92%
Does the law mandate a maximum group size in private childcare centers?	23%	77%
Does the law require educators at public childcare centers to undergo periodic training?	100%	
Does the law require educators at private childcare centers to undergo periodic training?	15%	85%
Does the law require quality assurance at public childcare centers?	23%	77%
Does the law require quality assurance at private childcare centers?	85%	15%
Are penalties imposed for noncompliance with applicable laws by public childcare centers?	15%	85%
Are penalties imposed for noncompliance with applicable laws by private childcare centers?	92%	8%

DATA COLLECTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Data was collected in 13 economies: Algeria; Bahrain; Djibouti; Egypt, Arab Rep.; Iran, Islamic Rep.; Jordan; Kuwait; Malta; Morocco; Oman; Qatar; Tunisia; United Arab Emirates.



For more information, please visit wbl.worldbank.org/en/childcare or contact wbl@worldbank.org.

HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

This document aims to improve understanding of legal and regulatory systems around the availability, affordability, and quality of childcare services for children below preprimary school starting age in the Middle East and North Africa. It also seeks to build awareness of laws and identify areas for reform and other regulatory interventions. Support for the Women, Business and the Law childcare regional profile series is provided by the World Bank's Knowledge for Change Program and the Multi-Donor Trust Fund for Jobs.

