



Scientific Paper

Women's school- to-work transition in the Arab mediterranean countries (AMC)

Center of Arab Women for Training and Research



Researching
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ABSTRACT

In compliance with SAHWA proposal guideline, and based on the data from the Ethnographic fieldwork, this scientific paper looks into the status of women's school-to-work transition in Arab Mediterranean Countries (AMC). Fresh female graduates, from poor backgrounds face the most challenges when seeking to access the labour market. They have difficulties due to social gender norms in the society, institutional decline in the educational system, and lack of social connections. Short-term solutions include introducing career guidance and job entry skills programs. Several case studies of successful school-to-work transition initiatives are highlighted. These initiatives seek to abridge the social gap for the young women by providing fair chances in applying for jobs opportunities via good communication skills that can help them to build proper social connections.

Keywords: education to employment transition – job entry skills – social connections – social connections

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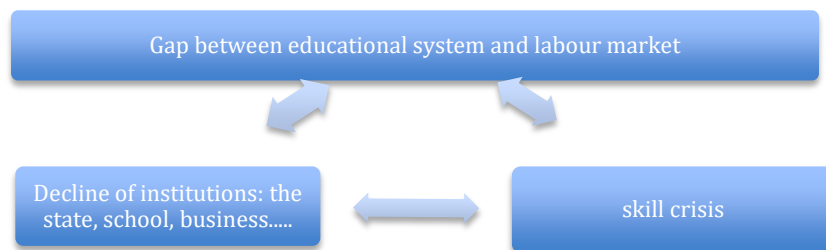
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Introduction

Current status of AMC school-to-work transition and its impact on women

Youth inactivity - not being in education, employment or training (NEET) - is by far the highest in the Arab Region, especially among young women, and estimated at more than 40% of the youth. Young people NEETs are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion (Rosso 2012). Two recent events in the Region have had a serious negative impact on job creation: 1) continuous political instability following the so-called Arab Uprising; and 2) the slowdown in global growth subsequent to the 2008 economic crisis. The probability of being unemployed increases when a person is young, educated, urban, or female (OECD 2015).

On the other hand, the school-to-work transition mechanisms are failing as a result of decline in the educational system. Save for a few exceptions, findings of several studies and surveys suggests that the educational systems in the region do not offer students the set of skills that enable them to get a job and subsequently serve them well in their careers (AfDB 2015). Taking into consideration the higher recruiters' demands, and stronger employers' expectations, tougher competition for talent, global sourcing of knowledge workers, and an increasing mobility of graduates, universities and schools need to do a better job at preparing students for successful and fulfilling careers.



To address the imbalance, a number of training institutions have developed training programs for unemployed and vulnerable young graduates, especially women who have more difficult times accessing the labour market. The focus is on 'job entry skills' (Soft

Skills¹ and Career Guidance) to help youth develop self confidence and self assertiveness, and develop their communication skills which will enhance their ability to build social connections, a major factor to finding a job opportunity.

Female graduates, especially from poor backgrounds, are the most effected by the rise in youth unemployment levels at AMC which have lower levels of women's labour force participation than other regions with similar income levels. The hard-won progress of women from AMC in education has not earned them the economic progress they deserve as the challenges that women from AMC face do not end with their ability to access to education, but rather continue after graduation. They find themselves excluded from the job markets for not having the needed 'social' and 'practical' entrance skills. The interaction between the region's economic structure and its conservative culture, in which traditional gender roles are strongly enforced, are largely responsible as AMC male graduates are more likely to have better social networks and more mobility and subsequently better chances to find a job opportunity. As a result, they are more likely to have direct access to wage employment and control over wealth. Gender discrimination in AMC is sometimes codified in law, frequently in Family Code. In several countries in the region, women must obtain permission from a male relative, usually a husband or father, before seeking employment, starting a business, or traveling. As a result, families tend to make greater investments in education and training for boys than for girls.

Taking into consideration that women are less competitive in the labour market than men in AMC, and women from poor backgrounds are less competitive, female graduates from public universities, have the least opportunities in finding a decent job in a highly competitive market place, and therefore find themselves economically and socially excluded. Hence, the research questions will focus on the following:

-How effective are the 'Job entry skill' program in enhancing young women's, from underprivileged backgrounds, opportunities in increasing their competitiveness in finding a good job opportunity?

-Can soft skills training compromise the lack of quality education for young female

¹ Soft skills is a term often associated with a person's "EQ" (Emotional Intelligence Quotient), the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, interpersonal skills, managing people, leadership, etc. that characterize relationships with other people.

graduates?

-Can good communication skills build positive social connections to increase the chances of finding decent job opportunities?

I – Background Literature

Overview of women's school-to-work transition in AMC

The AMC continues to rank lowest in the world on overall measures of women's economic participation and opportunity (Global Gender Gap Index 2014).

In Morocco, the most educated sections of the youth population have the highest rates of unemployment. Urban, educated females face a 50 percent unemployment rate, while rural men with no formal schooling have the lowest risk of unemployment at 10 percent. An estimated 22 percent of male youths are unemployed compared to 38 percent of young females. Young people make up 30 percent of the population, yet only around half of these individuals are in school or the formal workforce² (Molina & co. 2014).

Algeria's youth unemployment rate is over 50 percent. 24.4 percent of youth in the 16–24 age range were not in the labour force or in school. Young women in the labour force was as low as 9 percent. There is a dichotomy between the situation of a majority of young women who are in school (55.4 percent as against 45.9 percent for young men) and a significant share of young women who are neither in school nor in the labour force, 35.8 percent of young women were not in the labour force or in school, compared with only 13.3 percent of young men. The unemployment rate of women has stagnated since 2007, below 17 percent, leading to a situation where the gap between men and women has increased, because men's unemployment rate has been steadily decreasing (Jewell 2014).

25 percent of youth in Tunisia, aged 15 – 24, are neither in employment, nor in education or training (NEET). Young women have much lower employment rates than young men, 13.3 percent versus 30.3 percent, resulting primarily from higher labour market inactivity rates, 77.2 percent versus 52.9 percent. Young women (41.8 percent), graduates (62.3 percent) and those from the poorer Centre West and Southern regions are particularly likely to be unemployed (OECD 2015). More than 60 percent of university graduates are females, however, the rate of female participation in the labour force remains much lower, and their unemployment rate of 32 percent is double the rate for male university

² A 2014 research conducted by Students of the International Policy Practicum of the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago on: "Youth Transition to the Labor Market in Morocco"

graduates, 16 percent. In many regions, the unemployment rate for female graduates is above 50 percent. (Boughzala 2013).

Tunisia witnessed a growing stock of unemployed university graduates due to a structural problem: universities annually graduate 60,000 to 70,000 students, while the country creates only 20,000 new jobs. Moreover, the skills of three-fourths of the new graduates do not fit the job market needs. For instance, all graduates from fields such as Arabic language and civilization, philosophy, geography, and history often need a complementary training to become employable (AfDB 2015). These are the fields with high level of female participation due to mobility and fields more fit for females.

High unemployment rates persist in Egypt have contributed to the growing frustration of Egyptian youth. Egyptian women, however suffer most. According to the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), the unemployment rates among males stood at 9.2 percent (Q4 of 2014), while unemployment rates among females stood at 25 percent, almost three folds. Hence, labour force participation among young females in Egypt is still relatively low, and raising female education level has not been enough to boost young women's economic empowerment (CAMPAS 2015).

The National Gender Equality Strategies

MENA Governments have also developed *national gender equality strategies* that focus on preventing gender-based discrimination, and strengthening the economic empowerment of women: The Egyptian National Council for Women (NCW) Strategy for Gender Equality; The National Strategy for Women in Egypt (2011 – 2015); National Strategy for Women in Lebanon (2011 – 2021); Stratégie de la lutte contre la violence à l'égard des femmes au sein de la famille et de la société in Tunisia.

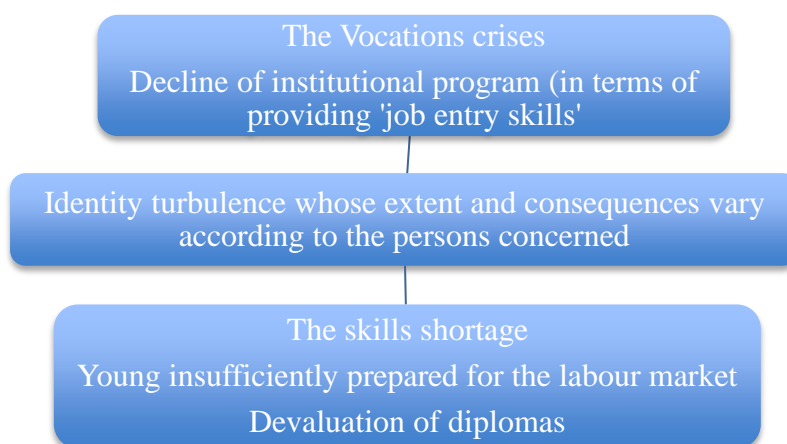
The introduction for the first time in Morocco of a Gender Report annexed to the 2006 Economic and Financial Report, which accompanies the budget law, highlights the process leading to gender-aware policy-making. In Algeria, the Ministry of Family and Women's Affairs is responsible for the women's national strategies. Since 2004, the Ministry has initiated a number of activities including: The development of a national

strategy to fight violence against women and children; The establishment of a data bank on the family, women and children;

What is noticed is that the strategies tend to lack specific gender equality standards, principles and objectives, narrowing women's role in the society and constrain women's empowerment in economic and public life.

The Educational System institutional decline

Preparation for professional life requires the involvement of several institutions having the role of the socialization of individual for the professional life. Two unifying principles characterize these different institutions (family, school, vocational training institutions, professional institutions, etc.) that are related to the state: 1- Working with one another (the socialization, the action); 2- The existence of an "institutional program".



Educational System reforms

For better labour market outcomes, one of the top priorities in the region is Improving learning and teaching facilities within universities and higher education institutions by incorporating technology in the classroom to enhance the learners' experience and encourage students to use, when needed, technology-enabled on-demand learning. Most of the AMC suffer from a poor educational infrastructure, schools are often over-crowded and have old facilities, with poor IT infrastructure, and few, if any, reliable systems for

information processing, and sharing. Many faculty members, university administrators, and students do not have access to email, and lack streamlined and user-friendly IT systems. In many locations, the Internet is not a first or second means of contact or information sharing among educational stakeholders. The poor physical and digital infrastructure cannot enable quality education and the rather low salaries paid to the teaching staff are not a motivating factor.

The challenge in Egypt is not only to reformulate education to better meet the needs of the private sector, but also to promote entrepreneurship and innovation to drive economic growth, enabling the country to create sufficient job opportunities for the millions of youth in the country. While the Egyptian education system is the largest in the Middle East and North Africa, its outcome is among the poorest. In fact, as one aid agency writes, ‘Egypt suffers from the phenomenon of “educated unemployment:” Egyptian college graduates are almost 10 times as likely to be unemployed than individuals with primary educations. In the push to democratize access to higher education, which has been the focus of the Ministry of Education since 1957, the quality of education has not followed suit. Classrooms are overcrowded, facilities are under resourced, teachers are under-qualified, and curriculum is out of date for the nearly 1.5 million students enrolled across Egypt’s seventeen public universities ³ (AfDB 2015).

The Egyptian Government has a strong interest in developing the needed education System, and providing education to all citizens. The goal is expressed in the “National Plan for Education for All” (2002/2003 – 2015/2016) issued by the Egyptian Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2003. The Ministry of Education (MoE) has also launched several initiatives to address the problem. One worthy of note for our purposes is their initiative focused on jumpstarting innovation and entrepreneurship through applied sciences (AfDB 2015).

³ Handoussa Heba et al., Egypt Human Development Report 2010, United Nations Development Program and the Institute of National Planning, Egypt, Project document EGY/01/006

Morocco, has made educational improvement a national priority, the primary and secondary school systems are characterized by low-quality education that does not adequately prepare students for the workforce. Even though primary enrollment rates reach above 90 percent, less than one-fifth of first-graders eventually graduate from high school (Molina & co. 2014).

In response to the 'Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC)' new technological breakthrough in class to allow individuals to become more proactive in taking their own education and development in hand at each stage of their lives, the Mohammed VI Foundation in Morocco launched a new e-learning platform for teachers in 2013. The platform is intended to help improve teachers' proficiencies in computers and technology, with courses on software, new languages, as well as courses aimed at personal development. It is not a requirement for teachers to log on or follow any of the courses, but employs a pull strategy, marketing to teachers' "thirst to learn, to exchange, and to achieve excellence."

Since 1976, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MoHESR) in Tunisia, has been using a computerized information system to manage the admissions process factors in applicants' baccalaureate grades (school leaving examination), and their preferences for areas of study at the university according to each institution's teaching capacity. However, the admissions process suffers from several significant weaknesses: 1) young people have insufficient information to make the right choice as to which areas of study have the greatest employment opportunities. For while engineering, medicine and architecture are considered "prestigious fields, and reserved for students who rank very highly," these choices do not guarantee employment because there are far more engineering graduates than engineering jobs; 2) Student preferences are not taken into consideration. 87 per cent of the students do not obtain their first choice of a study track. The misalignment between the desired field of study of high-school graduates and their allocation by the MoHESR to a given university track and later on their post-graduate employment has resulted in distortions in the economy and a lack of faith on the part of students in Tunisia's higher education system (AfDB 2015) .

In 2015, the National dialogue on the education system's reform was launched in Tunisia under the patronage of the Education Ministry, and in collaboration with the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) and the Arab Institute for Human Rights (AIHR). The reform comes as a result of the failures of the educational system that is felt all the way to the university-level. A college degree does not guarantee employment. In fact, the higher the level of education, the higher the unemployment rate⁴.

Hence, the Governments, represented by the Ministries of Education, remains the stakeholder for any proposed educational reform. However, a national social dialogue must be convened and consist of: main ministries (technical, industrial, vocational training, economy...), the Employers' Organizations, the Technical Unions, and Educational Institutions (universities, high technical institutions and colleges).

II - Challenges encountered by women during the 'school-to-work' transition

Despite the AMC Governments' efforts to enhance the level of education, and develop the educational systems (refer 1.4), and promote gender equality (refer 1.2), however in reality, the impact has had limited effect on the labour markets, and the rate of unemployment remains high for youth in Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia, and in some countries, such as Egypt, twice as much for women. The social norm is still one of the main reasons for the high unemployment rates among women; as a female graduate interviewee from Morocco, who is also an active member in an NGO that helped build her personality to become an entrepreneur, explains:

*... Being a young entrepreneur breaks all the classical standards of education and vision.... Being a woman entrepreneur in Morocco, in the whole vision and representation of things, is, for the majority of Moroccans, not compatible with traditions and the place of women, as it is represented.*⁵

*"In Morocco a good girl is 'dakhla f souk rasha'..."*⁶ (MA_LS_1).

⁴ Young Tunisians Deserve a Better Education System; Thirty-three percent of young Tunisians with a university degree are unemployed; among these students, fifty-six percent have a Master's degree <http://muftah.org/young-tunisians-deserve-a-better-education-system/#.Vy-djksTHwI>

⁵ It reminds us the native dichotomy between representations and the realities in the field, like rural women working hard on the land.

Tradition and social norms remain major obstacles. Restricted mobility and lack of social network are also major factors to women's limited access to the labour market, as one of the interviewee summarizes:

further education for a young girl living in a fairly enclosed locality and suffering from relatively inadequate or non-existent infrastructure and basic social equipment is subject to relatively complex relationship between three factors: the first factor is on the girl's degree of motivation and incentive, according to the place and role she assigns to school in the projection of her social trajectory. The second factor is the reality of material conditions indicating the geographical criterion of remoteness and consequently the key issue of transport especially for a girl. The third factor is related to the effect of the environment and cultural constraints that tend to provide a very low importance to the role of the school in the growth and development of the girl's personality. (DZ_NI_2)

Accordingly, the main challenges that encounter youth, and especially young women during the 'school-to-work' transition, can be summarized as:

Skills mismatch between the employment applicants profiles and the created jobs

Skill mismatches explain why unemployment is disproportionately higher among women. In AMC, the type of technical skills acquired by men and women differ considerably. While more men tend to study science and engineering, women are much more likely to specialize in the humanities or education. They are usually encouraged by their parents to chose these more 'feminist' field that will keep them near their homes and will not conflict later on with their roles as wives and mothers.

⁶ In Moroccan *darija* means a girl that is not opened to society, stays at home and waits for marriage.

Differences in technical skills between men and women is leading to occupational segregation and hindering women's ability to find suitable employment, as a young female graduate from Egypt explains during the ethnological interview:

Today there are new jobs being created and opened up... 30,000 teachers have been appointed nationwide, there was more demand on those who graduated from law or commerce while others who applied from the social sciences were significantly less. (EG_NI_4)

Hence, work and employment characteristics are changing. Specific skills are required to enter the labour market, yet formal educational systems are failing to follow changes and developments in the labour market. University programs have not been market-oriented: "universities have been producing a product designed to be stocked up!⁷".

The majority of unemployed (up to 80% in some countries such as Egypt) are first jobseekers with no previous work experience. Female unemployment (and inactivity) rates are very high even among the young, despite the increasing levels of education and aspirations of women for jobs. Labour market opportunities, which are rare for young men in the region, remain almost non-existent for young women (Rosso 2012). Employers tend to reject youth without relevant work experience, regardless of their level of education. The majority of unemployed women are first job seekers with no previous work experience.

"I often seek work on the net, I also use the newspapers, but they usually require a lot of experience, but if nobody hires you how you want to have the experience ... I'm in business, and they tell me, you have experience, so I told them give me a chance, let me work and I would get an experience." (DZ_NI_3)

To achieve more and better employment results, there is a need to foster vocational training activities and program, for they will achieve short-term results employment wise,

⁷ Maher Kallel, Founder and General Manager of Carthage Business Angels in Tunis, March 2013 (AfDB 2015)

and not only focus on educational reforms, which will bear fruit in the medium to long term period. The vocational training programs typically have an entrepreneurial drive and most of the time the graduates end up creating their own venture. However, there is an unbalance between university and vocational training programs. In Tunisia, for example, 70,000 students graduate each year from the university educational system and only 20,000 from the vocational training. A gender segregation exist in the vocational trained occupation as very few of the graduates are women since the available specialization do not fit with the young women expectation that they have for their future employment (OIT survey 2014)

Lack of social connections

Very related to the mismatch is the lack of social connections. A young female graduate from Egypt argued that there are no available jobs in the job market because no one works in their specialization. She mentioned that in order to get into a good job within your specialization you need *wasta* (social connection) and she used an example of a person she knows that graduated from physical education faculty and works in a bank while she the commerce graduated is unable to get a banking job.

“I am one of those that do not work in their specialization because there are no available jobs and even if there is they ask for a lot of qualifications, if every one works in their specialized work there will be more availability and better performance but if not then he/she will never put more than 40% effort.”.... “There aren’t any, I graduated from faculty of commerce and to banks is the sector and I took several exams and still I need wasta not grade and I know a PE graduate working in a bank. It’s all about wasta to live or die, I applied in smaller companies in Kafr El Sheikh and still not even in smaller ones, they do not need accountants.” (EG_NI_3).

Not having the right connections, few network opportunities, and being too young are some of the major obstacles facing female employees in the Region⁸. They lack adequate connections compared to their male counterparts. The importance of social connections was mentioned several times during the ethnological fieldwork, as one of the interviewed from Lebanon explains:

Well they give you work benefits like help with you medical (insurance) and things are done by the law but in my personal opinion there isn't much equality. So you know there are some people who favoured more than others...people who have better connections. (LB_LF_3)

Transparent and merit-based recruitment mechanisms involving open competition are not the reliable way to obtain a job.

When we asked if her aunt was employed through personal favours and connections, she replied by saying that everyone in Egypt is appointed this way. (EG_NI_4)

And again in Algeria, young women with no social contacts find more difficulties in obtaining the first job.

"I feel excluded sometime, I tell myself I did not make the university and all, but finally when I go to ANEM⁹, there are people who have degree+ 3 or +7 and do not call. They say we are here to help young people and all, but in fact there is nothing, if you do piston or not you come home system of corruption that does not. But I am against, frankly It takes me 2 years to get my Driving license because I did not want to pay anyone." (DZ_NI_1)

As cited over and over again, the need for social connection is undeniable, as a female graduate from Algeria, who received training in parallel while studying explains:

⁸ According to a report (2007) by Knowledge@Wharton publ. arm of the University of Pennsylvania US

⁹ National Employment Agency

"I wanted to work in a private school to teach courses, but it takes the piston¹⁰. There was another candidate, she was not even graduated. So, they made me pass the interview, and they saw that I had diplomas. But as "stemousni"¹¹ they do not even call me, so they recruited the other candidates.". She continues..."Otherwise, I worked in private schools, but there is exploitation, it was a lousy salary, because there are always other people who want to work at any conditions, (DZ_NI_3).

Thus, the social connection, or the 'wasta' has become a main system for hiring in the region

There is the problem of promotion by seniority in public sector. This system does not allow young people who have the potential to learn and gain experience, to advance. ... 'Wasta' system means people get hired because they have connections that help them apply and give them priority even if they don't have the necessary skills and knowledge for the job (EG_FG_1).

Territorial disparities and weak geographical mobility

Also well connected to skill mismatch and lack of social connection is the territorial disparities of where women live and which leads to women's inability to move as often as needed to access education and/or access to work. Women who live in remote small geographical places with limited infrastructural facilities suffer from limited access to education as explained by one of the interviewee in Algeria:

¹⁰ Network and relationships to find work

¹¹ Knowledge Networks in Kabyle

My mother encouraged me to go to school but she saw that there were no more girls in the class, added to the distance, because it must be said that at that time there was no transportation facilities like today. All this led me to drop out at the age of 11 years to stay at home like the other girls in the village with whom I spent a lot of time browsing the fields. (DZ_NI_2)

Most top universities and colleges are allocated in the capital or major cities. In Tunisia, for example, the distribution of higher education resources seems to be more aligned with the broader patterns of resources' allocation in the country. The majority of universities are located along the country's coastline and in wealthy cities like Tunis and Sfax. The same applies to research centers and techno-parks (AfDB 2015). Hence, job availability is very diverse across the countries as concentration of job vacancies are in the coastal areas. This can be very frustrating for female students from small cities and villages who are obliged to study near home. Very few job opportunities exist in small villages, as the ambitious student explain:

Indifferent to the choice of the subject, her parents had only one condition, which was to choose one subject that required her not to study away from Gafsa. Asked about the possibility of working, she is aware of the very modest means that the city offers her. Her specialty, has no prospects in the governorate (TN_LS_4).

So, even after graduating, young female job seekers are not always able to leave their home towns to seek employment or even to bear the costs of the employment away from their home especially when it is likely to last for a good long time.

The University of Jendouba, which fared lowest in the Shanghai universities' ranking, requires that students carry out an internship during their studies, but there are no companies within a 50-kilometer radius of this university (AfDB 2015). This problem is often faced by female students at small universities and colleges in the city or rural areas, as described by the female student in Gafsa during one of the ethnological interviews:

The two small offices that handle advertising in Gafsa are run by two young computer engineers, without the slightest training in the field. They practice advertising “in a crafty way” and overviews. “I could not attend a training with these two young persons of Gafsa, I will not learn anything new. Besides, they would not accept me; Even as a student, I know more than they do.” (TN_LS_4).

III - Bringing in new alternatives for women to access the labour market:

Job entry Skills for Better Access to the Labour Market

In one of SAHWA ethnography focus group discussions in Egypt, participants identified problems related to transition from school to work stating that there are not enough training programs for undergraduates and graduates that provide them the necessary knowledge and skills for the job market. When applying for new jobs, if their C.V. does not show that they attended some courses, that they received training and have a good command of the English language, then their application will not be considered. The college degree is no more sufficient to get a job. They think that the Government has to organize periodical training programs for young people in all specializations:

‘I have to work to get a certificate of experience; I need languages and a computer course, other than that, If you have only your degree, better stay at home!’ (EG_FG_1).

Public education is failing in providing students with the needed skills that prepare graduates to enter the market. This is more evident among the poor communities, ‘communities such as the slumps where women are a neglected category (Fathi 2015)’. The number of young women who have managed to reach and graduate from universities is slowly increasing, due to the fact that public education is almost free of charge in most MENA Countries, however, it is noticed that female university graduate from poor communities face two disadvantages; the fact that they are female, and therefore are less likely to have any social connection; and the fact that they are poor and have little chance

of obtaining the needed skills for proper job entry. This is obvious for Egypt and the other MENA countries

There are around 10 slums surrounding Halwan University, and therefore many of our students are from poor communities. We feel proud when young women from the poor communities are able to enroll and graduate from the university. However, we've noticed that very few of our graduates are capable of finding a proper formal job because the education provided to them at the university is not enough, and they cannot afford additional private classes. Therefore, they find themselves trapped in poverty (Lecturer at Halwan University, and a member of a local community development NGO).

To strengthen education as a path to enhance women's economic participation and opportunity, there is a need to focus on improving education quality, and targeting girls from secondary and technical education, as they are more vulnerable to unemployment and engagement in the informal sector (Abdel Mowla 2009). Poor quality of the education systems contribute to high level of economic inequality, and raise concerns about social justice (SYPE 2012).

Finding a decent job requires higher level of educational attainment. Thus, in most cases in the AMC, a university degree alone is still not enough and only a post-graduate degree can better guarantee a job opportunity, or farther training, which are beyond the mean of women from underprivileged backgrounds, especially from the villages or small cities, as one of the bright students mentioned:

Indeed the Institute requires students of this specialty to enroll in training courses in a department of a specialized company. Such companies exist only in large cities. These courses require her and her family to make sacrifices beyond their means. Money should be collected in order for her to spend one month or two in one of those cities, where she will have no one to host her (TN_LS_4).

What new female graduates, or final year graduates need is a comprehensive 'job entry skill', such as the Skills for Success: Employability Skills for Graduate Women provided by the Amideast Egypt:

The complete training includes modules covering all the basic skills needed to be hired for and to succeed at an entry-level job. Participants will complete 270 hours of training, divided into four components: English for the Workplace (135 hrs.), Computer Skills (30 hrs.), Job Related Skills (74 hrs.), and Career Development (31 hrs.). All courses will be tailored to young, unemployed and underemployed, university-educated women who have not had the connections, qualifications, or experience to secure a full time job or formally enter the labour market at the level of a decent job.... Potential employers were involved in activities throughout the program as real life examples and to build connections to industry that may result in the hiring of participants. (Amideast 2015).

A total of 20 fresh female graduates were received the ToT work@work program at the piloting stage. They provided another 85 young women with 50 hours 'job entry skills' training. 18 out of 20 beneficiaries were able to find jobs straight after graduation. 3 of which became certified 'job entry skills' trainers. The program was hence expanded to include 200 young female graduates from Cairo and Alexandria. They reached out to 3000 young women.

"After this scholarship, I become a different person. I always have hope, more self-confident, want to do anything and I know that I have a lot of skills which I don't know." (Rehab, age 23, 2015 Women @Work Graduate)

The program was a joint ILO/Amideast "Job entry skills and the promotion of women's economic rights" Implementation Agreement; as part of the ILO Project: "Creating a conducive environment for effective recognition and implementation of women's fundamental principles and rights at work in Egypt".

Definition of the problem

Researches have revealed that *women from under-privileged backgrounds, even those with a degree, face additional challenges than those faced by men when seeking to access the labour market*. They usually do not possess the personal network and relations to access decent jobs in the formal labour market. Hence, they need extra ‘job entry skills’ techniques and proper social connections to help them access the labour market.

Very little ethnographic research work on the impact of education in improving the socio-economic livelihood of women has been conducted, and scarcely any work exist on the impact of “soft skills trainings” on women, save for a few reports from renowned training institutions who have applied such programs; e.g. AMIDEAST and Education for Employment. They stated in their reports the positive outcomes of these programs in increasing women’s access to the labour market as a result of becoming more competitive and more self-assertive. 23 year old Magda was able to find a good job after participating in the women@work program.

“Throughout the program, training in the following areas was provided, to ensure that each of us was ready for her first interview: Prepared and tailored résumés and cover letters for different audiences; Highlighted our strengths and potential in the résumés and interviews; Determined the appropriate type of résumé to be used for different jobs; Prepared for job interviews by going through mock interviews; Learned how to search for a job effectively; Created LinkedIn accounts; and Learned how to follow up on their job application and interviews. That is why I advise any woman to take this program because this will change your life, your skills and your view of work 180 degree (Amideast 2015).”

IV – Methodology and Limitation of the Study

Several empirical research reveal that: “Soft Skills are as important as technical skills for entry level workers”:

More than 75 percent of employers surveyed said that soft skills were as

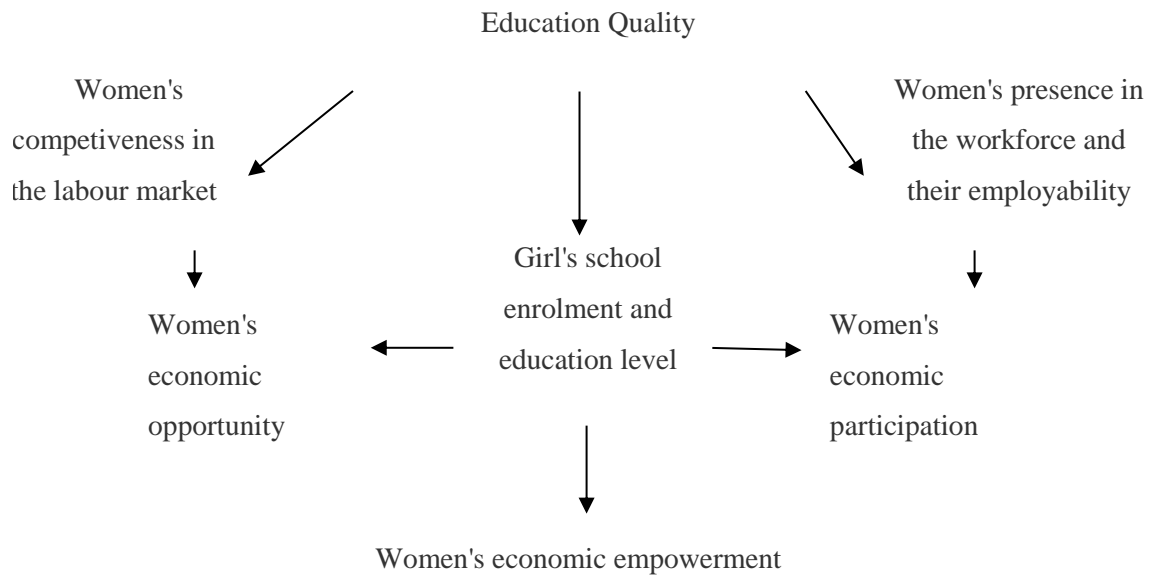
important as – or more important than – technical skills in securing entry -level employment. National surveys of employers reflect similar views, showing that in many cases soft skills are even more important than technical skills. Research on predicting the future career success of students supports employers' opinions that some soft skills are a better predictor of a dult success (salaries, graduation rates, home ownership) than technical skills (Pritchard 2013).

However, such researches and surveys are scarce in the MENA Region, and almost non existing from a gender sensitive point of view, save for a few internal reports from training institutions, such as Amideast, and Education for Employment (EfE):

“The soft skills portion of the program trained us on the following areas: Self-discovery; Career planning process; Communication and organizational skills; Being an effective team member; self-confidence and self-assertiveness; Skills needed to be an effective group member; Skills needed to leave an impression and achieve your career goals. (Amal, 22 year old female women@work graduate).

It is obvious that the soft skills are increasingly becoming the hard skills of today's work force. It's just not enough to be highly trained in technical skills, without developing the softer, interpersonal and relationship-building skills that help people to communicate and collaborate effectively. These “people skills” are more critical than ever as organizations struggle to find meaningful ways to remain competitive and be productive. Teamwork, leadership, and communication are underpinned by soft skills development. Since each is an essential element for organizational and personal success, developing these skills is very important¹² Therefore, researches should be carried out to measure the impact of the different ‘job entry skills’ program on women’s employment, and to have enough data for decision makers to develop a holistic policy to include the training in the curriculum. The research methodology could be as follow:

12 https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newCDV_34.htm; Why soft skills matter...



Results

Hence, when seeking a job opportunity, women in AMC encounter both ‘social’ obstacles, and ‘technical’ problems as: not having the necessary skills required by the job market, not having had the opportunity to gain practical experience at the university, and for those working not being satisfied with the opportunities their jobs offer them for self-development and professional growth. UNESCO’s 2012 “Social Inclusion: the difficult reality of young Lebanese Women” reveals that young female graduates complained from the absence of or the inappropriateness of career guidance and counselling services, from lack of formal channels of recruitment and objective hiring practices which heavily rely on social and personal connections and favouritism; and from the lack of internship and training opportunities their universities offer them.

There are a few training programs affordable for young women from poor background that provide them with the fundamental skills needed to prepare them for better chances to secure a decent job opportunity. Renowned training institutions who have applied such

programs; e.g. AMIDEAST¹³ and Education for Employment; stated in their reports the positive outcomes of these programs in increasing women's access to the labour market as a result of becoming more competitive and more self assertive. Yet aside from several internal reports, no actual research has been carried out on the impact of soft skill and complementary trainings in increasing poor women opportunities in entering the labour market. Such empirical researches are available in other countries. It revealed how *Employers should make soft skills in school their business*:

A school-leaver's prospects in the job market dramatically improves if he or she has a handle on key skills such as self-discipline, self-management, independence, delayed gratification, (not expecting immediate reward for hard work) and managing their own personal impact.¹⁴

Accordingly, there is a need for more comprehensive researches on the impact of these programs on improved access to decent jobs opportunities, and how to make them available for young graduates. There is also a need for a holistic approach by the educational system and the private sector to include soft skills trainings in the curriculum, as there is a lack of essential employability skills in the current school and college curriculum.

Soft skills are increasingly becoming the hard skills of today's work force. It is just not enough to be highly trained in technical skills, without developing the softer, interpersonal and relationship-building skills that help people to communicate and collaborate effectively. These "people skills" are more critical than ever as organizations struggle to find meaningful ways to remain competitive and be productive. Teamwork, leadership, and communication are underpinned by soft skills development. Since each is an essential element for organizational and personal success, developing these skills are very important

13 <http://www.amideast.org/our-work/elt/empowering-youth-and-women/skills-success>
<http://www.amideast.org/fr/news-resources/press-release/egypt/amideast-ilo-launch-employability-skills-initiative-women-egypt>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlf9JcNLEdM>

14 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationopinion/11149348/Employers-should-make-soft-skills-in-school-their-business.html>

In answer to the question to know whether the socialization in an associative frame and in the mosque has facilitated him the access to the employment, Karim has confirmed this role: " yes when you apply for a job, the employer will look at your appearance, at your behavior, at your conduct before seeing your skill level, to see if he can trust you or not" (DZ_FE_20).

Conclusion

In general, women are less competitive in the labour market than men in Egypt, and women from poor backgrounds are the less competitive. However, when offered a 'Job entry skills' training, their chances of finding a decent job increased. Accordingly, the following should be taken into consideration in regard to improving women's access to :

Improve learning and teaching facilities within universities and higher education institutions;

There is also an urgent and continuous need to strengthen the linkage between universities and employers, so as to ensure a better fit between educational programs, and job market needs. This requires among others: providing education for self-employment, and not just education for employment; Incorporating new pedagogical approaches, such as "learning-by-doing" (action-based learning); and taking into account the market impact of new types of entities delivering education and content (AfDB 2015).

Effective non-discriminatory 'Job entry skill' programs that enhance young women's opportunities, increase their competitiveness in finding a good job opportunity, and compensate for the lack of quality education for female public university graduates;

Several participants in the ethnological focus group discussions referred to the fact that the statutory texts governing the work contain no discrimination according to the sex of the employee in the public service, it is established that men and women are equal regarding salary. Although it is known in the academic literature that women have less

access to the high responsible jobs. In the private sector, it is believed that the employers prefer women because they can be granted a lower salary (DZ_FE_2).

Abridge the social gap for young women from poor background by providing fair chances in applying for jobs opportunities. The socio-economic gap among different classes in most Arab countries is widening. Education is one of the important factors that can abridge this gap, as stated by the youth themselves:

.... the state hasn't taken enough decisions and measures to ensure their social inclusion starting with the professional insertion (DZ_FE).

Strengthen the linkage between universities and employers in order to ensure a better fit between educational programs and job market needs.

Both public and private institutions should be viewed by universities as partners and customers. Close collaboration between companies and universities creates an eco-system that fosters job creation and new venture formation, and thus, boost opportunities for employment, and also self-employment. This can be achieved by creating more internship programs, establishing mentoring or coaching programs between students and executives or entrepreneurs, creating advisory bodies for schools to inform curriculum design, including professionals (and not only academics) in the faculty.

The glaring lack of opportunities in the resort, as it exists in large cities and towns, highlights a truth of a bitter taste when knowing that there is no work for young people outside agriculture which is their only chance, knowing that the major factor of social inclusion is work..... The difference between the two levels of perception concerning the identification of the two categories of young, from a sociological point of view, undeniably refers to the reality of the role and status of the girl in this type of locality. (DZ_NI_2)

Universities and schools need to do a better job at preparing students for successful and fulfilling careers. More specifically, they need to address students' deficiencies in some categories including: goal setting, information gathering and analysis, quantitative skills,

innovation, technology, and entrepreneurship. Other critical areas include inter-personal skills, initiative taking, leadership, relationship building, and sense making.

In particular, students need to be able to communicate well (orally and in writing) with different stakeholders, as well as to develop problemsolving and decision-making skills. Students who aspire to take a management position need to also develop a strategic thinking ability and be able to manage crises, and resolve conflicts. They should also be able to motivate and guide people and teams from diverse educational backgrounds, and work with different constituencies ranging from public and private sector institutions to non-governmental organizations, and civil society associations.

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