



# Conflict and its shockwaves: implications for the security and economic participation of women in the Arab region

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## Key findings

### **The current conflict is undermining women's security and economic participation,**

particularly affecting internally displaced women and their families. However, its impacts extend beyond countries under conflict to include women affected by trade disruptions, limited access to finance and basic services, and security spillovers, with implications for recovery across diverse contexts.

### **Small declines in women's labour force participation are sufficient to create setbacks in gender equality measures.**

In Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine, where women entered the current crisis with participation rates already below 30 per cent, additional pressure on sectors employing large numbers of women, especially healthcare, education and service sectors, will likely increase the risk of further exit from paid work.

**Unpaid care responsibilities have surged.** Women perform an estimated 80 to 90 per cent of all unpaid care work in the Arab region, where formal care infrastructure is among the weakest globally. As schools and health services collapse or are disrupted, care responsibilities are transferred back to households, predominantly onto women, compressing their time for paid work. For those who are internally displaced or moving across countries, care demands are expected to rise significantly, placing additional pressure on women to care for children, persons with disabilities and older persons.

### **Financial exclusion compounds a structural deficit with no buffer.**

The Arab region entered the current conflict as the only region globally where women's financial inclusion was already weakening. As employment losses mount and digital banking systems are disrupted, labour market detachment risks accelerating women's financial exclusion, reducing household shock absorption capacity and slowing recovery.

**Exposure to conflict-related insecurity affects people across the region.** War can erode women's security and mobility, signalling early pressure on governance and recovery capacity. In conflict-affected settings, where women's security conditions were already fragile, limited buffers heighten the risk that insecurity will rapidly translate into compounding vulnerabilities, with implications for the pace and inclusiveness of recovery.

## Introduction

The outbreak of the current war in February 2026 has rapidly produced headline macroeconomic impacts across the Arab region: trade and connectivity disruptions, energy and financial market volatility, constrained investment, and mounting pressure on public services. Within these broader pressures, one dimension receives less systematic attention: the risk that gains in gender equality are eroding. Evidence from previous crises consistently shows that deterioration in women's economic status deepens household vulnerability and slows recovery.

The present policy brief identifies early pressure points across four interconnected areas: security conditions, labour market participation, unpaid care responsibilities, and access to financial services. Using scenario-based simulations applied to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Index, the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), and the ESCWA Financial Inclusiveness Index (FII),<sup>1</sup> it models the risk of loss of gains under conflict-related stress. The analysis is exploratory rather than predictive: the indices are used as early warning signals of risk, not as real-time measures of current impact or predictors of future trajectories.

## 1. Women's security at heightened risk

Established through Security Council resolution 1325, the WPS agenda provides the normative framework for women's participation in peace and security decision-making, protection from gender-based violence, and gender-responsive recovery. Nine Arab States have adopted national action plans (NAPs) and the League of Arab States has developed a Regional Action Plan, though implementation remains uneven.<sup>2</sup> Notably, only 17 per cent of countries in Northern Africa and the Middle East have disaster risk reduction (DRR) frameworks inclusive of women, the second lowest share globally after Europe and Central Asia;<sup>3</sup> where they exist, women are categorized as vulnerable populations rather than agents of risk governance.

The 2025/2026 WPS Index translates these commitments into measurable outcomes across inclusion, justice and security for 181 countries. Most Arab countries score below the global average of 0.69, while Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries perform comparatively well, with the United Arab Emirates ranking twentieth globally at 0.87. This

advantage rests in part on the security dimension, including community safety, low proximity to conflict and limited political violence – gains that are particularly vulnerable to the current war.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1 sets out the results of a scenario analysis applying this assumption to the proximity-to-conflict indicator for five countries directly affected by the war, simulated using the ESCWA Indices Simulator for Policymakers in the Arab Region (ISPAR) tool.<sup>5</sup> The security subindex shows the sharpest losses: the United Arab Emirates falls from 8th to 18th in the security ranking; Bahrain and Kuwait see their rankings deteriorate to roughly twice their previous levels; and Qatar drops by 17 places. At the overall index level, rank changes are more modest, reflecting the diluting effect of unchanged inclusion and justice scores, but the direction is clear. Iraq, already ranked 151st on security, sees limited additional movement, reflecting a floor effect: the cost of conflict on women's security has already been fully absorbed into its score.

**Table 1.** Simulated impact of a 10-percentage point increase in proximity to conflict on WPS rankings of some Arab countries that are directly or in directly affected by the conflict

Country	WPS rank	Simulated WPS rank	Security rank	Simulated security rank
United Arab Emirates	20	23	8	18
Bahrain	55	58	12	24
Kuwait	70	76	14	28
Qatar	70	76	36	53
Iraq	158	161	151	156

**Source:** Compiled by ESCWA.

**Note:** Countries included in the simulation are those where ACLED conflict exposure data for the period 28 February–20 March 2026 show population exposure rates high enough to make a 10-percentage point increase a conservative assumption. Lebanon and the State of Palestine are excluded because their proximity-to-conflict indicator already stands at 100 per cent in the WPS Index, leaving no room for further simulated deterioration. Saudi Arabia, Oman and Jordan are excluded because their observed ACLED exposure rates (2, 7 and 5 per cent, respectively) are too low to justify a 10-percentage point assumption without overstating the shock.

Outcomes captured by the WPS Index help contextualize the economic dynamics analysed in the present brief by highlighting how insecurity and institutional stress shape access to work, services and finance. Viewed alongside macroeconomic indicators, WPS outcomes highlight governance and security conditions that shape labour market access,

service delivery, financial inclusion, and ultimately recovery trajectories. These trajectories will, in turn, significantly affect women living in displacement, where heightened risks, including limited access to healthcare and basic services, as well as increased exposure to gender-based violence, further constrain their economic participation.

## 2. Women's employment under stress

It is too early to draw firm conclusions on the war's impact on women's employment, as labour market effects typically appear with a lag. However, macroeconomic pressures already visible across the region, including disrupted trade, elevated uncertainty, constrained investment, a drop in tourism and pressure on public services, transmit quickly into labour markets through weaker demand, delayed hiring and reduced hours, particularly in services and informal activities. Female labour force participation is treated here as a shock-sensitive early indicator of adjustment under pressure, rather than as a real-time measure of employment loss. When income opportunities tighten and care burdens rise, women are often the first to reduce paid work, shift into precarious employment, or exit the labour force altogether.

These dynamics are unfolding in labour markets already constrained by weak job creation and slowing growth. In several countries, private sector hiring has slowed amid heightened uncertainty and reduced

investment.<sup>6</sup> In such contexts, even well-designed policies on care, finance or legal reform may have limited traction in the absence of broader recovery in labour demand.

Pre-war conditions varied considerably, so the effects of the current shocks are unlikely to be uniform. GCC countries entered the conflict with comparatively higher women's participation by regional standards, reaching 61.7 per cent in Qatar, 49.9 per cent in Kuwait, 34.6 per cent in Saudi Arabia, 54.5 per cent in the United Arab Emirates, 39.9 per cent in Oman and 43.5 per cent in Bahrain,<sup>7</sup> although shaped by segmented labour markets and significant disparities between national and migrant workers. In contrast, Lebanon and the State of Palestine were drawn in with much weaker baselines: female participation at 29.4<sup>8</sup> and 19.3<sup>9</sup> per cent, respectively, with very high female unemployment rates at 32.7 and 29.9 per cent, respectively. These different starting points matter because the same shock is unlikely to produce the same labour-market outcomes across countries: in some contexts, it may slow or reverse

recent gains, while in already fragile contexts it may push more women out of paid work altogether. This is most likely where women are concentrated in informal, part time or service sector jobs, which are often the first to contract during crisis, and where limited access to childcare, transport and social protection further constrain women's ability to remain active in the labour market.

In Lebanon and Palestine, displacement disrupts access to workplaces, clients, documents, transport and childcare, while reduced hours, declining wages and informality compound pressures. Limited access to savings and credit further undermines women's ability to absorb shocks. Many women may exit the labour force altogether rather than appear in unemployment statistics, making declining participation a more reliable indicator of gendered economic harm.

These dynamics differ by subregion. In Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine, where war compounds already weak labour market conditions, the risk of withdrawal from paid work or a shift into precarious employment is greatest. In the GCC subregion, the immediate effect is more likely to be a slowing of recent gains among national women, while migrant women in domestic, hospitality and care work

require particular attention given weaker labour protections and domestic workers isolation in private households. In Iraq and Jordan, the more plausible risk is a deepening of already low participation, driven by compounding effects of weak job creation, heightened uncertainty and tightening economic conditions that reinforce long-standing structural barriers.

Illustrative simulations based on GGGI point in the same direction.<sup>10,11</sup> As shown in table 2, a mild 2 percentage-point decline in women's participation lower the GGGI rank for Lebanon from 136 to 137, while a severe 10 percentage-point decline would reduce it to 139. In Jordan, a mild shock would lower the country's rank from 122 to 124. These simulations show that even modest declines in women's labour force participation rate (LFPR) can lead to visible setbacks in gender equality, while capturing only one channel and not reflecting concurrent effects on earnings, job quality, informality or occupational mobility. The direction of risk is therefore clear: if the war persists and macroeconomic pressures intensify, women's labour force attachment is likely to come under increasing strain, with direct implications for household resilience, inclusive recovery and longer-term economic performance.

**Table 2.** GGGI simulation: Lebanon and Jordan

Lebanon					
Scenario	Female LFPR	Male LFPR	Female-male ratio	GGGI rank	Score
Baseline	29.35%	70.56%	0.416	136	0.63
Mild shock (-2 percentage points)	27.35%	70.56%	0.388	137	0.63
Severe shock (-10 percentage points)	19.35%	70.56%	0.274	139	0.63
Recovery (+5 percentage points)	34.35%	70.56%	0.487	135	0.64
Jordan					
Scenario	Female LFPR	Male LFPR	Female-male ratio	GGGI rank	Score
Baseline	15.9%	61.9%	0.257	122	0.66
Mild shock (-2 percentage points)	13.9%	61.9%	0.225	124	0.65

**Source:** Compiled by ESCWA.

**Note:** These results are illustrative and should not be read as forecasts. They show that relatively small participation losses can translate into visible setbacks in gender equality rankings, even when rounded overall scores change only marginally. The simulation captures only the participation channel and does not reflect likely concurrent effects on earnings, job quality or occupational mobility.

### 3. How war shifts care work back onto women

Across Arab countries, women account for an estimated 80 to 90 per cent of all unpaid care work<sup>12</sup> – a structural weight that has long constrained female labour force participation in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine, even before the current escalation.

The war is sharply intensifying care needs while simultaneously dismantling the services required to meet them. The displacement of 19 per cent of the Lebanese population, including 300,000 children,<sup>13</sup> has generated overwhelming unmet care demands. Around 73 per cent of public schools now serve as shelters and five hospitals closed within the first 20 days of escalation.<sup>14</sup>

While the war on Gaza is not new, its impacts are intensifying every day. Approximately 90 per cent of its population is currently displaced, over 90 per cent of housing has been destroyed, and 97 per cent of schools have been destroyed or damaged, placing mounting socioeconomic pressures on families that will take decades to recover and rebuild.<sup>15</sup>

School closures push girls into caregiving roles and push boys into hazardous child labour at the expense of their education. Health facility destruction transfers professional care back onto households, predominantly onto women. As care responsibilities rise and formal infrastructure collapses, women's time for paid work contracts is reduced, reinforcing the labour force withdrawal projected in the simulations above.

Only 8 of 22 Arab countries provide government-funded maternity leave, only 3 mandate centre-based childcare, and only 3 offer families financial support for childcare costs. Moreover, flexible work arrangements exist in law in only 5 countries, and parental leave in only 1.<sup>16</sup>

Increases in care needs triggered by conflict are absorbed largely through unpaid household labour rather than formal service expansion. Evidence consistently shows that women's recovery to pre-crisis employment levels takes longer than men's,<sup>17</sup> particularly when women are excluded from the automatic stabilizers and recovery measures deployed during downturns.<sup>18</sup> In a region where prevailing norms assign women primary responsibility for care, prolonged increases in unpaid care work risk locking in lower participation and weakening recovery efforts.

Conflict thus sets in motion a self-reinforcing cycle: unpaid care burdens rise, women's labour force participation declines, and the economic rationale for investing in care infrastructure weakens, further entrenching reliance on unpaid labour. Breaking this cycle requires treating care as a core component of conflict response from the outset, not an afterthought during reconstruction.

### 4. Access to finance at risk

The Arab region entered the conflict with women's access to formal financial services already among the lowest worldwide at 42.1 per cent compared with a global average of 62 per cent,<sup>19</sup> and a 15-percentage point gender gap in account ownership, with Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates showing gaps exceeding 20 points.<sup>20</sup> The ESCWA Financial Inclusiveness Index 2025 places the region at the bottom of all income groupings on both the access and usage pillars, and identifies it as the only region globally where

financial inclusion barriers worsened between 2023 and 2025, driven primarily by collapsing trust in financial institutions, most sharply in Lebanon.<sup>21</sup> Only 41 per cent of adults in the region made or received a digital payment in 2024, well below the global average of 62 per cent, with women's usage rates falling below the regional average.

The conflict is compounding this deficit through two reinforcing mechanisms. Firstly, damage to power grids, cloud computing infrastructure and submarine

cable servicing across the Persian Gulf and Red Sea corridors is undermining the digital payment systems on which financial inclusion increasingly depends,<sup>22</sup> with women bearing a disproportionate share of the impact given their smaller base of digital payment usage. Secondly, employment losses directly threaten inclusion gains: women who lose income risk pushing active accounts into dormancy, a reversal the FII captures through its usage pillar, where sustained

transaction activity, not mere account ownership, determines depth of inclusion. In Lebanon, where female unemployment stands at 32.7 per cent and institutional trust has been in freefall since 2019, this risk is acute. In Iraq, ongoing digital payment reforms and the National Financial Inclusion Strategy launched in 2025<sup>23</sup> may face implementation challenges if conflict-related disruption persists.

## 5. Policy recommendations

1

**Call for an immediate ceasefire.** An immediate cessation of hostilities is the foundational condition for protecting women's safety, economic participation and rights across the region.

2

**Protect women's labour market attachment.** Short-term employment in response to crisis, income support and cash-for-work programmes must maintain women's labour market attachment during active conflict and early recovery, with eligibility criteria and delivery modalities that reflect care constraints, mobility restrictions and service disruptions. In GCC countries, crisis protocols and labour safeguards for migrant women workers, particularly those in domestic and care roles, are needed to prevent permanent labour market detachment.

3

**Integrate care into crisis response from day one.** Care infrastructure must be included in reconstruction frameworks from the outset. Existing childcare and social protection services must be protected from conflict-driven budget cuts. Post-conflict recovery plans should earmark international financing for care economy investment, prioritising the 14 Arab countries without government-funded maternity leave and the 19 that leave childcare entirely to the private sector.

4

**Safeguard access to financial services during shock periods.** Functioning payment and financial systems are essential to crisis response and early recovery. Digital and financial infrastructure should be treated as critical enabling infrastructure, on par with energy and transport. Cash transfers should flow through women's individually controlled accounts, and central banks should issue emergency guidance enabling simplified account opening for displaced women. The Jordanian National Financial Inclusion Strategy 2023–2028 offers a replicable regional model.

5

**Strengthen the nexus between WPS and disaster risk reduction (DRR) nexus.** All Arab countries should develop NAPs on Security Council resolution 1325, with explicit commitments on DRR, thereby ensuring that women participate meaningfully not only as beneficiaries but as active agents and decision makers across all stages, including conflict prevention, disaster risk management, emergency preparedness and crisis response. GCC countries should leverage their institutional capacity and resources to fund gender-responsive DRR across conflict-affected neighbouring countries.

6

**Establish continuous gender-responsive monitoring of conflict-related economic impacts.** National and regional authorities, supported by development partners, should deploy high-frequency sex-disaggregated monitoring to track shifts in labour market attachment, unpaid care burdens, income losses, displacement and access to financial services. This provides early warning of compounding risks, enables rapid course-correction, and reduces the likelihood that short-term shocks translate into long-term exclusion.

## Endnotes

1. The WPS Index captures conflict exposure, safety and institutional stability. The GGGI simulations focus on female labour force participation as a stress-sensitive measure of labour market attachment. FI assesses household-level shock absorption capacity, with emphasis on risks of reversal in financial usage during periods of employment loss and infrastructure disruption.
2. The United Arab Emirates was the first GCC country to adopt a NAP. Kuwait is developing its first NAP, and other Arab countries have undertaken WPS-aligned initiatives.
3. UN-Women, [Gender-responsive and inclusive disaster risk reduction \(DRR\) and resilience frameworks: insights from the Women's Resilience To Disasters \(WRD\) Policy Tracker](#), 2025.
4. The WPS Index's published scores predate the war that erupted on 28 February 2026 and therefore do not yet reflect its impact. Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) conflict exposure data for the period 28 February–20 March 2026 show the share of the population living within 5 km of a recorded conflict event rising from near-zero to between 21 and 37 per cent across GCC countries. Since the WPS Index measures proximity to conflict at a 50 km threshold, actual exposure under the Index's methodology would be higher still, making a 10-percentage point increase a conservative assumption.
5. The simulation applies a 10-percentage point increase solely to the proximity-to-conflict subindicator within the security dimension, holding all other indicators constant. Results are illustrative and do not constitute a projection.
6. European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, [Transition report 2024–25: Jordan country assessment](#), 2024.
7. World Economic Forum, [Global Gender Gap Report](#), 2025.
8. Central Administration of Statistics, [Lebanon's follow-up labour force survey](#), 2022.
9. ILOSTAT.
10. Using ISPAR, we conducted a light-touch simulation to examine how declines in women's labour force participation under mild and severe shock scenarios may affect countries' gender-parity rankings in GGGI.
11. GGGI treats the participation gap as one component of the economic participation and opportunity subindex, measuring the female-to-male labour force participation ratio as part of a broader parity score. The GGGI methodology converts outcomes into female-to-male ratios and truncates them at parity, which means that any decline in women's participation relative to men directly worsens the participation component.
12. Jonathan Woetzel and others, [The power of parity: how advancing women's equality can add \\$12 trillion to global growth](#), 2015.
13. International Rescue Committee, [One million people displaced across Lebanon in just two weeks; Children in need of urgent support, warns IRC](#), 17 March 2026.
14. [Lebanese Ministry of Public Health](#), 19 March 2026.
15. United Nations, [The question of Palestine](#), 26 February 2026.
16. Based on an ESCWA review of Arab countries' labour laws.
17. ESCWA, [Leaving women and girls further behind or a potential opportunity for strengthening gender equality? Lessons from the COVID-19 crisis in the Arab region](#), 2022.
18. Ibid.
19. ESCWA, [Unlocking women's economic potential in the Arab region: advancing financial inclusion and autonomy](#), 2026.
20. Ibid.
21. The access subindex includes indicators related to traditional and digital infrastructure and ease of access to financial services. The usage subindex includes indicators related to traditional financial operations and digital financial services.
22. Drone strikes on cloud computing infrastructure in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates in early March 2026 caused documented outages at banking providers including ADCB and Emirates NBD, and affected payments platforms across both countries. The International Telecommunication Union has separately noted that submarine cable disruptions in conflict-affected maritime corridors can cause prolonged connectivity failures with direct economic consequences.
23. United Nations Development Programme, [The turning point: Iraq's leap into the digital economy](#), 2024.



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