

Article

Beyond Income: Rethinking the Feminization of Poverty in the Middle East

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license.

Abstract: The problem of poverty in the Middle East is a serious, multidimensional issue making it vulnerable to political instability, economic inequalities, and extended conflicts that occur disproportionately in the vulnerable populations. To overcome these structural weaknesses, sustainable policies that are focused on short term relief and long term resilience should be addressed. The current study aimed to examine the phenomenon of feminization of poverty in the Middle East, with a particular focus on Emirati women. Employing a descriptive research design, data were collected through a questionnaire administered to a random sample of 60 women representing various nationalities, socio-economic backgrounds, and employment statuses within the United Arab Emirates. The findings highlighted that feminized poverty is a widespread issue across the Arab region, largely influenced by factors such as the shift from extended to nuclear family structures, increasing rates of family disintegration, and rising divorce rates. Moreover, the results indicated that no statistically significant differences were found in the prevalence of feminization of poverty across nationalities, including Emirati, Moroccan, Palestinian, Jordanian, and Egyptian participants. Among the most impactful proposed solutions were the eradication of gender-based discrimination in Arab societies and the advancement of gender equality in both rights and responsibilities—measures deemed essential for addressing the underlying drivers of poverty among women in the region.

Keywords: *Feminization of Poverty, gender Equality, Arab women, socioeconomic disparities, Emirati society*

Introduction

In recent decades, societies around the world have undergone sweeping changes—economic, social, cultural, and political—driven largely by the forces of globalization. These changes have impacted all segments of society; however, their effect on women has been especially profound (Ramadan, 2019; Inglehart, 2020; Nwaoduh, 2017; Klasen et al., 2015). Despite the efforts of international human rights and humanitarian organisations to address women-specific issues, United Nations reports continue to highlight that women remain among the most vulnerable to poverty (Moquette, 2029; Seliga, 2023; Boris, 2019). This is attributed to gender disparities in access to education and employment, with women forming a significant proportion of the uneducated population and earning lower wages than men (Tabana, 2021).

Traditional societal norms in many parts of the world—including Arab societies—further hinder women from fully participating in economic, political, and community development. This systemic marginalisation results in a loss of national developmental potential (Ahmed, 2020). Providing women with greater access to education and employment is essential for achieving societal progress. Investing in women is widely recognised as a critical strategy for alleviating poverty and promoting sustainable development (Jassim, 2021). This study explores the concept of the feminization of poverty in the Arab world, particularly in the United Arab Emirates, identifying its causes and proposing strategies to mitigate it (Ibrahim, 2021). It aims to offer a theoretical framework to support future research while addressing a pressing socio-economic issue affecting Arab women.

Problem

The concept of feminization of poverty—though relatively new in Arab and Islamic contexts—originated in Western discourse, particularly in response to weakened family structures and male

withdrawal from familial responsibilities (Rashdi, 2020; Gimenez, 2020). The phenomenon is now evident globally, including in Arab nations, where poverty rates are increasingly skewed toward women. Contributing factors include limited access to education and employment, and entrenched cultural norms that restrict women's roles in society (Melo, 2019; Mishra, 2018; Chant, 2016; Bradshaw et al., 2018).

Arab societies cannot overlook the growing economic and social burdens placed on women, especially in female-headed households. Addressing the feminization of poverty requires a shift toward empowering women, ensuring gender equality in opportunities, and dismantling societal beliefs that confine women's roles to the home (Jassim, *ibid.*). This study seeks to examine the feminization of poverty across Arab countries with specific focus on Emirati women.

Objectives

1. To identify the root causes of feminization of poverty among Arab women.
2. To propose practical solutions for addressing the feminization of poverty.
3. To determine whether significant differences exist in the feminization of poverty based on nationality (Emirati, Moroccan, Palestinian, Jordanian, Egyptian, Syrian).

Questions and Hypothesis

- What are the causes of feminization of poverty among Arab women?
- What are the proposed solutions to address this phenomenon?

- **H0:** There are no statistically significant differences in the feminization of poverty attributable to nationality (Emirati, Moroccan, Palestinian, Jordanian, Egyptian, Syrian).

Literature review

Few studies have focused on the feminization of poverty in the UAE. However, Jassim (2021) examined the issue in Iraq, using a descriptive approach with a sample of 120 women from Mosul. The study highlighted male dominance as a contributing factor and recommended social and economic support for women. Similarly, Ibrahim (2021) investigated women's capacity building in Khartoum and found a strong link between empowerment and poverty reduction.

Rashdi (2020) explored the characteristics of feminized poverty in Algeria, noting its prevalence in rural areas and among women with low education. The COVID-19 pandemic was found to exacerbate poverty, disproportionately affecting women. Abdel Wahab (2020) studied coping strategies of women in Giza, Egypt, and found low living standards and adaptive behaviours aimed at overcoming poverty. The study recommended increased education and support for women.

Theoretical Framework

Defining poverty has posed challenges for scholars due to its multifaceted nature—spanning economic, social, cultural, and political dimensions. Sociologists view poverty as a social issue that limits an individual's ability to achieve their aspirations due to structural inequalities (Hagenaars, 2017).

Modern definitions of poverty go beyond financial deprivation, incorporating access to healthcare, education, and participation in societal life (Madanipour et al., 2015). For women, poverty also includes limited autonomy, lack of communication rights, and exclusion from privileges enjoyed by men (Agha, 2021).

Dimensions and Causes of Women's Poverty in Arab Society in Arab societies, the family is traditionally responsible for providing financial and social security to women. However, the economic marginalisation of women has become increasingly evident (Naji, 2020). Though poverty affects both genders, its impact is often harsher on women due to lack of empowerment and societal restrictions that limit job opportunities. As a result, women are often pushed toward low-paying or informal employment or are forced to rely on social assistance (Nazir, 2018).

Female-Headed Households

Women who become primary breadwinners—due to divorce, widowhood, or a spouse's disability—face increased risks of poverty. The scarcity of well-paying jobs and the burden of household responsibilities severely constrain their ability to pursue professional growth. These conditions often lead to poor educational outcomes for children, perpetuating the cycle of poverty (Fadil, 2021).

Globalisation and the Feminization of Poverty

Global economic shifts and the dominance of capitalist models have prioritised private sector growth over public employment. This trend disproportionately affects women, who are less likely to be hired in competitive sectors. Without equitable wage distribution, systemic gender disparities persist, potentially fuelling familial instability and rising divorce rates (Ahmed, ibi; Dominelli, 2016).

Socio-Demographic Dynamics and Support Networks Dilution

The trend of feminised poverty is rapidly becoming fuelled by fundamental socio-demographic changes, especially family break-up and the breaking of historic safety nets. Traditionally, the extended family formations would offer crucial economic and emotional assistance. Nevertheless, modern trends in society that tilt towards individualism have eroded the unity of the community as a whole, which has suppressed the collective care (Ramadan, 2019). As a result, women bear the brunt of the costs of

relinquishing financial and care giving roles to the male counterparts. These worsening economic realities coupled with the growing number of family members often force women into the workforce unwillingly to support their families (Jassim, *ibid*).

Systemic Discrimination and Discriminatory Institutional Barriers

The level of gender-based discrimination is still highly ingrained both within institutional structures, and this has been crippling access by women to equal education, health and employment opportunities (Das, S., & Das, 2019). Even though education has become a key trigger to economic equality, systematic gender discrimination and traditional attitudes towards women, including early marriage, still impede the achievement of education by women in many Arab cultures (Abdul Wahab, *Ibid*) The imbalance continues to exist in the labour market as women continue to be marginalized into informal sector, where they have to suffer hardships of insecurity, salary reductions, and failure to advance in their careers (Jassim, *Ibid*). This economic insecurity is also contributed to by discriminative legal frameworks and inheritance practices which structurally deny women long term financial security (Ramadan, *Ibid*; Tabana, *Ibid*). Moreover, financial poverty is also indisputably connected with the increased susceptibility to gender violence and thus the vicious cycle of poverty is going on (Abdul Wahab, *Ibid*) This systemic disparity can also be seen through the healthcare access, where women face a serious physical and psychological threat due to societal neglect and early pregnancies (Ibrahim, *Ibid*).

Psycho-Social Constraints and Cultural Hegemony

Overall patriarchal paradigms that enforce women to the domestic spaces and leave the power of the public, profession, and political affairs to men are fundamental factors that compound feminisation of poverty (Ahad, 2025). This cultural hegemony determines the allocation of resources, in most cases giving men and bequeathing educational and career improvement, as well as systematically undermining female educational credentials and contributing to the widespread underemployment (Woodford, 2025).

Mitigation Strategic Frameworks

In order to be effective in combating the feminisation of poverty, the literature recommends a dualistic approach of dealing with the problem by combining long-term structural empowerment and short-term socio-economic remedies (Machingo, 2018).

The Long-term Structural Empowerment: To unwind the sources of poverty, there is need to have extensive educational reforms such as literacy programmes to improve the skills and economic involvement of women. Moreover, universal health care including family planning and nutrition should be given priority. Gender-sensitive employment and entrepreneurial opportunities should be a part of the national development agenda to be empowered economically (Cerf, 2023). At the same time, there is a strong necessity to increase the level of legal literacy and political participation of women to enable them to defend their rights and to struggle with systemic exploitation (Yilmaz, 2025).

Short-term Socio-Economic Interventions: There should be a short-term stabilisation of living conditions to create sustainable livelihoods. This requires the supply of safe shelter, essential amenities and special sensitization on the rights of law. Also, there should be urgent job creation and training vocational programmes so that women can easily enter the labor force and be motivated to establish small business ventures (Wilson, 2020).

Methodology

The present study employed a descriptive research approach, which is suitable for analysing social phenomena by providing an in-depth and accurate depiction of the issue under investigation. This method allows for the collection of rich, detailed data that captures the complexities of feminized poverty as experienced by women in the UAE context.

Participants

The study population comprised all women residing in Abu Dhabi in the year 2024. A purposive sample of 60 women was selected to represent a diverse group of female residents from various nationalities, socio-economic backgrounds, and employment statuses within the United Arab Emirates.

Table 1
Distribution of the Study Sample According to Personal Variables

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	20–30 years	10	17%
	31–40 years	29	48%
	41–50 years	10	17%
	51 years and above	11	18%
	Total	60	100%
Marital Status	Single	16	27%
	Married	28	47%
	Divorced	10	17%
	Widowed	6	10%
	Total	60	100%
Family Size	Fewer than 4 members	11	18%
	5–8 members	37	62%
	9–12 members	8	13%
	More than 12 members	4	7%
	Total	60	100%
Education Level	Illiterate	4	7%
	Basic reading and writing	6	10%
	Secondary school certificate	19	32%
	University degree	25	42%
	Postgraduate degree	6	10%
	Total	60	100%
	Nationality	Emirati	10
Moroccan		10	16.7%
Palestinian		10	16.7%
Jordanian		10	16.7%
Egyptian		10	16.7%
Syrian		10	16.7%
Total		60	100%

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the study sample according to several personal variables. The results show that 48% of the participants were male, while 52% were female. The largest proportion of participants by age group was in the 31–40 years category, accounting for 48%, whereas the smallest proportion, 17%, was in the 20–30 years category. Regarding family size, the majority of participants (62%) belonged to families with 5–8 members, while the lowest proportion (7%) came from families with fewer than 4 members. In terms of father's education level, the highest percentage (58%) had attained a university degree, while only 5% were illiterate. For mother's education level, the highest percentage (32%) also held a university degree, whereas the lowest percentage (7%) were illiterate. The sample included equal representation across six nationalities: Emirati, Moroccan, Palestinian, Jordanian, Egyptian, and Syrian, with each group making up 16.7% of the total sample.

Research Tool

The study utilised a structured questionnaire as the primary tool for data collection. The questionnaire was divided into two main sections: Section One focused on demographic data, including variables such as age, marital status, family size, education level, and nationality. Section Two consisted of 10 items designed to address the research questions and objectives.

These items were distributed across two key axes: Causes of the Feminization of Poverty, which included items on: (Modern economic pressures, Rising female unemployment, Early divorce and Breakdown of social ties.

Solutions to Combat the Feminization of Poverty, which included items on: Gender equality in rights and duties, Providing employment opportunities for divorced women, Increasing women's participation in the labour market, Eradicating gender prejudice in Arab societies and Establishing funding programmes for women's projects

To ensure the validity of the instrument, the initial version of the questionnaire was reviewed by the academic supervisor, who provided feedback on the clarity and relevance of the items. Revisions were made accordingly, and the final version was approved for use.

The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach’s Alpha to assess internal consistency. The values obtained were deemed acceptable and appropriate for the objectives of this study. Details of the reliability test are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Internal Consistency Reliability Coefficient of the Study Instrument

Questionnaire Domains	Internal Consistency
Entire Instrument	0.92

It is evident from Table 2 that the overall reliability coefficient of the study instrument reached 0.92, which is considered both appropriate and acceptable for the purposes of this study. The responses to the questionnaire items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, where participants received a score of 5 for *Strongly Agree*, 4 for *Agree*, 3 for *Neutral*, 2 for *Disagree*, and 1 for *Strongly Disagree*. This scale was applied consistently across all items in the two axes of the study instrument.

Results

First question result: What Are the Reasons for the Feminization of Poverty Among Arab Women?

To address this question, arithmetic means and standard deviations were calculated for the items related to the causes of feminization of poverty among Arab women.

Table 3
Items Related to the Causes of Feminization of Poverty Among Arab Women

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
Collapse of social ties	4.20	0.83	High
Transformation of the Arab family from the extended to the nuclear model	4.19	0.91	High
Family disintegration and women bearing full responsibility	3.63	1.41	Moderate
Increase in female unemployment rates	3.47	1.32	Moderate
Early divorce among women	3.34	1.11	Moderate
Overall Average	3.68	0.94	High

It is evident from Table 3 that the overall arithmetic mean for the causes of feminization of poverty among Arab women was 3.68, indicating a high level of agreement. The individual item means ranged

from 3.34 to 4.20. Two items received high approval ratings: "Collapse of social ties" with a mean of 4.20 and "Transformation of the Arab family from the traditional extended model to the modern nuclear model" with a mean of 4.19. The remaining items were rated at a moderate level of agreement, with mean scores ranging from 3.34 to 3.63: The highest among these was *Item 1*: "Family disintegration and women taking responsibility" with a mean of 3.63 and the lowest was *Item 4*: "Early divorce among women", with a mean of 3.34

Second question result: What Are the Solutions to Address the Feminization of Poverty Among Arab Women?

To answer this question, arithmetic means and standard deviations were calculated for the items related to proposed solutions for confronting the feminization of poverty among Arab women.

Table 4

Items Related to Solutions to Address the Feminization of Poverty Among Arab Women

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
Purifying Arab societies from prejudice against women	4.32	0.86	High
Gender equality in rights and duties	4.23	1.16	High
Establishing programmes to finance women's projects	3.43	1.25	Moderate
Increasing women's participation in the labour market	3.4	1.2	Moderate
Providing job opportunities for divorced women	3.12	1.14	Moderate
Overall Average	3.7	0.97	Moderate

It is evident from Table 4 that the overall arithmetic mean for the proposed solutions to address the feminization of poverty among Arab women is 3.70, indicating a moderate level of agreement. The arithmetic means for individual items ranged between 3.12 and 4.32. Two items received high approval ratings: "Purifying Arab societies from prejudice against women", with a mean of 4.32 and "Gender equality in rights and duties", with a mean of 4.23. The remaining items were rated at a moderate level, with means ranging from 3.12 to 3.43. The highest among these was *Item 5*: "Establishing programmes to finance women's projects", with a mean of 3.43 and The lowest was *Item 2*: "Providing job opportunities for divorced women", with a mean of 3.12.

Hypothesis Result (H0): There are no statistically significant differences in the feminization of poverty attributable to the nationality variable (Emirati, Moroccan, Palestinian, Jordanian, Egyptian, Syrian).

To test this hypothesis, the frequencies and percentages of responses indicating a significant perception of feminized poverty were calculated according to nationality. A Chi-square test was then applied to compare these proportions across the six nationalities. The results are presented in Table 8.

Table 8
Frequencies, Percentages, and Chi-square Test Values for the Feminization of Poverty According to Nationality (Emirati, Moroccan, Palestinian, Jordanian, Egyptian, Syrian).

Nationality	Frequency	Chi-square Value	p-value	Statistical Significance
Emirati	5358	12.569	0.672	Not significant
Moroccan	1278	10.363	0.9	Not significant
Palestinian	896	45.232	0.067	Not significant
Jordanian	729	51.216	0.083	Not significant
Egyptian	639	62.941	0.416	Not significant
Syrian	587	51.211	0	Significant

It is evident from Table 8 that there is no statistically significant difference in the feminization of poverty attributable to the nationality variable among participants from Emirati, Moroccan, Palestinian, Jordanian, and Egyptian backgrounds. The Chi-square values associated with their respective frequencies (5358, 1278, 896, 729, and 639) yielded p-values greater than 0.05, indicating that the differences are not statistically significant. However, the results revealed a statistically significant

difference in the case of participants of Syrian nationality. The frequency for this group was 587, and the associated Chi-square value resulted in a p-value of 0.000, which is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. This suggests that Syrian women in the sample are more significantly affected by feminization of poverty compared to other nationalities represented in the study.

Discussion

Discussion of the Results for the First Research Question: What Are the Reasons for the Feminization of Poverty Among Arab Women?

The findings revealed that the overall arithmetic mean for the reasons behind the feminization of poverty among Arab women indicated a high level of agreement. Two items received notably high ratings: “The collapse of social ties”, “The transformation of the Arab family from the traditional extended model to the modern nuclear model”. The remaining items received moderate approval, with the highest among them being “Family disintegration and women taking responsibility”, and the lowest being “Early divorce among women”. These results can be attributed to several structural and social changes, including the erosion of extended family support systems and increased responsibilities placed on women within evolving family structures. This finding aligns with the studies of Jassim (2021), Ibrahim (2021), and Rashdi (2020).

Discussion of the Results for the Second Research Question: What Are the Solutions to Address the Feminization of Poverty Among Arab Women?

The results showed that the overall arithmetic mean for the proposed solutions was at a moderate level of agreement. However, two items received high approval: “Purifying Arab societies from prejudice against women” ,“Gender equality in rights and duties”. The remaining items received moderate ratings, with the highest being “Establishing programmes to finance women’s projects” and the lowest being “Providing job opportunities for divorced women”. This suggests that participants were aware of the seriousness of the feminization of poverty and recognised the importance of societal reform, legal equality, and economic empowerment in addressing the issue. These results are consistent with the findings of Jassim (2021), Ibrahim (2021), and Rashdi (2020).

Discussion of the Hypothesis: Are There Significant Differences in the Feminization of Poverty Attributable to Nationality (Emirati, Moroccan, Palestinian, Jordanian, Egyptian, Syrian)?

The findings indicated that there were no statistically significant differences in the feminization of poverty based on nationality among the Emirati, Moroccan, Palestinian, Jordanian, and Egyptian participants. The Chi-square values for these groups (5358, 1278, 896, 729, and 639, respectively) yielded non-significant p-values. However, a statistically significant difference was found among Syrian participants, where the Chi-square test based on a frequency of 587 resulted in a p-value of 0.000, indicating statistical significance. This result may be attributed to the socio-political challenges faced by Syria, which have exacerbated economic vulnerability and gender inequality, thereby intensifying the feminization of poverty among Syrian women. In contrast, other countries in the sample have made more structured efforts to bridge the gender gap. These findings are consistent with prior studies by Jassim (2021), Ibrahim (2021), Rashdi (2020), and Abdul Wahab (2020).

Conclusion

The above findings indicate that the feminization of poverty is a widespread phenomenon across the Arab region, driven primarily by factors such as the shift from extended to nuclear family structures, family disintegration, and increased rates of divorce. The results also revealed that there were no statistically significant differences in the prevalence of feminized poverty based on nationality among Emirati, Moroccan, Palestinian, Jordanian, and Egyptian participants.

The most effective solutions identified include the elimination of gender-based bias within Arab societies and the promotion of gender equality in rights and responsibilities, which are essential steps toward addressing the root causes of poverty among women in the region.

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