

Women, Work and Family in the Arab Region: Toward Economic Citizenship

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Educational attainment and economic need are factors that contribute to female labor supply, while the structure of the economy and the development strategy in place create demand for female labor in both public and private sectors. Other factors that shape female labor supply are age, marital status, and the presence of young children. Across the world, as the female share of the global work force has grown to near parity with that of men, even mothers of small children have achieved labor force attachment. And yet, the double burden that they face is a matter of concern for policymakers and women's rights advocates alike. Moreover, this burden is complicated by social class. In many cases, upper-income women are able to secure the services of a nanny or an expensive childcare center, which enables them to remain at their professions. Such an option is not, however, available to most middle-class women, and certainly not to women from working-class or low-income households. In many countries where statutory paid maternity leaves are available, such leaves are available only to women in the formal sector and may be of short duration, leaving working mothers dissatisfied and anxious. Where mothers have the possibility of lengthy, unpaid maternity leaves, their status in the workplace becomes diminished.

In the Arab region, women have yet to achieve labor market attachment, and their labor force participation remains lower than in other world regions. Educated women are

disproportionately represented in the formal labor markets, while the informal sector is populated by the poor. Decent work and decent wages – as recommended by the ILO – alleviates and prevents poverty, and such conditions certainly are needed to encourage women from low-income households to seek employment. But more is required, including policies and institutions that alleviate women’s responsibilities for the care of children and the elderly. In addition, legal and policy frameworks need to be in alignment: labor laws, family laws, and social policies should complement and not contradict each other.

The paper will provide an overview of the literature on women, work, and family and recent discussions concerning the “care economy”, drawing also on T. H. Marshall’s conceptualization of citizenship. The empirical part of the paper will examine patterns and trends in women’s employment across the Arab region since 1990, with classifications by type of political economy (e.g., oil economies, mixed oil economies, non-oil economies; income; human development) and by states’ ratification of international conventions pertaining to women, work, and family (e.g., ILO conventions and CEDAW). Data also will be presented on maternity leave policies and other institutional supports for maternal employment. Key questions to be addressed are: what explains the variations in female labor market participation across Arab countries? What is the role played by political economy, legal/policy frameworks, human capital, and social norms? Why are Arab women from working-class or low-income households least likely to be part of the formal labor force? Could the provision of quality childcare, family allowances, and paid maternity leaves increase the labor force participation of married women with children? What is the role of the state in enhancing women’s labor force participation, helping to secure work-family balance, and ensuring women’s economic citizenship?

Some references to and comparisons with non-Arab countries at similar levels of development and income will be made.

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