

Unintended Pregnancies in the Middle East and North Africa

by

Farzaneh Roudi - Population Reference Bureau
Ahmed Abdul Monem - Pan Arab Project for Family Health

Prepared for

IUSSP International Population Conference, Marrakech 2009

Theme 1: Reproductive Health

Session 105: Unintended Pregnancies

September 29 — 3:30 5:00 pm in Karam 3

Women, families, and societies benefit when childbearing is planned. But throughout the world, including the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA¹), too often women become pregnant when they have already achieved their desired family size and do not desire to have more children or desire to have a child or another child later in their lives. Whether and when to have a child are basic human and reproductive rights acknowledged in different international documents, including the Programme of Action of the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994.

Current data suggest that 1 in 3 pregnancies in the MENA region is unintended. Unintended pregnancies are a burden on women's health and their families, as well as on countries' health system and its social and economic development. Thus, the problem of unintended pregnancies although may at first appear that it should be dealt with as a couple's private concern, in fact it has health and demographic consequences that require a public policy response addressing the issue of unintended pregnancies for both individual's and societies' wellbeing.

It is particularly urgent to address the issue of unintended pregnancy in the MENA region now, because an unprecedented number of women are in the reproductive age group (ages 15-49) and at risk of unintended pregnancies. The United Nations estimates that the number of women of reproductive years will be over 120 million in 2010, with more than half them between the ages of 15 and 29 years.

This paper examines the latest national data on unintended pregnancies in Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. Being the first such effort of its kind, the paper analyzes and illustrates levels and patterns of unintended pregnancies across countries and their differentials among population groups within individual countries.

Concerns Surrounding Unintended Pregnancies

Public health practitioners are interested in the subject of unintended pregnancies to prevent unwanted childbearing, and demographers to better understand fertility as the main component of population change. Social scientists in general and women advocates in particular are also interested in the concept of

¹ Countries included in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as defined here include: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine (referring to the Arab populations of Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

unintended pregnancies for promoting women's ability to determine whether and when to have children. Unintended pregnancies—or couples' failures to successfully use contraception—occur for variety of reasons, such as not having an easy access to a contraceptive method of their choice, failing to use the method correctly, or simply because a women having no power to exercise her reproductive rights that the international development community advocate and hope for.

According to international agreements related to family planning and reproductive health, every pregnancy should be intended and wanted. However, a significant number of women living in the MENA region and beyond experience unintended pregnancies. The high rate of unintended pregnancies is a serious public health issue that impedes the governments' efforts to improve women's and children's health. International studies have shown that when a pregnancy is not intended at the time of birth, it jeopardizes the health of both the mother and child. Unintended pregnancies carry a higher risk of maternal mortality and morbidity because they are associated with unsafe abortions, and a higher risk of child illness because of late initiation and underuse of prenatal care, poor health behaviors during pregnancy, complications during delivery, low birth weight, and problems in child development.

By reducing unintended pregnancy, MENA governments not only help improve the health and well being of women and their families, but also help their countries be better positioned to move towards achieving their development goals. Reducing maternal and child mortality and reducing poverty are three of the eight Millennium Development Goals. Furthermore, reducing unintended pregnancies will help lower fertility and lessen population pressure on this environmentally fragile region, which is faced with the most sever freshwater shortages in the world. Slower population growth will also help MENA economies, that are faced with high rates of unemployment among its young people, have slower inflow of newly job seekers. Despite its vast oil resources, MENA economies have generally not been able to accommodate for their rapidly growing newcomers to the job market.

Addressing unintended pregnancies in MENA now is critical and requires policymakers and program managers to have a correct understanding of the magnitude and patterns of such pregnancies and their implications for the health and well being of mothers, children, and the society as a whole.

Sources of Data

The data presented in this paper are from the Pan Arab Population and Family Health (PAPFAM) surveys conducted in Algeria (2002), Lebanon and Morocco (2004), Palestine (referring to the population of Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem; 2006), Syria and Tunisia (2001), and Yemen (2003). These nationally representative surveys provide comparable data on population, family planning, and maternal and child health. Except for the Tunisian survey, they all contain a direct question on the subject of unintended pregnancies, asking pregnant women that, "At the time you became pregnant, did you want to become pregnant *then*, did you want to wait until *later*, or did you *not* want to become pregnant *at all*?"¹ Married women responding to these questions report on attitudes they hold towards their pregnancies at time of the survey.

In the case of the Tunisian survey, there was no question directly on the status of current pregnancy. All married women were asked whether they desired to have more children. As a result, data for Tunisia could not be included in most of the tabulations and graphs presented in this paper.

RESULTS

These PAFAM surveys show a wide range of fertility levels among the countries, ranging from 6.2 births per woman in Yemen to 1.9 births per woman in Lebanon. In Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, more than half of married women of reproductive age use modern contraceptives, but in Yemen the rate is as low as 13 percent. Overall contraceptive use is the highest in Morocco and Tunisia, where 63 percent of married women use contraception, including traditional methods. (See Table 1.)

Table 1 – Total Fertility Rate and Contraceptive Use Among Married Women Ages 15 to 49

	Yemen 2003	Palestine 2006	Syria 2001	Morocco 2004	Algeria 2002	Tunisia 2001	Lebanon 2004
Average number of births per woman	6.2	4.6	3.8	2.5	2.4	2.1	1.9
<u>Percent of married women using contraception</u>							
Any method	23	50	47	63	57	63	58
Modern methods	13	39	35	55	52	53	34

Marriage and Pregnancy Rates

In MENA, marriage is legal and cultural prerequisite for childbearing. Thus, any study of unintended pregnancies needs to start by looking at marriage patterns. Moreover, marriage patterns, most notably age at first marriage, influence overall fertility levels, that in turn influence rates of unintended pregnancies. Family health surveys, including PAFAM surveys, ask married women about their pregnancy, contraceptive use, and other reproductive health issues. No data are collected on unconventional marriages and pregnancies within such marriages.

Among countries with PAFAM surveys, percent of women 15 to 49 years old who were married at the time of the survey ranged from 42 percent in Algeria and 45 percent in Lebanon and Tunisia to 57 percent in Palestine and 59 percent in Yemen. Yemeni women under age 40 are more likely to be married than their counterparts in the other countries. Around 90 percent of women are married by age 40 in Yemen as compared to 72 percent in Lebanon. Yemeni young women ages 15 to 19 are 16 times more likely to be married than their Tunisian counterparts. (See Table 2.)

Table 2 – Percent of Women Who Are Married by 5-Year Age Groups

Age	Yemen 2003	Palestine 2006	Syria 2001	Morocco 2004	Algeria 2002	Tunisia 2001	Lebanon 2004
15 - 19	16	9	11	11	2	1	3
20 - 24	55	48	42	38	17	14	19
25 - 29	80	77	61	55	43	44	45
30 - 34	88	84	78	67	62	65	62
35 - 39	91	86	86	75	78	81	72
40 - 44	88	86	89	79	83	86	73
45 - 49	87	82	88	79	85	87	78
Total (15-49)	59	57	54	52	42	45	45

These aggregated data on marriage shown in Table 2 and pregnancy rates shown in Table 3 point to a positive correlation between marriage rates and pregnancy rates across the countries, as expected. In other words, Yemeni and Palestinian women who generally are more likely to be married, are also more likely to be pregnant when they are married. In Yemen, 16 percent of married women—or 1 in 6—were pregnant at the time of the survey, and in Palestine 12 percent of married women of reproductive age—or 1 in 8—were pregnant, as compared to 7 percent of married women in Lebanon and Tunisia—or 1 in 14—who were pregnant.

Among 15-to-19 years old female Palestinians who are married, one in three reported to be pregnant at the time of the survey, that is the highest in the region. Interestingly, although women living in Lebanon generally have lower marriage rate and also a lower pregnancy rate, but when it comes to the youngest group of married women ages 15 to 19, one in three is pregnant, which is similar to that of the Palestinians.

Table 3 – Percent of Married Women Who Are Pregnant by 5-Year Age Groups

Age	Yemen 2003	Palestine 2006	Syria 2001	Morocco 2004	Algeria 2002	Tunisia 2001	Lebanon 2004
15 - 19	24	34	26	24	10	13	32
20 - 24	22	25	21	14	20	21	20
25 - 29	19	18	17	13	17	14	15
30 - 34	18	11	11	8	13	10	9
35 - 39	12	9	7	5	8	6	4
40 - 44	7	2	3	2	3	1	1
45 - 49	4	0	1	0	0	0	1
Total (15-49)	16	12	11	8	9	7	7

Intended and Unintended Pregnancies

The PAFAM surveys show that pregnant women generally tend to report their pregnancies as unintended at a higher rate in countries where the overall fertility level is higher (see Table 4). Percent of pregnant women who wanted to have the pregnancy “then” ranged from 71 percent in Lebanon to 42 percent in Yemen. In other words, pregnant Yemeni women did not want their pregnancies “then” at a higher rate than their counter parts in the other countries—58 percent of pregnant Yemenis either wanted no more children or wanted a child later. This high level of unintended pregnancy in Yemen, combined with high rate of marriage and high rate of pregnancy to begin with, translates into an estimated half a million births in the country in 2009 that can be labeled as “unintended.” (See Table 5.)

The number of unintended pregnancies in 2009 for PAFAM countries are shown in Table 5. The numbers are calculated based on the estimated number of births in 2009, using PRB’s World Population Data Sheet 2009 and percent of pregnancies that are reported in the PAFAM surveys as wanted later or not wanted at all. In Morocco, for example, it is estimated that there are around 650,000 births, with 200,000 of them unintended. The six PAFAM countries covered in this paper together expect to have 1.2 million unintended births in 2009.

Table 4 – Percent Distribution of Pregnant Women by Whether They Wanted No More Children, Wanted a Child or Another Child Later, or Then

Status of pregnancy	Yemen 2003	Palestine 2006	Syria 2001	Morocco 2004	Algeria 2002	Lebanon 2004
Wanted then	42	61	69	69	69	71
Wanted later	36	26	21	19	18	15
Wanted no more	22	13	10	12	13	14

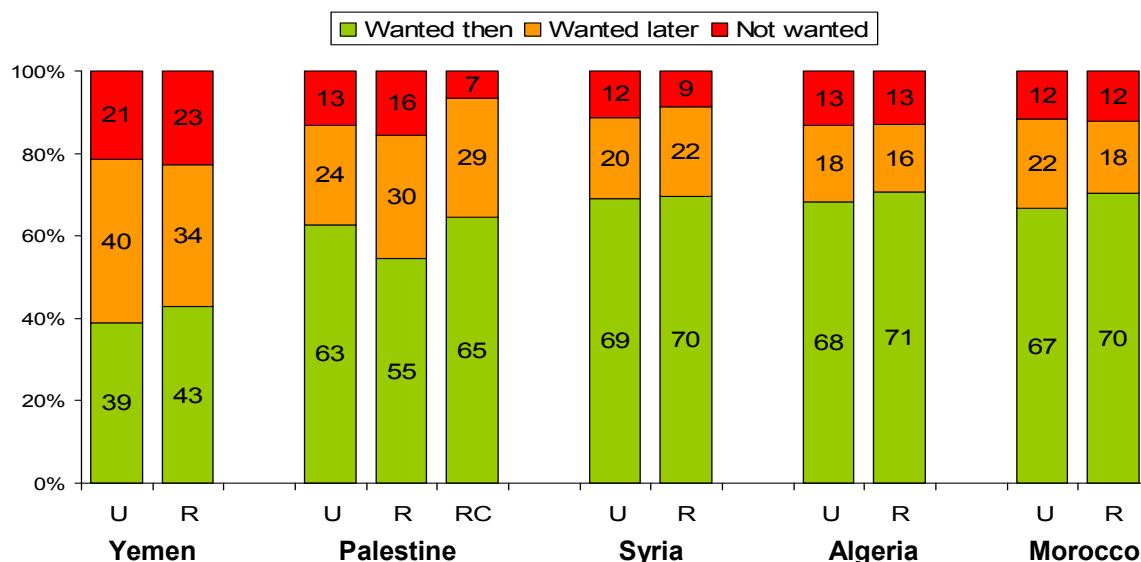
Table 5 – Estimated Total Number of Births in 2009 and Births That Are Unintended (Rounded in 1,000)

	Yemen	Palestine	Syria	Morocco	Algeria	Lebanon	Total
Total number of births in 2009	867,000	128,000	618,000	649,000	813,000	78,000	3,153,00
% of pregnancies that are unintended based on PAFAM surveys	58	39	31	31	31	29	39
Estimated number of births that are unintended	503,000	50,000	192,000	201,000	252,000	23,000	1,220,000

Differentials in Pregnancy Status

In an effort to look for patterns of unintended pregnancies among different population groups in the six PAFAM countries, the PAFAM Project produced a special series of tabulations that are presented in this paper. The data presented below shows the status of pregnancies—wanted a child then, wanted later, or wanted no more—as reported by women in each country by their age, parity, educational attainment, employment status, and place of residence (urban-rural). Among these variables, place of residence (rural-urban) appears to be the least determining factor in women’s reporting of their pregnancy status. In individual countries, pregnant women living rural and urban areas report not much different whether they wanted their pregnancies then, later or not at all, except for the Palestinians. The largest gap in rural-urban residence on percent of pregnant women who said they did not want their pregnancy at all is seen among the Palestinians. A lower percentage of Palestinian pregnant women living in refugee camps reported that they wanted their pregnancy then than those living in other areas of the Palestinian Territory. (See Figure 1.) It should be noted that Lebanon is not included in Figure 1, because the survey was conducted only in urban areas, where about 90 percent of Lebanon’s population live.

Figure 1
Women by Place of Residence & Attitude Toward Their Pregnancy



Age and Parity

Percent of married women who are pregnant declines as they age and their parity (number of children ever-born) increases. One in four childless married women (25 percent) are pregnant in both Yemen and Lebanon—two countries with very different total fertility rates. But then the pregnancy rate declines to around one in five (21 percent) among Yemeni married women who already have one or two children, as compared to 1 in 12 (or 8 percent) in Lebanon. (See Figure 2.)

As also expected, pregnant women with higher number of children ever-born tend to report their pregnancy as unintended at a higher rate; and percent of women who said that they did not want to have their pregnancy at all increases as their parity increases. In Morocco, for example, 33 percent of pregnant women who already had three or four children said they did not want the pregnancy at all, as compared to 6 percent of those who had one or two children. In Yemen, three quarters of pregnant women who already had at least 5 children said they did not want that pregnancy; with nearly half of them saying that they did not want it at all. (See Figure 3.)

Lebanese pregnant women with five or more children appear to be exceptional to the rule. They are less likely to say that they did not want to have the pregnancy at all and more likely to say that they wanted the pregnancy then or later than pregnant women who had three or four children.

Figure 2
Percent of Married Women Who Are Pregnant by Parity

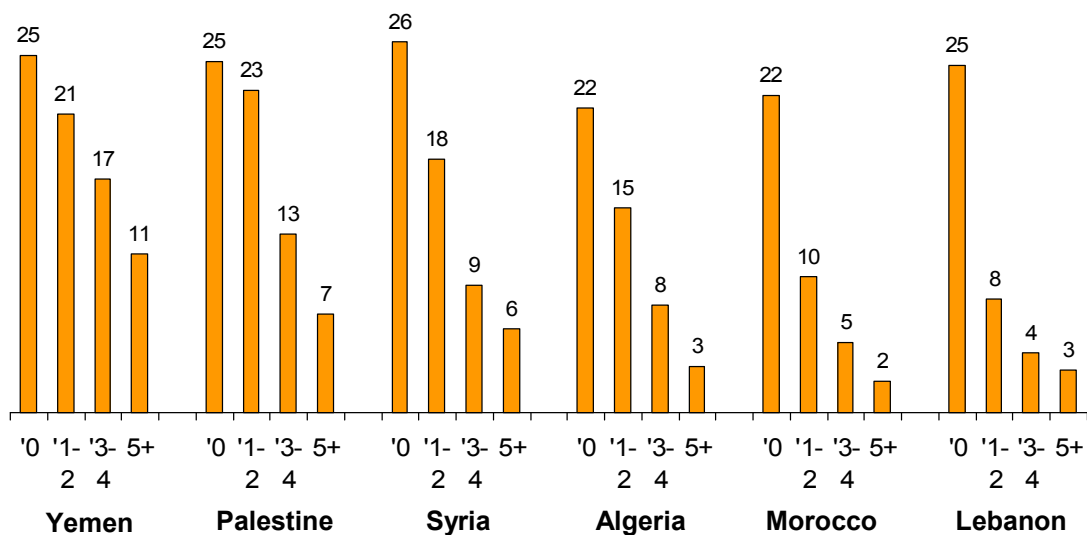


Figure 3 - Percent Distribution of Pregnant Women by Parity & Attitude Toward Their Pregnancy

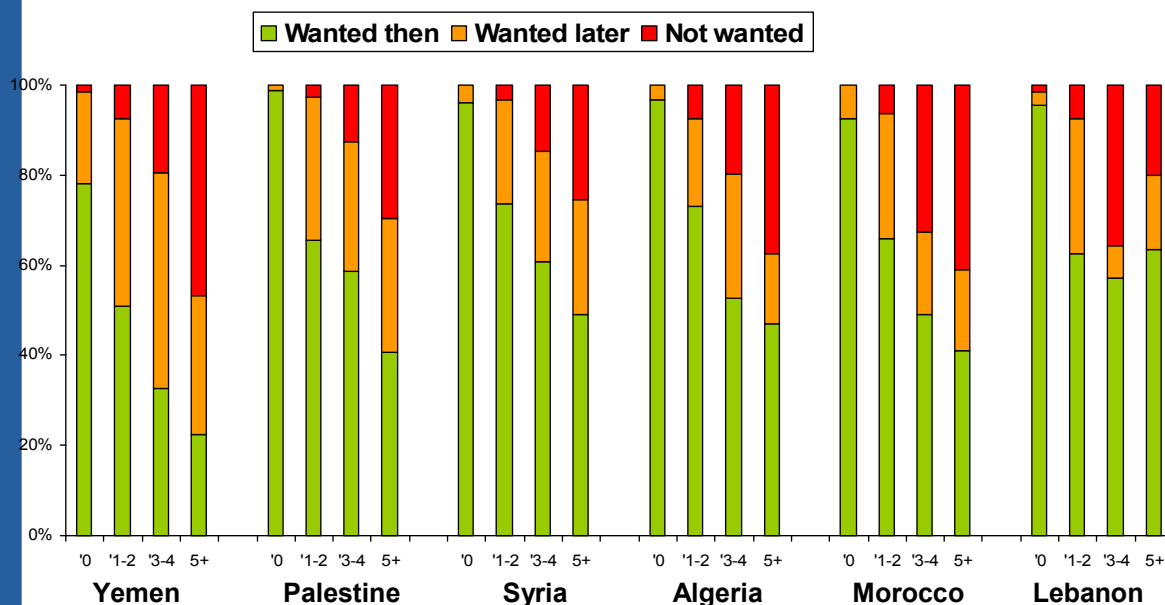


Table 6 shows that the percent of pregnancies that are reported as unintended increases with age, as one would expect. Among pregnant women in all age groups, except for the youngest group (15 to 19 years old), a higher percentage of Yemeni women reported that they wanted no more children than their counterparts in any of the other PAFAM countries. The youngest age group of pregnant women in PAFAM countries nearly universally said that they wanted to have a child then. Four percent of pregnant, young Algerians and Palestinians said that they did not want a that pregnancy at all, that is twice that of reported by their Yemeni counterparts.

Table 6 – Percent of Pregnant Women Who Wanted a Child or Another Child Later + Wanted No More Children

Age group	Yemen 2003		Palestine 2006		Syria 2001		Morocco 2004		Algeria 2002		Lebanon 2004	
	Later	No more	Later	No more	Later	No more	Later	No more	Later	No more	Later	No more
15-19	31	2	24	4	18	1	14	0	16	4	7	0
20-24	41	9	29	3	20	3	19	1	14	1	30	4
25-29	37	19	29	9	20	8	18	12	17	9	23	10
30-34	36	33	21	20	18	15	27	12	19	10	6	16
35-39	29	44	25	33	30	22	20	35	18	22	2	24
40-44	24	59	0	59	17	38	16	49	16	50	8	47

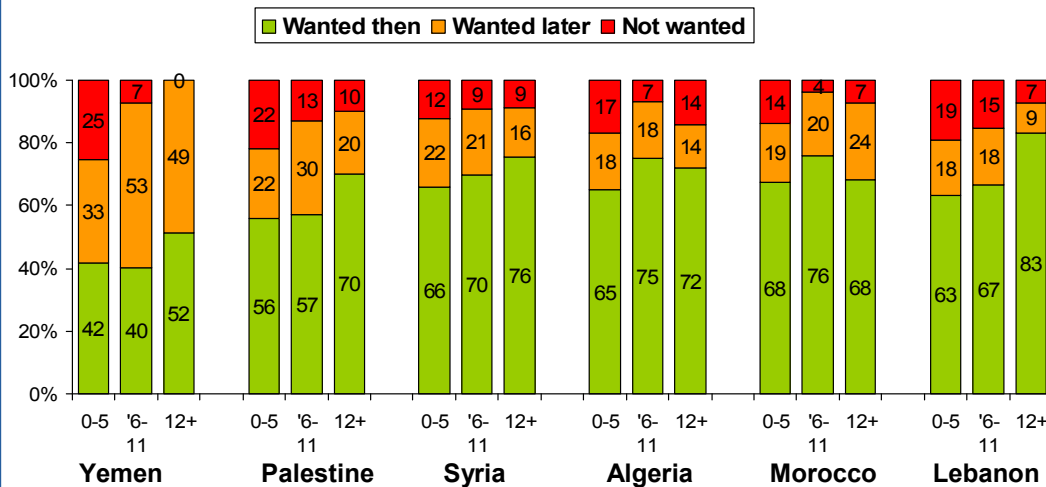
Total	36	22	26	12	21	10	19	12	17	13	16	14

Education

Looking at the aggregated data across the PAFAM countries, no regular pattern is seen between women’s education and the likelihood of being pregnant among married women. But when it comes to levels of unintended pregnancies among pregnant women, four countries of Yemen, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon follow a similar pattern, where more educated women tend to have lower rates of unintended pregnancies. In Palestine, for example, 70 percent of pregnant women with at least 12 years of education said that they wanted their pregnancies then as compared to 56 percent of those with less than six years of education who said the same. Pregnant Palestinian women with less than six years of education are twice likely than those with at least 12 years of education to report that they did not want the pregnancy at all. (See Figure 4.)

In the other two countries of Algeria and Morocco, pregnant women with 6 to 11 years of education report a lower rate of unintended pregnancy than their counterparts in the higher and lower educational categories. In Morocco, 4 percent of pregnant women with 6 to 11 years of education reported that they did not want the pregnancy at all, as compared to 14 percent for those with less than 6 years of education and 7 percent for those with at least 12 years of education.

Figure 4 – Percent Distribution of Women by Years of Formal Education & Attitude Toward Their Pregnancy



Employment

In all the PAPFAM countries, except for Algeria, married women who are employed are less likely to be pregnant than those who are not employed. In Yemen, 17 percent of working women were pregnant as compared to 12 percent among those who are not working. And 8 percent of working Moroccan women were pregnant as compared to 5 percent of those who are not working. A reverse pattern is seen in Algeria, where percent of working women who are pregnant (10 percent) is slightly higher than that of pregnant women who are not working (9 percent). (See Figure 5.)

There is a mixed pattern across the PAPFAM countries in regard to the relationship between pregnant women’s employment status and whether their pregnancies were reported as wanted then, later, or not at all. In Palestine, Syria, Algeria, and Lebanon, working women are more likely to report on their pregnancy as intended—85 percent Lebanese working report said they wanted the pregnancy then, that is the highest rate among the six PAPFAM countries. But at the opposite spectrum, only around a third of working Yemeni pregnant women said they wanted their pregnancy then. And more importantly, another third said they did not wanted the pregnancy at all—the highest rate among the PAPFAM countries. (See Figure 6.)

Yemen and Morocco are the only two countries whose working pregnant women are less likely to report their pregnancy as intended (“wanted then”) as compared to their counterparts in their own country who are not working. And in Morocco and Syria, the same percent of working and not working pregnant women in each of the countries said that they did not want the pregnancy at all.

Figure 5
Percent of Married Women Who Are Pregnant by Employment Status

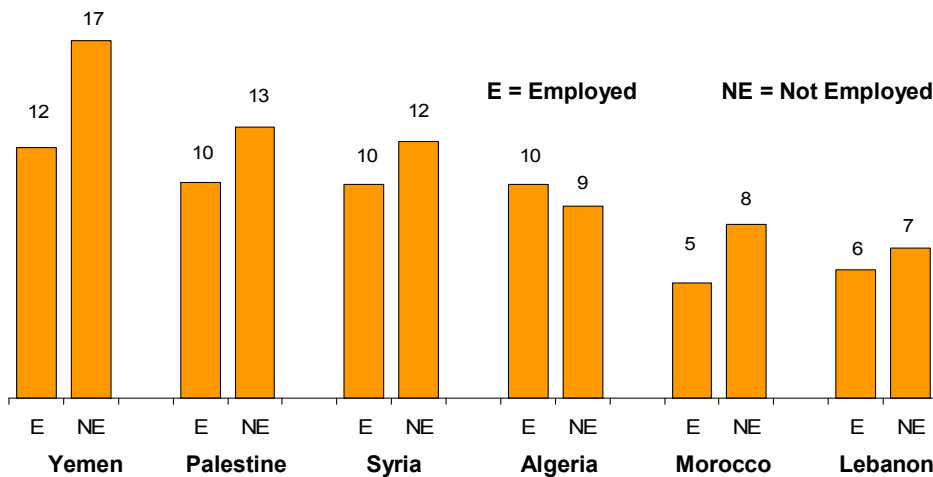
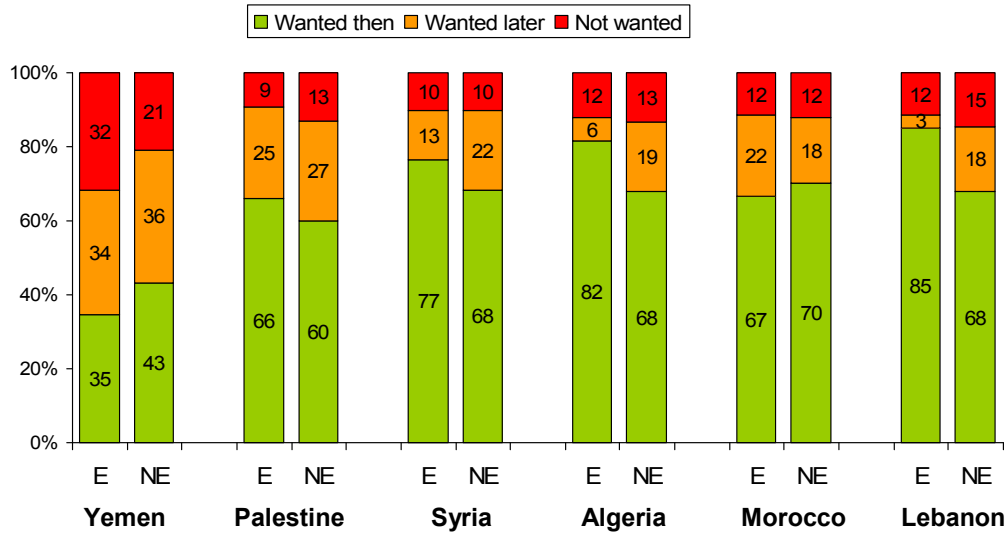


Figure 6– Percent Distribution of Women by Employment Status & Attitude Toward Their Pregnancy



¹ Pan Arab Project for Family Health, *The Arab Family Health Survey, Module "A" Core Questionnaires* (League of Arab States: Cairo, 2001).