

# FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF NEOLIBERALISM IN THE MENA REGION



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# INTRODUCTION

Feminist economics first emerged in the early 1900s, with a focus on how gender shaped vulnerability in the context of early industrialization. Analysts such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman pointed out that, as a result of the traditional division of labor whereby men were more likely to work in paid employment and women were more likely to participate in unpaid labor in the household, women were more economically vulnerable and socially isolated. Although this division of labor was class specific (working class women often did not have the luxury of not going out to work) and built on mutual dependency (some labeled this the patriarchal contract), the contribution of unpaid care labor to economic well-being was less recognized and it was also easier to replace when a household dissolved. Given that post-industrial/cash-oriented societies were increasingly premised on the male breadwinner model, women with no male breadwinner to rely on (due to never marrying, neglect, abandonment, divorce, or being widowed) were particularly economically vulnerable. These issues continue to be relevant, both globally and in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), since women's labor force participation rates in the region are quite low, thus leading to high rates of dependency on patriarchal structures. In addition, a number of countries in the region are transitioning from largely agricultural to more industrial/service-based economies.

The massive body of feminist literature that has developed over the last hundred years, particularly since the rise of neoliberalism in the early 1980s, has explored at least six distinct angles: 1. The importance of determining how the types and degree of gendered challenges differ depending on the level of economic development; 2. Why and how both micro and macroeconomic analysis is required to understand various gender inequalities; 3. The role that various forms of gender discrimination have played in shaping socio-economic outcomes; 4. The role the gender division of labor has played in shaping patterns of deprivation, with a particular focus on the challenges women face due to their greater unpaid work burden; 5. The importance of taking an intersectional approach to feminist economic analysis, given that the vulnerability of women and girls can vary considerably depending on different characteristics (age, marital status, sexual orientation, class, race, location, disability, etc.); and finally 6. The importance of focusing not just on women when applying a gender lens, but rather also on the role that structural power and historic gender norms (in particular masculinity) have played in shaping gender outcomes. Each of these angles has, in turn, been examined in the context of the

growing prevalence of neoliberalism, which reemerged in the 1980s in conjunction with the debt crisis.

The main proposition of neoliberalism is that free markets are preferable to government intervention. The reality is actually more complex, since neoliberalism tends to champion certain forms of government intervention (e.g., protection of property rights and enforcement of national borders when it comes to human mobility), while at the same time advocating for fewer government regulations when it comes to labor and environmental protection, trade, and financial capital movements (in particular those of transnational corporations in search of opportunities to earn more profit abroad). An array of policies, which were related to the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) imposition of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs), targeted countries in the Global South with high levels of debt, with the aim of ensuring that these countries restructured their economies to facilitate repayment of their debts. Eventually neoliberalism spread far beyond the countries that were in danger of defaulting on their debt. As the dominance of neoliberalism spread, more emphasis was put on economic growth and the market as the key institution for making socio-economic decisions. This, in turn, meant that less value was placed on the importance of the state as a provider of both services and employment. Emerging from this we have seen the development of both a feminist and an environmental critique which question the continued devaluing of non-market aspects of the economy, particularly those related to the exploitation of unpaid labor and natural resources. Although this process began 50 years ago, it is ongoing in a number of countries, including most notably in Arab countries being targeted for (post-) conflict reconstruction and development.

Feminist economists criticized the shift to neoliberalism based on several different arguments — as trade and finance policies were changing, transnational corporations began moving capital to countries with cheaper wages, and many of the workers they hired were women. The exploitative conditions and the precarity of the work provided by these companies (which often continued to move in search of higher profit margins) were emphasized by early feminist analyses. Feminists have also written about the gendered impact of the shrinking of the government sector, particularly the reduction in government services, on women and girls, as well as households more generally. Women and girls were affected both as recipients of services and as workers, since, in a number of countries, women's

formal sector employment was more closely tied to the public sector than men's. Another angle feminists took in their examination of SAPs was an emphasis on the unpaid work burdens that resulted from rising paid work burdens as well from reducing services, which often happened at the same time. More abstractly, feminists drew attention to the particular emphasis neoliberalism puts on market outcomes, which, they argue, has been at the expense of non-market activities. This in turn has important consequences for gender relations, given women's historic focus on non-market work.

Much of the early analysis of capital mobility and trade focused on the experiences of South Asian and Latin American garment industry workers and later on tech manufacturing workers in Southeast Asia (see Beneria, Berik, and Floro 2016, among others). Such studies illustrated the contradictory impact of the growing global manufacturing industries — on the one hand, the newfound income generated by this work was highlighted as a factor that sometimes helped empower women within the household and their local communities. On the other hand, the low wages, dangerous work conditions, and the volatility of the work were indicated as contributing to women's exploitation in other dimensions. More generally, there have been debates on the question of when women's entry into paid employment is empowering and on the social consequences of the heightened expectation that, globally, women will contribute to paid work. Related to this, feminist economists have emphasized the shortcomings of using national income as a measure of well-being, with the argument that the contributions of women, many of which remain unpaid, are invisible and undervalued.



# EFFECTS OF NEOLIBERAL POLICIES ON WOMEN IN THE REGION

The Beneria book provides a fairly comprehensive look at gender and neoliberal globalization but an examination of the examples/case studies included in the analysis reveals that almost none of these focused on MENA. This is, in part, because less research has been carried out in the region, but also because the globalization experience of the region has been somewhat unique. While some of the findings from elsewhere are relevant to the MENA context, there are some specific challenges facing the region that remain under-researched from a gender angle. In addition, it is important to note that there is considerable variation within the region. For the purposes of this study, an overview of the entire region will be provided, with as much emphasis as possible on the low and middle-income Arab countries, including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Unfortunately, the amount of research conducted on the intersection between gender and economics in these countries varies considerably and this, in turn, hampers a detailed discussion of unique country specific challenges. Categorizing countries by development history is therefore helpful, in cases where specific country-level studies are unavailable, to identify the extent to which the experiences of other countries are relevant.

The MENA region is unique for at least two reasons. The first reason relates to the fact that many countries are subject to what has come to be known as “Dutch disease”, a phenomenon whereby currency markets are distorted due to large inflows of foreign exchange (this can happen either because of exports of natural resources, such as oil, or because of large remittance and/or foreign assistance inflows). Dutch disease makes countries less attractive to international capital. This means that many MENA countries have not experienced large influxes of foreign direct investment, which is often linked to employment in industries such as textiles and apparel, where, around the world, a large number of women have tended to be employed. The second reason pertains to the fact that many countries have experienced armed conflict in recent years. This has exacerbated poverty in a number of contexts, as well as leading to massive displacement of various populations, with other MENA countries acting as hosts to the vast majority of those being displaced. In addition, Dutch disease and conflict are interconnected in the context of MENA, since significant aid flows are related to the political instability in the region. This does not mean that neoliberalism has not affected these countries, but it does mean that the impact has been different,

for a variety of reasons. Unfortunately, few analysts have focused on the gender aspects of these specific MENA-related challenges. Returning to the six specific challenges that have been highlighted by feminist economists, the specific circumstances in the MENA region are explored below.

The 2018 Global Peace Index (Institute for Economics & Peace 2018) rated the Middle East as “the world’s least peaceful region.” Six of the countries currently classified as having the highest rates of conflict globally include Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Other countries that rank low in terms of their peace index include Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, and Egypt. A number of countries in the region, including Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey have absorbed large numbers of refugees, which has created unique challenges. Three other countries rated as less peaceful are Bahrain, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia. High per capita military spending is another challenge in the region, with four of the top ten countries globally being in the region — Saudi Arabia, Oman, Israel, and Bahrain. Being a higher-income country does not preclude the presence of conflict, given that armed conflict has affected both middle- and low-income countries in the region, although the human development impact in the poorest contexts is particularly devastating.

## 1. Differences in the types and degree of gendered challenges depending on the level of economic development

In light of the challenges listed above, any analysis of MENA must also address the fact that there are vast differences in the level of development across countries in the region. While Yemen and Sudan have very low levels of per capita income and remain very rural, at the other end of the spectrum are the Gulf countries, which have some of the highest per capita incomes in the world. Related to this, Yemen and Sudan have some of the largest gaps in terms of female and male literacy rates, as well as more generally facing a number of basic development challenges that can impact males and females differently. These include high maternal and child mortality rates, hunger, as well as difficulties related to access to health care and education. In the

richest countries such problems have largely been eliminated. Given such different levels of economic development and therefore also of vulnerability, it is difficult to lump together the entire region effectively. Cuts in government spending, which are often justified by neoliberalism, therefore have very different impacts in countries at lower levels of development, in part because of the different degrees of vulnerability, in part because the policies themselves are likely to vary.

Before conducting a more in-depth analysis of the impact of neoliberalism on various countries, it is therefore important to categorize the countries within the MENA region. This can be done by examining the level of economic development, the primary forms of foreign exchange flows (e.g., the extent to which Dutch disease is an issue), and the degree to which the country has been affected by armed conflict. At one end of the economic development spectrum are the oil-rich Gulf Emirates, which earn most of their foreign exchange by exporting oil and natural gas. These countries face unique macroeconomic challenges related both to fluctuations in the price of oil and natural gas, with periods of falling oil revenues leading to a certain degree of economic hardship, and to the fact that they are at a disadvantage when it comes to their ability to be competitive in international trade. Although these countries have experienced some conflict (notably Bahrain in recent years), their economies are quite robust. Many of the most relevant gender-related questions in these contexts involve introducing better policies for assisting women in the education-to-work transition and for supporting women entrepreneurs.

A second category of countries are also oil rich, but have much larger populations and therefore face more economic challenges. This group includes Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and, to a lesser degree, Oman and Saudi Arabia. Although quite a lot is known about various economic aspects of women's lives in Iran, and some is known about Iraq and Oman, very little has been published about women's economic engagement in Algeria, Libya, and Saudi Arabia. This is partly due to governments' tight control over existing data. While the extent to which their economies have been disrupted by conflict varies, the ongoing conflict in Iraq and Libya, as well as the eruption of protests in Algeria and Iran in 2019, are indicative of the political instability facing this set of countries. At the same time, these are the countries where substantial oil revenues have historically contributed to meeting the basic needs of most of the population (though this applies less to Iraq due to

the history of sanctions and war), and where income inequality, labor market discrimination, and gender-related challenges are important areas of research.

A third group of countries comprise those that have had a more traditional relationship with the global economy, and have relatively large industrial sectors that have often provided jobs for women. A number of middle-income countries in North Africa (particularly Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt), as well as the two non-Arabic-speaking Middle East countries Iran (even though this is also an oil-exporting country) and Turkey fall into this category. Here conflict has also been an issue, both in terms of absorbing refugees (e.g., Turkey) and in terms of a certain degree of political unrest (Egypt and Morocco). In countries where employment for women with lower-levels of education has historically been more closely linked to export-oriented manufacturing, an understanding of how shifting global demand may be affecting women's ability to earn income is an important research question. Gender dimensions of poverty are another important concern, with the focus here being on how maternal and child mortality, nutrition, as well as gendered education gaps, are driven by poverty.

Another group have historically also been categorized as middle-income countries (although a number of these have slid into the lower category due to conflict). This includes Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria. Finally, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen are among the low income, primarily agricultural countries and have also faced severe setbacks due to armed conflict. Given that Dutch disease can be triggered both by natural resource revenues and foreign aid inflows, it is important also to highlight the countries in the region that have historically been particularly reliant on aid, which include Jordan, Palestine, Israel, and Iraq. Although the per capita figures are somewhat lower, Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen are also quite dependent on aid. Finally, Lebanon and Turkey have recently also received large influxes of aid, as a result of the large numbers of Syrian refugees coming into the country. In countries where armed conflict has been endemic, poverty remains a huge challenge, and therefore focusing on meeting the basic needs of the population is key.

More generally, in all the contexts where armed conflict has been an ongoing challenge and has negatively affected macroeconomic functioning, it is important to analyze the degree to which this has gendered impacts. For example, in a context where infrastructure has been destroyed or neglected, assessing the extent to which

the consequences of deteriorating roads and sewage systems are different for women and men is key.

Even within the smaller subgroup of countries of particular interest, there is considerable variation. Morocco and Tunisia are the least conflict ridden, and traditionally have fairly strong manufacturing sectors, which sets them apart from the other countries in the group. Jordan and Algeria are also fairly stable, have somewhat higher levels of per capita income, but, to a certain extent, both suffer from Dutch disease and so have weaker manufacturing/export-oriented sectors. The remaining countries are all among the most conflict ridden in the world but can be subdivided by per capita income level, with Palestine, Sudan, and Yemen being low-income countries, while Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, and Iraq have higher per capita income levels, but face considerable challenges in terms of political stability. The types of economies represented among the more conflict-ridden countries also vary considerably, which has implications for the policy recommendations that are likely to be most effective.

Aside from the difficulty of categorizing countries within the region, a related challenge pertains to the degree to which it is possible to paint a clear picture of the gender-related economic policy issues in each of these countries. This varies considerably from country to country. Probably the most studied country from a gender economic perspective is Egypt. Countries where the least in-depth analysis has been carried out include Algeria, pre-conflict Iraq, Libya, and Syria, as well as countries facing serious conflict such as Sudan and Yemen. A lack of data has been a major issue when it comes to the poorest/most conflict-ridden countries, but government control over data has also played a role in limiting the research conducted in countries such as Syria, where survey data existed but were tightly controlled by the government.

## 2. The importance of considering the potential gendered impact of both micro and macroeconomic policies

In terms of research on economic policy issues, an entire sub-discipline has emerged within feminist economics that examines macroeconomic policies through the lens of gender. This involves asking questions about how government spending, taxation, and even monetary policy may have a differential impact by sex (as well as by other individual and collective characteristics). Analysis such as this is essential to understanding neoliberalism, given that one of the primary aims of

neoliberalism is to shift the goals and substance of the different components of macroeconomic policy.

Two important ways that the region has differed from a number of others in its macroeconomic strategy are the focus on maintaining a large government sector and using consumer subsidies to address poverty. Concerning the first issue, many MENA countries used government employment to reduce unemployment and as an incentive for the population to invest in education. Interestingly, women particularly benefited from the emphasis on a large public sector although this was unlikely to have been the primary objective of such policies (Olmsted 2010). Regarding the second issue, many governments introduced food and other types of subsidies for basic commodities, in order to assure that poor households were receiving sufficient calories and were able to afford various basic necessities. Again, although Egypt is probably the most well-known and well researched example of this, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen also had similar policies in place and were all pressured to reduce their food subsidy programs as part of SAPs in the 1990s. Some governments (e.g. Egypt) pushed back against the IMF edicts, but others, such as Yemen, one of the poorest countries in the region, succumbed to pressure to remove subsidies, despite evidence that they were an effective mechanism for increasing calorie intake. A number of analysts argued that the Arab uprisings erupted in part because of anger over rising food prices. Jordan and Syria in fact reinstated certain food subsidies at the time, and, while in the Jordanian case this may have helped reduce tensions, in Syria the policy change was clearly not enough to address protesters' concerns.

Moreover, many countries had fuel subsidies in place, which have since also been removed. According to a 2014 article in *The Guardian* (IRIN), Yemen cutting fuel subsidies contributed to worsening poverty. The same article also indicated that the targeted cash assistance program that Yemen put in place when they removed the food subsidies was not functioning effectively since the government was failing to dispense cash regularly.

More has been written about the impact of SAPs in MENA in relation to the size of the government, although again much of that analysis has focused on Egypt. When Egypt began implementing SAPs, the initial prediction was that, as the size of the government began to shrink, women would suffer larger job losses. However, later analysis suggested that rather than laying off workers, the government in fact froze wages. Given that inflation was occurring this meant that government workers' salaries declined over time. Men were more likely to leave the public sector, while women kept their jobs and were more likely to face declining real wages, which also contributed to an increasing gender wage gap (Said 2015). Although far less has been written about

the situation in Sudan, one qualitative micro level study of privatization (Khalfalla and Ahmed 2017) argues that the process negatively impacted women in particular and they were more likely to lose their jobs during that process. This is the result of one component of neoliberal reforms that involves selling off government assets to private investors.

Gender budgeting is one method that has emerged out of the macroeconomic sub-field and has been applied in a number of contexts. The approach involves assessing government taxation and spending through the lens of gender, in order to assess whether, on the one hand, taxation systems are gender neutral and whether, on the other hand, spending addresses men and women's needs adequately. One of the aims of such exercises is to reduce the negative and gendered impacts of neoliberalism by assuring that policy-makers take into account the gendered implications of various budgetary decisions.

A requirement of such exercises is sex-disaggregated data, which must be analyzed in conjunction with detailed fiscal data on spending. A recent publication by Kolovich and Shibuya (2016) indicates that Egypt, Morocco, and Palestine have done fairly extensive work around gender budgeting, and that some other countries (e.g., Bahrain and Jordan) have also taken steps in this direction. The article commends Morocco, in particular, for the progress it has made in the area of gender budgeting and provides some analysis of educational outcomes that show improvements in recent years. Gender budgeting and other macrolevel analyses can provide insights into the specific challenges faced by women when it comes to economic vulnerability and access to education and paid employment.

While analyzing macro policies is important for assessing gender equality in the aggregate, an understanding of the impacts of neoliberalism requires also taking into account microeconomic conditions and policies (those related to labor regulations, fee structures for health and education services, as well as the structure of the social safety net). Microeconomic analysis requires drilling down into the question of which households are most affected by these changes and what impact they have on individuals within those households. More generally, microeconomic issues where gender can be unpacked include household decision-making and power, as well as corporate decision-making, especially regarding the treatment of workers and consumers. Looking at both household and company behavior is, of course, key to understanding gender inequality. Households are where many economic decisions are made, which affect not just husbands and wives, but also children and other household members. Companies are where hiring decisions are made, and consumer products developed and sold. All of these individual decisions shape gender

inequality and, in turn, influence neoliberal policy decisions. Unfortunately, in some countries there are very few micro-level data sets available and a number of the countries in the region have also been reluctant to release microlevel data to researchers even if they exist. However, progress has been made in recent years with the help of the Economic Research Forum, which has compiled data on a number of Arab countries for research use.

One key focus of feminist analysis has been on factors that enhance women's decision-making power within households. These studies have addressed issues such as the impact of women generating their own income. Another question that is frequently asked by researchers is whether girls are treated differently than boys, particularly when it comes to access to food, education, and health care. In relation to this, a considerable literature has looked at differences in how men and women spend their income. Frequently it is neoliberal policy changes that have been the catalyst for such analysis. When an Arab government, for example, is pressured to replace universal food subsidies with more targeted assistance programs, in theory, it should be possible to examine both the macroeconomic implications as well as to disaggregate effects down to the household and individual level, although doing so requires detailed microlevel data sets, which are sometimes not available.

Some of the early studies on food safety net assistance outside the MENA region, for example, led to changes in how food and other types of assistance were delivered, with the aim of improving outcomes for women and girls. For instance, in the aftermath of neoliberal reforms, Mexico led the way by designing a family assistance program aimed at incentivizing families to keep their daughters in school longer. Interestingly, Turkey adopted a similar conditional cash transfer policy in the early 2000s, which appears to have had some impact on girls' education. Few, if any, studies have examined the possible gendered impact of removing universal subsidies in the region, although theory suggests that in instances where household resources are reduced, women and girls are often more affected.

Two other important areas of focus when it comes to households include how assets/wealth influence women's power and the way unpaid work burdens have shifted over time. Again, one question that has been asked is whether neoliberal reforms have impacted these assets in general. Particularly in societies that remain primarily agriculturally based, studies place considerable emphasis on how neoliberal reforms may have reduced women's control over land, as well as resources such as water. As noted in a recent assessment of the situation in Sudan, this remains a serious issue of concern (Khalfalla and Ahmed 2017). As a result of feminist critiques of the

potential role of policy in increasing inequality, access to assets is now something tracked by UN Country Teams as part of the UNCT Gender Equality Scorecard.

### 3. The role of various forms of gender discrimination in shaping socio-economic outcomes

The study of gender discrimination has focused both on pre- and post-labor market discrimination, with a particular emphasis on contexts where girls and women are denied access to resources such as food, opportunities to attend school (pre-market discrimination), as well as unequal treatment in the labor market (e.g., employment and wage discrimination, occupational segregation).

Such analysis generally involves a more micro-level approach, and one particular area where feminists have identified gender biases is when mapping the actual or potential impact of various macroeconomic policy changes to intrahousehold allocation of resources. Studies that directly examine household decision-making tend to be data intensive and, to the best of my knowledge, have not been carried out for Arab countries (similar studies have only been conducted for Turkey). One study that takes a less direct approach by examining child mortality data (Alkema 2014) finds that in Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, and Jordan girls are more vulnerable, which indicates there may be a gender bias when it comes to household resource allocation. Interestingly, the data from conflict-ridden countries such as Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen did not indicate a gender gap in terms of child mortality. Literacy data also suggest differential treatment of girls, although in many countries the education gap has already closed or is in the process of doing so. In light of the various policy changes that have been implemented in the context of neoliberalism, one important question to ask is whether the different educational and poverty assistance programs rolled out across the region have helped increase or close the numerous gender gaps. For example, are targeted or universal programs more effective when it comes to closing gender gaps?

One of the more frequently studied topics when it comes to MENA is the relatively low female labor force participation rates observed in the region, compared to other parts of the world. In the context of neoliberalism, the MENA region is, in fact, an outlier (much of the rest of the world saw rising rates of female employment as a result of neoliberal reforms). Because the MENA trajectory has been quite different, a number of studies have focused on this phenomenon, with authors exploring the role that factors related to macroeconomic

realities (e.g., Dutch disease), as well as cultural factors may have played. Female labor force participation rates in MENA vary by country, with the Gulf Emirates, on average, having rates of above 50 percent, North Africa having rates in the mid to low 20 percent range, and the lowest rates (below 20 percent) being found in the Levant (with the exception of Lebanon, which has a rate closer to that of the North African countries).

A fairly common pattern throughout the region is for women with high levels of education to have considerably higher rates of labor force participation, although in rural areas, less-educated women are often highly active in agriculture. This has led to a bimodal distribution in a number of countries, where women with middle levels of education are the least economically active. Marital status is another predictor of employment — women often leave the labor market once they marry. A recent ILO analysis (Mansuy and Werquin 2015) found this to be the case among young women in Tunisia, for example. Again, it is important to note that neoliberal policies that reduce the role of the state in terms of service provision may have been contributing factors in cases where low labor force participation rates of women have persisted. At the same time, the opposite can also occur — with neoliberal policies reducing safety nets and increasing women's need to generate income.

Household decisions are, however, not the only factor influencing employment outcomes. Companies also have an impact, which must be examined in order to understand the role of post-market discrimination in shaping women's experiences. Women may be subject to multiple types of discrimination within the employment context — employers may be biased in terms of who they choose to hire, and this can lead to both higher unemployment rates among women and also occupational segregation (men and women being concentrated in different industries). In addition, women may face wage discrimination. Although, in the past, there have been a number of global studies conducted on occupational segregation and wage discrimination, there is a lack of recent country-level studies for the Arab world. One global ILO study (2016) confirms that occupational segregation has not improved in recent years, and may even be worsening. There is a high concentration of women in agriculture in poorer countries, and in the health and education sectors in more developed nations. This general pattern is clearly visible in the MENA region. In addition, women in the region who are employed in the formal sector tend to be particularly concentrated in the public sector. For example, in Syria before the crisis, agriculture and education were the top two employers of women, followed by government/civil service (Lockhart, Barker, and Alhajahmad 2018). Similar trends are also visible in other countries, although in North Africa, manufacturing absorbs more women.

The 2016 ILO study also indicates that wage differences persist globally. El-Hamidi and Said (2014) examined data from Egypt and found that occupational segregation worsened between 2000 and 2004. They also found evidence of a wage gap that they conclude is a function both of discrimination and occupational segregation. A study conducted by the ILO in Jordan and published in Al-Raida (2011/2012) suggests that the average wage gap is about eight percent but in some sectors is as high as 33 percent. While the average wage gap is smaller in Jordan than in many other countries of comparable or higher levels of development, the ILO notes that this may, in part, be due to the low rates of labor force participation among less-educated women.

While neoliberalism has generally meant that countries are more integrated into the global economy (through trade and financial markets), another distinctive characteristic of the MENA region is the high number of countries that have had sanctions placed on them. Olmsted (2007 and 2011) has argued that the imposition of extensive sanctions on the region has played a role in suppressing female employment in Iraq, Iran, and Palestine. On the one hand, this can be viewed as the antithesis of globalization. On the other hand, it can be seen as an extension of neoliberalism, since, with increased global interdependence, there is also the increased ability to punish countries by excluding them from trade and other global economic exchanges.

#### 4. The need for an intersectional feminist economic approach

While it is important to recognize the various components of intersectionality (e.g., gender, race, age, class, location, sexual identity, disability), more research has been conducted on some of these aspects of identity than others. Because the Arab region has been experiencing a massive youth bulge, age is one lens through which a lot of analysis has been carried out. When it comes to the issue of unemployment, as neoliberal reforms have become more extensive in the Arab world, both young men and women have been affected. However, both theory and the available empirical evidence suggest that young women may be facing even greater challenges than young men when it comes to overcoming unemployment.

There is also evidence that the degree to which women are subject to wage discrimination can vary considerably depending on their education level, their occupation, etc. Interestingly, in Jordan there is less evidence of wage discrimination in the low-skill professions, but at the same time women are more concentrated in higher-skill sectors. Another thought-provoking finding of the

2011/2012 Al-Raida ILO study is that feminized sectors in Jordan are not necessarily low-wage sectors (because more educated women have higher rates of labor force participation), but women in feminized sectors (e.g., education and health care/social work) do earn less than their male counterparts. Women in general earn more in the public sector, which in part explains why they prefer this sector.

One area where class has an impact is on the type of work women are able to obtain. Research from Egypt (Kabeer 2011) and Iran (Bahramitash and Olmsted 2014) sheds light on this question. The Kabeer study found that, in Egypt, only formal work outside the home was empowering. Informal sector work, whether carried out in the home or the public sphere had less impact on various measures of empowerment. The data also suggested that women working in the informal sector outside the home were likely to have lower mental health outcomes compared to non-working women, while working from home in the informal sector was linked to lower self-confidence among women when compared to non-working women. Bahramitash and Olmsted (2014) found that among low-income women, certain types of work were viewed as undesirable and demeaning, although interestingly this is not universally the case and seemed to be related to age. Some younger women, for example, found informal sector work in sales less demeaning than older women did. More generally, a number of feminist analysts have pointed out that exploitative low-paid work is often not empowering for women. If neoliberalism is linked to reductions in formal sector employment (which can be the case if the public sector is significantly cut back) this may be a concern. Given that returning to large public sectors may not be feasible, ensuring that private sectors hiring less-educated women are providing decent jobs is particularly important.

More generally, an important aspect of identity is class, particularly in light of the neoliberal emphasis on entrepreneurship as the solution to poverty, which has been pursued in parallel with a big push to expand credit to poor communities. There is a massive, rather critical literature on microcredit, which increasingly also includes studies on other types of credit and the links to gender and entrepreneurship. In terms of the effectiveness of microcredit, there has been more research conducted on Turkey than on the rest of MENA, although studies from Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine exist. While some studies find that microfinance helps reduce poverty at the household level, evidence of it impacting macrolevel poverty is negligible. In addition, a number of concerns have been raised about the regulation of the sector (interest rates charged are often quite high) and the degree to which such programs adequately target women. It is also important to consider the more metalevel ethical question of whether poor women

should be expected to absorb the considerable risks related to entrepreneurship. Self-employment may be empowering for women who are not already dealing with considerable risk, but may represent an increase in precarity for others. In fact, interviews with a leading microcredit provider to women in Lebanon indicated that their clients are rarely the most vulnerable.

A recent UNIDO study (2019), implemented by the Center of Arab Women's Training and Research (CAWTAR), surveyed women business owners in a number of Arab countries and noted that rates of entrepreneurship among Arab women remain quite low. The women entrepreneurs surveyed identified a lack of finances as the main obstacle they face, suggesting that the various programs that claim to assist women entrepreneurs in the region need to find a better way of reaching their target audience. Lack of experience and contacts were also cited as major challenges, suggesting the need for more networking support for entrepreneurial women in the region. Finally, and possibly most importantly, a number of those surveyed, particularly in Lebanon and Jordan, reported that the income they earned from entrepreneurial activity was not sufficient and that they had to rely on other income streams. This is another indicator that self-employment is not a panacea for women.

Related to this, in recent years there has been an interest in focusing on the possible macroeconomic impact of women entrepreneurs as employment generators, with the World Bank (2008) arguing that female entrepreneurs are more likely to invest in sectors that hire more women and can therefore contribute to increasing female labor force participation. The UNIDO study also suggests that women entrepreneurs, on average, prefer to hire other women, although the overall impact of pursuing this as a general macroeconomic strategy is not clear and nor are the class implications of the impact of supporting successful women entrepreneurs obvious.

The particular vulnerability of single mothers is also of key importance. Interestingly, female-headed household rates have remained relatively low compared to other parts of the world, although rates vary considerably by age, country, the presence of armed conflict, and other factors. There is also evidence that divorce rates are rising in the region. Efforts to track rates of female headship are sporadic, although the World Bank (nd) is attempting to provide this information. The role that various neoliberal policies may have played in reshaping household structure is also not clear. One rather surprising finding that has emerged from some studies is that, in most Arab countries, the difference in labor force participation rates between women with male partners and those without is not particularly big. This suggests that the male bread winner model continues to prevail even in the absence of a two-parent

household, and that female-headed households are often dependent on outside income sources, which can, in turn, increase their vulnerability. Also worth noting is that the average age of a woman at first marriage varies considerably across the region but has, on the whole, been rising. In Egypt, Palestine, Sudan, and Yemen, the average remains low (around 22 or 23 years) but in a number of North African countries and the Gulf, the number has risen considerably, with Algeria, Lebanon, and Tunisia reporting an average age at first marriage of between 28 and 29 years. It is unclear how this shift is linked to women's employment patterns and economic vulnerability, however.

Many other intersectional issues are worth closer examination (e.g., disability, race, sexual orientation), but given the region's recent history of armed conflict, a focus on whether conflict contexts increase specific macroeconomic challenges in particular is worth exploring further. Armed conflict unquestionably raises rates of female headship, in a context where women's access to paid employment is particularly challenging. It is also striking that, in the case of the Syria crisis, the response plan placed significant emphasis on assuring that women are engaged in paid employment and yet success in doing so has been limited. The study by Lockhart, Barker, and Alhajahmad (2018) suggested that the labor force participation rate of Syrian refugee women rose from 19 to 30 percent after arriving in Jordan, indicating a change in attitudes about paid employment. At the same time, many of these women are searching for work rather than actively working. Other important questions requiring further analysis include the potentially gendered impact of Syrians and other refugees on local labor markets. On the one hand, it could be that Syrian women are taking jobs that other women do not want and so there is little competition between local and refugee populations, but, on the other hand, it may be that influxes of refugees are further depressing economic opportunities for the most vulnerable women.

## 5. Unpaid work and the gender division of labor

Feminist economists have argued that time use surveys are key to understanding the gender division of labor, particularly given the concern that females may be especially vulnerable to what has become known as the double (and even the triple) burden. This describes the idea that women and girls who enter paid employment are expected to continue carrying a large burden of unpaid work as well. A related concern is that girls' and women's heavy unpaid work burden may preclude

them from participating in other activities (e.g., self-care, education, paid employment, and political participation). MENA countries that have collected time use data so far include Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Oman, the Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Tunisia, and Turkey. Unfortunately, a number of the early time use data sets collected did not include detailed questions about other socioeconomic aspects, or were limited in terms of who was sampled, making in-depth analysis of the links between time use, women's employment, and other factors challenging. For example, the Morocco data surveyed women but not men, so no comparisons could be made between the two groups.

In the absence of rigorous analyses based on time use surveys, what can be gleaned from the existing literature is that, because labor force participation rates in the MENA region are lower than elsewhere, the double burden is less likely to be an issue. Musawah (2018: 38) uses UN data to examine average time use by gender for a number of MENA countries. Men's unpaid work is, on average, between one and two hours a week, with the highest levels of unpaid work for men being observed in Oman. On average, men do between four and six hours of paid work, making their total work burden six or seven hours. Women do the same amount of total work, on average, but their unpaid work burden ranges from five to six hours, while their paid burden is considerably lower at between one and two hours. However, aggregates like this conceal the fact that women in paid employment generally work a considerably higher total number of hours, especially if they have children and cannot afford to pay someone to help with household labor.

The degree to which unpaid work burdens can explain low labor force participation rates among women in the region is unclear although El Awady (2018) argues that better parental leave policies would be a step toward improving support of working women. She identifies Algeria, Mauritania, and Morocco as three Arab countries that meet the ILO standard of at least 14 weeks maternity leave. While a number of other countries mandate at least some paid leave (7 to 9 weeks in Bahrain, Iraq, Oman, and Yemen), even in countries where such leave is mandatory, given that many women are in informal sector work, it is not clear how many of them are able to take advantage of the existing regulations.

Aside from the issue of maternity leave, childcare availability has been highlighted as a possible impediment to women's employment in countries such as Jordan (Better Work 2016). Analyses that map available resources and the quality of such facilities are also emerging from the region (Faour et al 2006). More recently the Queen Nour Foundation (2015) mapped early childhood facilities in Jordan. One of the

recommendations from the Arab Resource Collective report by Faour et al is that those working in early childhood development need more extensive training. Such programs could be particularly helpful in addressing the challenge of female employment. Not only would the provision of more childcare facilities create jobs (for women), but this step could also potentially contribute to raising overall labor force participation rates, if affordable quality childcare is one limiting factor. However, it is important that such programs are subsidized, in order to assure that affordable high-quality childcare is available to parents and also that childcare workers receive a living wage.

## 6. The importance of structural power and historic gender norms

Theoretical work on the structural factors contributing to gender norms in the region has been growing, and scholars are increasingly examining the potential impact of masculinity on women's vulnerability. Frequently, however, the focus is not on economics per se, but rather on attitudes toward violence. Some surveys do ask respondents to reflect on their attitudes toward girls' education and/or working women and a few studies have examined how women's income generation influences their ability to make decisions in the household. Interestingly though, empirical studies have not shown that the attitudes of family members are a major factor in predicting women's participation in the labor force, suggesting that other structural factors are more important. At the same time, women do identify both family and societal pressure as factors stopping them from entering paid employment. Internalized norms also shape attitudes of employers and contribute to occupational segregation. More generally, it is important to look at the macro factors impacting the tendency of economies to reduce women's opportunities. Given the region's position within the global economy, both internal and external factors play a role here. Armed conflict and the impact it has had both on women's economic well-being and the social fabric in general, are also considerations related to local and global structural power. For example, the negative impact sanctions have had on many economies in the region illustrates one important structural factor imposed from outside the region.



# LOCAL INSTITUTIONS WORKING TO RESHAPE GENDER OUTCOMES AND NORMS IN MENA

When examining the various ways that economic vulnerability intersects with gender in the context of the region, it is important to take into consideration the relevance of local institutions that are working to address both the material conditions women face and the structural factors shaping these material conditions. Given that the present article covers the whole region, it is difficult to make general statements about local women's groups. However, there are still a number of points worth making. First, NGOs critical of the status quo have not generally focused on the economic consequences of neoliberalism on women and gender relations. Although a growing number of women's rights organizations can be found in the region, they tend to concentrate on political and social rather than economic rights. As an example, the EuroMed Feminist Initiative provides excellent guidance when it comes to developing feminist political institutions and ensuring that women are incorporated into governance structures, but it does not address women's labor rights/support for women in paid employment.

Some organizations that have emphasized economic challenges from a gender perspective include Sadaqa in Jordan, which strives to create "a friendlier working environment for employed women", also focusing on daycare centers. Sadaqa collaborates with the transnational organization Vital Voices and youth-oriented Jordanian organization Al Hayat Center for Civil Society Development. Another Jordan-based organization that is devoted to both women's and workers' rights is Al Ahel. Although Jordan based, the organization works in Jordan, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. One of their projects focuses on empowering female teachers in Jordan, for instance. In Egypt, women and work are among the priorities of the New Woman Foundation, which currently has a project focusing on addressing violence and harassment in the workplace.

The Working Women League focuses on changing discriminatory legislation in Lebanon. They are partners with the National Commission for Lebanese Women, a government-organized NGO (GONGO), whose leadership is appointed by the Lebanese President. This relationship is likely to limit the organization's criticism of free market-oriented policies. A considerably more radical approach is taken by Nasawiya, a feminist collective tackling issues ranging from sexual rights and political voice to economic justice by focusing on the rights of immigrants, and particularly women working in the care labor sector.

The National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT) was founded in the 1950s and has been working to address various aspects of gender inequality, including women's economic rights and participation in business and the labor market. Organizations supporting women in business have also emerged in other parts of the region. These include Al Majmoua (Lebanon), the Lebanese League for Women in Business and the Lebanese Association for Development, the Palestinian Businesswomen Forum, the Association for Women's Total Advancement and Development in Egypt, Business and Professional Women Amman in Jordan, the Association des Femmes Chefs d'Entreprises du Maroc (Morocco), and Femmes et Leadership in Tunisia.

Another type of organization that has emerged in the region focuses on supporting women working in particular sectors. One example is Arab Women in Computing (ARABWIC), which has members working in or from a range of Arab countries and seeks to provide networking and growth opportunities for women in tech fields. Although such developments are signs of increased women's empowerment, as well as supporting women in a number of ways, and these types of professional organization undoubtedly have a number of feminist members, their programming does not necessarily explicitly prioritize feminist issues.

CAWTAR, mentioned earlier as an organization that has carried out some recent research on women entrepreneurs, is among the more research-oriented organizations in the region and is headquartered in Tunisia. In addition to conducting research such as the UNIDO study discussed above, CAWTAR has developed a number of training kits focused on self-empowerment, mainstreaming gender, self-employment, and most relevantly on gender, poverty, and employment.

The West Asia North Africa (WANA) Institute in Jordan works in three areas: human security, sustainable development and social justice. Under their social justice umbrella, they are conducting a project that addresses the economic participation of women and the disabled. They have also carried out a lot of research focusing on the impact of the Syria crisis on the Jordanian labor market that includes a gender dimension.

Musawah is an example of a transnational feminist network that was originally focused on political and social rights, but has, in recent years, decided to look more closely at the links between religion and economic rights. Their report *Who Provides? Who Cares?*

Changing Dynamics in Muslim Families (2018) argues for reforms to Muslim family law with a particular emphasis on how and why current socioeconomic conditions (e.g., male unemployment, higher female labor force participation, later marriage, etc.) necessitate these changes. Musawah also has a project that looks at ‘tracking positive developments’ in Muslim family laws, including inheritance and divorce laws, as well as at property rights more generally.

Universities are, of course, another group of institutions where the intersection between gender and economics has been at the forefront. The number of gender units in universities has proliferated in recent years. A recent mapping exercise conducted by Tadros and Habib (2015) provides information on master’s programs, a narrower scope than gender studies more generally, but nevertheless informative. The Levant area is particularly well represented with two master’s programs being offered in Lebanon, one in Jordan, and one in Palestine. Other programs can be found in Yemen, Egypt, Sudan, and the UAE. Although with a less comprehensive range of courses, gender studies programs also exist at other universities. Much of the focus of the existing programs however is on gaining a basic understanding of gender theory, and the empirical focus tends to be either gender and literature and/or political rights and social norms. It is important to note that the region generally lacks teaching staff with gender expertise (Golley 2015), and in particular, very little gender economic analysis/curricular focus has emerged from within existing programs, although among the master’s programs reviewed by Tadros and Habib (2015) quite a few have either political economy or development focused requirements. A few years ago, the UNDP began work on establishing a regional master’s program with a gender and economics focus, similar to the program at Makerere University, but efforts seem to have stalled.

One university that does have a particularly strong tradition of conducting research on gender and economics is Birzeit University in Palestine. Birzeit has a number of feminist faculty members, including one feminist scholar with a PhD in economics. Over the years, groups of interdisciplinary faculties with expertise in gender studies have also written a number of reports that include an analysis of economics and gender. The Lebanese American University has also conducted a lot of gender research but with somewhat less of an emphasis on economics. The longevity of the LAU’s program deserves a mention, however. Along with the Arab Institute for Women, which publishes the journal

Al-Raida, LAU has been active in the region for well over 40 years.

In Sudan, the Ahfad University for Women offers a master’s and a number of courses with an economic focus. The American University of Cairo (AUC) also has a long-standing gender studies program, as well as an economist who focuses on gender issues. The AUC master’s program also includes a required course focusing on political economy. The American University of Beirut (AUB) is something of a latecomer to the field of gender studies, but in 2016 they launched an initiative focusing explicitly on women and gender studies. In addition, members of AUB’s business school have begun to tackle a number of gender issues. Most recently, for instance, they launched the Kip Index Project (nd) to address data gaps related to women’s economic contributions and challenges in the region. Other universities with gender programs include Al Akhawayan in Morocco, which is home to the Hillary Clinton Center for Women’s Empowerment, and American University of Sharjah, which recently started a minor in gender studies.

Returning to the question of why a feminist lens in general and gender and economic rights in particular have not featured particularly strongly in the work of the NGO community in the region and/or in university research, one possible contributing factor discussed by a number of scholars is that aid dependency in several countries has led to donor priorities imposed from the outside taking precedence in the NGO field (Arenfeldt and Golley 2012). These authors identify Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen as being particularly prone to this problem. Two Palestinian scholars, Jad (2007) and Kuttab (in Arenfeldt and Golley 2012) have been particularly vocal about this challenge. In the case of Yemen, al-Ashtal (2012) argues women’s groups employ human rights discourses, but at the same time shy away from being feminist in their approach. More generally the collection by Arenfeldt and Golley (2012) provides insights into women’s mobilization across a range of countries in the region. Given that many large donors are currently particularly interested in the issues of child marriage, gender-based violence, and encouraging entrepreneurship, it comes as no surprise that these themes are more prevalent among local NGOs than labor and economic rights more broadly.

In terms of donor backing, one organization that bucks the above trend is the ILO, which has been supportive of NGOs working at the intersection between gender and alternatives to neoliberal approaches

to the economy. The ILO also has a strong interest in expanding cooperative economic models, which are less hierarchical and more socially inclusive in their approach to economic decision-making.

While many interventions focus on the treatment of symptoms, far fewer focus on addressing the structural issues that contribute to cycles of violence and perpetuating women's economic vulnerability, let alone global conditions that reinforce inequalities. To some degree this is understandable, given that the structural problems (armed conflict, poverty, global inequality, etc.) are much more difficult to tackle. Certainly, in acute circumstances, rapid interventions to protect women and girls are needed. However, finding more effective ways to combine strategies that support short-term fixes with those that have a longer-term vision of how to change gender norms is crucial.

One example of feminist activists taking a longer-term approach to changing gender norms is a project in Jordan centered on gender biases in school curriculum materials by pushing for textbook reforms. There are two important points to make about this initiative. First, the organization, mindful of the role that outside money can have on shifting priorities, refused to accept donor funds. Second, while this initiative does not directly target women's empowerment, efforts to change stereotypes in textbooks are a strategy that, in the long run, could have a far-reaching effect on how both males and females perceive female roles. This could, in turn, lead to societal change on many levels.



## CONCLUSION

What would a feminist economic strategy for MENA look like? On the one hand, such a strategy would need to take into account the uniqueness of the region, including the specific forms that neoliberalism has taken, shaped by different understandings of the social contract in the MENA region, the legacy of Dutch disease, and the widespread impact of armed conflict. Any strategy would also need to factor in the diversity of the region as well as some common patterns. One distinctive trend in MENA has been the slower than average increases in labor force participation in the context of neoliberal reforms. Feminists argue that, although rising labor force participation is a sign of increased empowerment for some women, a nuanced approach to paid employment is required that would identify the conditions that lead to women's employment being empowering and would also consider ways of recognizing and supporting women's unpaid work, as well as assuring institutions are in place to ensure women's well-being in general. Given the realities of the region, a dual strategy of better supporting women who aspire to engage in paid employment while, at the same time, also supporting those who for a variety of reasons are unable or unwilling to go out to work is much needed. Reasons for not engaging in paid employment may include adherence to traditional norms, high unpaid work burdens, a lack of preparation for the job market (e.g., education, training), as well as various disabilities. Age is certainly also an important factor in this context, with there being evidence of younger women having different expectations than their mothers. As such, a key element of any strategy should of course support younger women to participate in paid employment. This would involve ensuring that adequate maternity leave and childcare institutions are in place, that private sector employers, in particular, are more supportive of women, but also that public sector opportunities are available to women. Supporting institutional structures that encourage more equitable and less hierarchical/exploitative workplaces is also key. Cooperatives are one method of doing this, but encouraging for-profit companies that embrace corporate social responsibility (a growing field in the MENA region) to prioritize gender equality is also key. The work of Karam and Jamali (2013) can be particularly informative in this regard.

Doing more to support women who are working or wish to work is undeniably key to any feminist strategy. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that, for the foreseeable future, female labor force participation rates are likely to stay below 50 percent and that far more therefore needs to be done to ensure that the important

unpaid work that women are already doing receives more recognition and support. A number of scholars have advocated for policy changes to address gender differences in unpaid work. Elson (2016) suggested an approach involving three Rs (recognition, redistribution, and reduction), and Olmsted (2019) expanded this idea, arguing for the need for two additional Rs (reward and reinforcement). Recognition involves acknowledging the importance of unpaid work for functioning economies. To achieve this, time use data are essential and would help make unpaid work more visible to policymakers (a number of countries globally have created satellite national income accounts that include unpaid labor, for example). A redistribution of unpaid work burdens can be achieved both by encouraging other family members to shoulder more of the burden and by developing institutions to substitute for unpaid household labor. Clearly as women are being encouraged to enter paid employment, efforts need to be made to change gender norms and develop better care facilities, focusing not only on childcare, but also other forms of dependent care. This is particularly important in light of the fact that Arab societies are aging and given the history of armed conflict in the region, which has led to higher rates of disability.

The concept of reinforcement involves recognition that certain tasks performed by women cannot be redistributed and women themselves may also not want to find substitutes. Breastfeeding (for those who opt to do so) is the most obvious example. Here again institutional support is needed in the form of better maternity leave as well as awareness raising among employers about the need for better facilities at work for those women who choose this option.

The most interesting, but also the most controversial R is reward. Feminists are split on the question of whether women should be remunerated for their unpaid work. Some argue that doing so just reinforces existing gender norms, while others point out that given the importance of care labor to intergenerational well-being, and the current realities when it comes to the distribution of both paid and unpaid work, this option should not be ruled out. There is already some precedent in the region for this, as Iran, drawing on Islamic principles, recognizes this by reimbursing women for their unpaid labor in the event of divorce (Musawah 2018). Given that, at the present time, the MENA region's female labor force participation rates average 20 percent, a multipronged strategy that pushes gender boundaries while also acknowledging economic realities is crucial.

While the above are some strategies for addressing women's empowerment by focusing on both paid and unpaid work, it is also worth noting that the region is severely under-researched when it comes to issues related to gendered well-being. Data remains a serious problem because governments have not prioritized various types of data collection either because they view government spending in other areas as more important (this is particularly the case when it comes to time use data), or because they lack the infrastructure to do so (particularly poor war-torn countries). An additional problem is that data are viewed as very politically sensitive and consequently, even when some countries have collected the relevant data, they sometimes do not allow researchers access.

Even in contexts where data are available, there is a striking lack of basic analysis of labor force participation patterns, wages, and occupational segregation. Consequently, very little is known about the labor market conditions women face across the MENA countries. Given that there is not even a basic understanding of labor market conditions, it goes without saying that more nuanced analyses of the impact of the various policy changes associated with neoliberalism are also lacking. Without this analysis it is difficult to advocate for changes that might have a positive impact on women, for example those related to the structure of the social safety net and to wage gaps and other labor market inequities. Bearing this in mind, addressing key research gaps is one important step toward addressing gender inequalities. Other knowledge gaps relate to the state of childcare facilities and needs across the region.

One positive change when it comes to research is the increased interest in gender budgeting. To date, gender budgeting has been carried out by national women's organizations with the support of intergovernmental entities (e.g., the UN), as well as, in some cases, national governments. The value of continuing to support this area of work is that not only can it provide a quantitative analysis of government spending with a focus on improving gender outcomes, but it can also exert political pressure to gather better gender disaggregated statistics.

Considerably more work has been done on documenting legal frameworks and women's rights in various MENA countries. More still needs to be done, however, to link these studies to actual empirical data to determine which legal changes to prioritize.

While knowledge is key for effective advocacy, some findings from other regions are also likely to be relevant to MENA. It is, therefore, not necessary to wait until research is completed before beginning to advocate for various changes. Parental leave policies, high-quality subsidized childcare, and other policies that support

working parents, for example, are important steps toward addressing some of the challenges of unpaid work facing women. These can all be advocated for even in the absence of detailed analyses of the local situation.

On the issue of legal frameworks, advocacy can definitely already begin addressing legal biases, even in the absence of links to empirical realities. Another important focus can be on supporting communities to explore alternatives to neoliberal market-driven solutions to various economic problems. There is clear evidence, for example, that the private sector has not been particularly supportive of working women in the region or elsewhere. In light of this, organizations such as the ILO have increasingly been fostering the development of cooperatives, which are generally less hierarchical and therefore less exploitative institutions supporting various economic activities.

Strengthening the capacity of local universities is also vital. Ensuring that women and men are trained to analyze local economic conditions through a gender lens requires training on various theoretical and quantitative skills. Better trained professionals can help in both advocacy and research. Parallel to this, there is a need to develop the capacity of interested local NGOs to work on economic rights more.

There is clear evidence that younger generations of MENA women have different expectations than their mothers. They are more interested in engaging in paid employment per se and also keener to access a broader range of professions. At the same time, they may be frustrated by the lack of educational opportunities in the region and they are certainly frustrated by the lack of employment opportunities.

Finally, more research is needed to assess the pros and cons of encouraging women to be entrepreneurs, taking both the class implications and the macroeconomic impact into consideration. On the one hand, empowering women to be entrepreneurs clearly has some value mindful that women entrepreneurs face various forms of gender discrimination, ranging from sexual harassment to challenges in accessing credit and establishing networks, to the more general problem of entering male-dominated industries and therefore need strong institutional support. On the other hand, entrepreneurship can be the ultimate neoliberal approach to addressing poverty, placing risks that ought to be shouldered by societies onto those with limited resources who are already in a precarious position. It is therefore essential that policies are developed that support women who have the resources and the talents to become thriving entrepreneurs, while, at the same time, also assuring that those who are less able to cope with risks are adequately protected from economic hardship.



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