

Gender and Economic Opportunities in the Arab World

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Summary

The paper examines the persistent gender gap in economic opportunities in the Arab world which is still wide, unlike the education gap that appears to be closing if not reversing in some countries. The authors question why the Arab world - with the exceptions of Morocco and Tunisia - has not followed the worldwide trend of increasing labor force feminization that usually accompanies globalization and greater integration into world markets.

The authors review various explanations in the literature on women's economic participation. First they presents the argument on cultural norms and patriarchy emphasizing the relatively narrow forms of work in which women are allowed to participate due to constraints imposed by a patriarchal "gender system" that puts a high premium on women's modesty and honor. Then they look into demand driven factors focusing on the structure of Arab economies and the characteristics of their labor markets and delineate three sets of reasons for the restricted demand on female labor: gender segregation of labor markets, the effect of oil on the structure of Arab economies, and the ongoing retrenchment of public sectors, which had been privileged locations of female paid employment.

The authors postulate that the recent economic growth in Arab countries has occurred largely in construction, transportation, retail, trade and real estate, but less so in social or public services or in manufacturing and agriculture where women tend to concentrate. This, they claim, can also be attributed to the effect of oil and oil-related revenues on the structure of Arab economies. The other reason is the decline in the importance of public sector employment which had helped to pave the way for women to enter the workforce. Moreover, Arab countries have not dedicated substantial resources to social services thereby limiting female-oriented professions and services. Finally, the private sector seems closed to women as it requires significant cultural, linguistic, and symbolic capital as well as *wasta* (contacts or nepotism). They argue that the low female labor force participation has resulted in weaker female voice and a lessening of female influence in political institutions. This in turn has lead to a reinforcement of patriarchal norms, laws and political institutions that maintain the low status of women in society and sustain gender inequalities.

Other forms of barriers to female economic opportunities also exist, such as constrained geographical mobility, the tendency for women to work in informal markets, and employer's hesitation to assume the cost of women's reproductive role, in the form of paid and unpaid maternity leaves. Workplaces for women, particularly in informal labor markets, can lack the safety and security they need, possibly leading to limited supply and demand for female labor.

Future research in this area, the authors suggest, should focus on the role of oil in limiting female participation in the economy, the role of limited geographic mobility and migration, development of and support for the social services sector, and possible avenues for changing the patriarchal gender contract. Another major question for research is what constitutes empowering work for women and what can be done to make women's work more empowering. They underline that definitions and concepts used for research have room for reformulation and expansion. There is a current trend to refrain from compartmentalization of men's and women's roles, from viewing women as "submissive victims" or (in the non-West) as "underdeveloped" towards a more nuanced and interdisciplinary view. This nuanced view of women's work may also involve considering women's work on a continuum rather than an absolute value of "working" or "not working". The paper ends with a review of the scholarly scene on gender and work in the Arab region by presenting a list of active individuals and institutions in this area.