

Policy Paper

HOW GENDER AFFECTS YOUNG WOMEN'S OPPORTUNITIES IN THE ARAB MEDITERRANEAN COUNTRIES

Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia

Center of Arab Woman for Training and Research
(CAWTAR)



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For decades, unemployment rates among youth have been rising in the Arab region, and the gap in educational levels and unemployment rates between young men and young women has been widening. The exclusion of young people, youth unemployment and the depletion of human and social capital have had a major impact and come at a high cost, demonstrated by high level of youth unemployment and school dropout rates, amongst others. Furthermore, globalization and the opening markets and economies in the region have failed to create anticipated employment opportunities for young people¹.

1. Introduction: The Status of Arab Women in the AMC

According to the Global Gender Gap Report, the Arab region in general continues to rank lowest overall in the world on measures of women's economic participation and opportunity. It indicates that overall, the region ranks lowest in the world on measures of women's economic participation and opportunity. The outcomes of education, employment, cultural values and practices and political participation reflect how gender relations affect the daily life of Arab Youth. Women remain heavily underrepresented in politics, holding only about 7 percent of the seats in parliament. In the last decade, some progress has been made in extending the rights of women to vote and run for political office (GGG 2014).

Currently, the Arab Mediterranean Countries (AMCs) are experiencing a period of momentous change and uncertainty, with profound political, economic, and demographic transitions in some countries (Egypt, Tunisia), and economic strains (Morocco, Algeria), unemployment and rising citizen demands (Lebanon). Throughout the region, men and women are calling for increased voice and participation in the economy and society. The current period of uncertainty and change presents challenges and opportunities, including and with regard to gender issues. It is feared that many countries, faced with these myriad challenges, may not prioritize gender issues in the short- or medium-term. In general countries are still debating identity, and the role of women in the economy and society (World Bank 2012 b).

In compliance with the SAHWA guideline, the objective of the paper is to look into "How gender affects Young women opportunities in the Arab Mediterranean Countries (AMC), and specifically in: Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia. It argues that 'lack of reform for youth employment' and 'persistent gender inequalities' are the main factors that affect youth employment in the region. Furthermore, social barriers are hindering women's participation in the public sphere and is due to: certain social norms that discriminates against women's participation; the exploiting nature of the private sector which should be the main hub for youth employment; and the quality of the education that does not meet the market's expectations.

Based on the identified main hindrances, the paper concludes with recommendation to concerned decision-makers which can be summed up as follow: 1) the need to give women a voice in decision-making and the right to choice her path; 2) the private sector needs to be more involved in skills training for youth to meet labour market participation; 3) improving the quality of education for young female job seekers to enable them better access to the labour market; and 4) more 'gender friendly regulations including social protection laws.

Evidences and case studies to debate the argument are presented from the SAHWA ethnographic fieldwork which include data, individual and group interviews from the five countries, and highlighting initiatives that has been conducted in the region targeting women's socio-economic empowerment.

2. What is affecting youth employment in the Arab Mediterranean countries

2.1 Lack of much needed reforms for youth employment in the AMC

Youth feel frustrated by the Government's failure in all walks of life. As the ethnographic research in one discussion group in Lebanon mentioned that: "Frustrated feelings about the experiences of daily life were often expressed in connection to a negative perception of the state"... and "little hope the government would ever change".

A number of young women spoke about how state politics manifested into the everyday through the education system and in the work place.

"We were told that at universities—both public and private—lecturers, or even departments might have affiliations with particular political parties who also held office in the state. (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork LB_FE_1)

Similarly at work, the young people faced discrimination or favouritism and this was also dependent on their background. The ways in which state corruption and the overall lack of transparency materialised into the everyday prompted some of our interlocutors to question the democratic nature of the country. As one of the female interviewer states:

"First of all...well they say that we have a democratic country but in my opinion this isn't democracy...there are still inequalities and differences...women still don't have all their rights...women are working to help men but there isn't a word of support to help women in the house and to look after the children I want my children to be free to decide what they want...in everything...on what they study where they want to go with it... (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork LB_FE_1)

Governments are doing little to address the long-term economic challenges facing youth. It seems that they are reinforcing institutions that disincentive job creation and skills development. Such efforts could accentuate the challenges facing long-term institutional reform efforts. As one group in Algeria explains:

" the government has implemented a number of devices able to create employment for the youth category. However for many of these young people, the ANSEJ device (national support agency for youth employment), for example, is too demanding to the extent that a lot of them are holders of no adequate qualification to benefit from bank loans and therefore to realise an economic project in this context. The other slot on services sector has been quickly saturated (transport of passengers and goods) (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork DZ_FE_1).

Hence, Government's failures to create a framework for inclusive growth, specifically addressing young men and women in the region, has left youth at the margin of society. Understanding the role of women in the ongoing political, economic, social and cultural transformation to the significance of states and institutions in reproducing and maintaining existing inequalities, a number of scholars and experts have expressed particular concern over the impact of the Arab Spring on initiatives to support women's public participation in the region, and the lacking and emerging conditions for establishing social justice in gender relations as well as the socio-economic factors leading to the exclusion of women.

2.2 Persistent gender inequalities

Issues of gender and access to equal rights are often connected to perceptions of obligation that were also quite tense and conflicting. During SAHWA fieldwork interviews several issues regarding women's employment were raised such as: the role of women in the private and public spheres, job preferences, and the mismatch between the quality of education and access to the labour market.

Most of the young women interviewed spoke of the importance of equal opportunities between men and women. Young women and men acknowledged that 'many challenges faced by men to provide for their wives'... and ... 'young men often worked three-four different jobs'. Participants believed that there was little opportunity to pursue their jobs interests in Lebanon, and this was an incentive to considering the options abroad" (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork LB_FE_1).

For young women workers in the region, marriage and the presence of children are typically detrimental to employability in the private sector although: "... Working in the government institute is not a dream because the government salaries are very weak and needs from a person to find another job in the afternoon in order to improve his living standards and increase his salary", as explained by one of the SAHWA fieldwork interviewees in Egypt who believes that: "her own salary would not make a difference, mentioning that even her working would not be a big deal as it would the responsibility of the husband (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork EG_LS_1).

Women in general face a myriad of barriers to labour force participation in the Arab region, including discriminatory social attitudes that hinder their access to leadership positions however, they some have taken several strides to break the gender barriers and participate in the public sphere. As one of the Ethnological Research conducted by SAHWA reveals how Moroccan women are generally active and dynamic outside and at home. They are an insurance of income in their family, and are the hard core of the society. They are kind of super women even if it's not recognized by outsiders. Beyond the idea of the patriarchal system's functioning, women in Morocco can have a word to say, and can play a major role in society (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork MA_LS_1).

Although migration is mostly associated with young unemployed men, however, young unemployed women have started to think of this opportunity to. One of the female interviewees in Tunisia argued that '...The black horizon of employment shows the use of choices to which several succumb; which is illegal immigration (alharqa). She regards this choice as legitimate given the attractive opportunities provided to the young person at arrival to Europe (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork TN_FG_2).

3. Social barriers hindering women's participation in the Public Sphere

The obstacles facing women and men in finding employment are manifold including inadequate education and hiring practices. Women in addition have specific constraints including those related to access and control over economic and financial resources, as well as physical mobility, care responsibilities, and restrictive gender norms. Women in the region own only a small share of land and other property and have more difficulty than men in accessing credit. Gender inequality in access to and control over resources is related to discriminatory legislation and practices with regards to property and inheritance rights.



From the above we can conclude that gender equalities in general remain persistent in most Arab societies, and as summed up by one of the ethnographic focus group discussions in Egypt: there is a gender bias and girls are less privileged than boys when it comes to job opportunities and work conditions. “It’s easier for a young boy to find a job” (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork EG_FG_1).

The most obvious obstacles and challenges hindering women’s participation are related to: social norms and stereotyping; non-engagement from the private sector; poor quality of education that does not meet with labour market expectations, inefficient reform to the education to work systems, and under addressing youth needs, as further explained:

3.1 Social norms

Barriers related to the different social and economic roles that both men and women are expected to perform and which are largely influenced by cultural, religious and social norms remain deeply ingrained in all regions, even though the world of work and society has changed. This is translated into specific occupations being considered more suitable either for men or for women, as focus groups in Morocco and Algeria discuss:

“For young women (in Morocco), the (work) experiences are often paradoxical. They have to negotiate their independent earned income, their partial freedom with the socio-cultural gendered norms prevailing in the region” (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork MA_FE_1).

Discriminatory social attitudes remain one of the main barriers to Labour force participation in the AMC and the most debated:

The issue of women’s work was one of the more controversial question between those who support women’s work arguing that it became necessary for women to work to help the family in the living costs, and those who say they should stay in their houses, and that men should assume work, meanwhile most of the young people state that employers prefer to recruit women than men (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork DZ_FG_2).

Traditionally, management, running a business and decision-making in the public arena was viewed as the domains of men. These norms have also informed educational curriculum and recruitment and promotion policies for many decades. While these are now being addressed to eliminate gender bias, they remain deep in the psyche of a broad spectrum of men and women. Stereotyping women’s role is still quite persistent as stated by one of the focus groups in Algeria and Morocco:

.... Women should not practice politics in all its forms. In return, they have their right spaces where they can work and raise their competence; in this case the sectors of education and health. Decisions taken cannot go against the natural division of labor between men and women. The world has always worked well (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork DZ_FG_4)

While cultural and structural explanations are part of the story, however they do not put sufficient emphasis on human agency and contextual circumstances in shaping attitudes.

Regarding gender differentiations: “If we talk about the Casablanca-Rabat axis and the major cities, there most women have access to education and several things, parents are open in general, so women can do a lot of things in terms of participation and have opportunities. But, when talking about “the real Morocco”, women are faced with a lot of problems. We talk about culture of “hchouma” and “hram”. A woman can’t do this or that, it’s a matter of culture, it’s “Maroc profond” (al maghrib al 3amiq). And for me, these regions are the “Real Morocco”, not Casa-Rabat even though the majority of Moroccans are concentrated in that axis” (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork MA_FG_3).

Hence, women in the region continue to face significant restrictions on employment, social inclusion, political mobilization, participation, culture and values, international migration and mobility, among others. To some extent, this pattern is present across the world, but it is particularly pronounced in MENA², and is embodied in several laws and traditions.

3.2 The private sector is exploiting

Job creation in the private sector in general is too limited to absorb the large and growing number of young jobseekers in the Arab Region. Within this limited sphere, women are unable to compete on an equal footing due to several interrelated factors that constrain women’s economic participation (restrictions on mobility and choice, household care burdens, occupational segregation, and son preference, among others). Because jobs are scarce and laws to protect workers’ rights are lenient, private sectors are exploiting youth employment, and especially women. Concerning the differences of gender regarding recruitment, one participant in a discussion group confirms a situation of discrimination toward men and which is advantageous for the women. According to his declaration:

“... there is a discrimination, there are companies which prefer to recruit women rather than men. While the man has a family of which he has to take care, he needs more money than the woman. She does not need a lot, she is preferred during the recruitment and is less paid” (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork DZ_FE_2).

Women are hence, the first to be fired when reducing the number of workers, as explained by a female interviewee, rural Morocco:

“... In the farm of Zniber, there used to be 200 laborers. They reduced the number to 100 workers ..., 12 women, and the others are male workers. The men working as technicians all have accomplished their high school. The various labour activities are carried out in separated groups. Men and women laborers usually do not work together (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork MA_NI_1).

3.3 Quality of education is not meeting labour market’s expectations

A second constraint is the poor quality of education and critical skills mismatches between what is studied in school, especially for girls, and what the private sector demands. Employers often perceive women as more costly and less productive than men. For their part, women have concerns about their reputations and safety in private sector jobs³, as obvious in an interview with an employer in a rural area in Morocco as one participants gives the following example to illustrate the genders’ differentiated work abilities:

“for the plantation of the onions, the lines should not exceed 50 meters. The young women only do four lines, but they respect the distance between the different plants. The men may plant more lines, but they are often not done in a neat way. Young men just do the work fast to earn more money at the end of the day” (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork MA_LS_2)

He continues to explain that young women are additionally more diligent because they have to work the entire week, contrary to young men who only have to work a couple of days a week:

“Young women have to work to help out their parents, because one of their parents is ill, or they have to pay the rent, to answer the needs of their brothers and sisters”.

Hence, in addition to inadequate education and hiring practices, women have specific constraints, including those related to access and control over economic and financial resources, as well as physical mobility, care responsibilities and restrictive gender norms.

4. Initiatives targeting women’s socio-economic empowerment

Research available on the factors that constrain women’s economic empowerment in the Arab region is abundantly available (refer to the reference provided), yet on the other hand; there is little evidence of the impact of government or donor initiatives that have sought to directly address these constraints. What is obvious is that there is a paradox in gender equality in the MENA region: while, for the most part, MENA countries have made admirable progress in closing gender gaps in education and health outcomes, these investments in human development have not yet translated into commensurately higher rates of female participation in economic and political life.

In Egypt, the World Bank initiated a ‘Gender Equity Model’ (GEME) in 2010. This firm certification project aimed to promote women’s access to employment, training and career advancement in the private sector. It targeted medium and large sized companies in the greater Cairo area, providing training and support for a gender self-assessment.

In cooperation with the Government, the ILO initiated the ‘Youth Employment National Action Plan’ (2010 – 2015) with a goal to increase youth employment and provide decent and productive jobs for young people, who join the labor market every year. The goal is closely related to the main objectives of Egypt’s Sixth Five-Year Economic and Social Development Plan (2007/2008–2011/2012). The Plan was based on three main pillars: the Presidential program that the government adopted (2005-2011); the new Social Contract for Social Participation, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations to concerned decision-makers

Social barriers are the main factors that are hindering women’s participation in the public sphere in the Arab Mediterranean Countries. Addressing the social norms is the first step to ease these barriers, in addition to more technical steps such as taking actual measures to reforms to boost private sector led job creation and create a diverse set of opportunities will help bring more women into productive employment. Reforms are also needed in the education system to bridge the mismatch between what is learnt in schools and what the market demands. These reforms must be a mixture of social, technical and legislative reforms as follow:

5.1 Giving women a voice inside and outside the house

In several countries in the region, women's ability to exercise agency within and outside the home is restricted by the letter, interpretation and implementation of laws. These include low or no legal minimum age of marriage, limited access to marital property, and guardianship laws (including the requirement of the guardian's permission to work) that restrict women's ability to make decisions, and their mobility outside the home. Women in the MENA region hold only about 15.7 percent of the seats in parliament⁴, the least among the regions, and witnessing the least expansion in civil society and political participation.

5.2 Private sector involvement for skills training to meet labour market needs

Identifying the skills and competencies required to effectively train young women to meet labour market demands is the first step, followed by recruiting young women into job-training programs. This requires designing employment-driven training models that respond to employers' skills demands; and exploring ways to change employers' beliefs that underprivileged young women do not have suitable skills.

5.3 Improving the quality of education for young female job seeker

The approaches to be included among others are: offering job entry skills training for young female job seekers to understand the basics of finding a job that completes the technical skills they have already obtained; organizing Job fairs and inviting employers, who are ready to offer decent job opportunities for women; supporting the design of effective employment training programs for in-demand skills and competencies; Produce evidence on the most efficient methods for recruiting youth for employment training; Develop online content, videos, and other targeted knowledge products for youth employment stakeholders.

5.4 More "gender friendly" laws, regulations and social protection

Labor laws and regulations in some countries restrict the hours and occupations that women have access to, and some, paradoxically make it more expensive to hire women. Even where the letter of the law is relatively equitable, much needs to be done in terms of implementation, effective enforcement and equitable access to justice. Women's participation in political and civic organization can also enhance their voice in public life.

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Researching
Arab Mediterranean Youth:
Towards a New Social Contract



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