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Women's Employment in North Africa

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Question

Why is women's labour force participation rate low in Egypt and in the Maghreb (Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria)?

Why do women drop out of the formal and informal labour market in these countries and why are they less likely to advance than their male counterparts?

Contents

1. Summary

Despite increased educational parity between the genders and declining fertility rates, female labour force participation rates in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia remain low and even declining. This phenomenon is a shared attribute among Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries and has therefore been dubbed by the literature as 'the MENA gender paradox'. The literature covers this topic either through a deep dive in one country or a group of countries to understand demographic patterns of participating women and their experiences in the labour market, or through a regional perspective, pointing to shared structural, institutional, or cultural qualities that result in the low female labour force participation.

The first branch of literature makes apparent that part of the low participation can be attributed to an accounting issue; women are overrepresented in subsistence work, which is hard to capture and goes uncounted in most surveys. Beyond that, education and occupation matter; educated women constitute a minority in the population but a majority among participating women. The public sector is favoured by women, especially married ones with children, because of its reconcilability with marital and maternal responsibilities, unlike the private sector.

Looking at the characteristics of working women in the four countries of interest, it is clear that they have a completely different labour market experiences compared to their male counterparts. They tend to be concentrated in very few fields, such as education, health, and public administration and have extremely high unemployment rates. They also earn significantly less than men, in no small part due to pay discrimination, and face widespread sexual harassment.

Within the second branch of literature, some look to cultural or Islamic values to explain the low female labour force participation. This is met with mixed results as well as criticism regarding weak conceptualization and reductionism. Instead, other studies delve deeply into the various economic, structural, and institutional factors and the interactions between them that caused the sustainability of these cultural norms and, consequently, the stagnation in female labour force participation. These include factors like dual labour markets that push women into unemployment and inactivity, social policies that reinforce a traditional family structure, and the resource curse from oil revenues that inhibited the growth of female-dominated fields (the traded sector) and maintained a high level of wages that allowed the one breadwinner family to remain affordable.

2. Defining concepts

The labour force participation rate is defined as the percentage of the working age population who are employed or unemployed. Employed individual comprise those who have a job as paid employees or as self-employed. The unemployed are those without work but who are willing and available to take up employment and have been actively seeking work. The working age population varies in its definition; it is either defined as those aged 15 and over or those who are aged between 15 and 64.

Some problems arise from this measure, especially in its ability to capture certain types of work. For example, workers who are involved in irregular, unpaid or subsistence employment are sometimes counted among those who are outside the labour force, despite being engaged in work (this is generally referred to as informal work). Since most workers who belong to these categories are women, this leads to the underestimation of the number of women engaged in work (ILO, n.d.).

It can also lead to an inconsistent measure of participation across different sources, countries, and time, making it difficult to compare.

Another flaw in this measure is that it does not capture so-called discouraged workers. These are men and women of working age who are not actively seeking employment or who have not found employment after long-term unemployment, but who are willing to work. Because these are usually individuals who have given up looking for work, they do not count as unemployed but as outside the labour force, despite their ability and desire to be engaged in employment.

Both these issues are relevant to the countries of interest, and to MENA at large. In the case of hidden work, the female labour force participation rate tends to be underestimated because of the concentration of women in the agricultural sector, where subsistence work is particularly prevalent. Additionally, because recent surveys make a specific effort to capture all the different types of workers, this may result in old data becoming incomparable to the new, meaning that change over time is difficult to capture accurately (World Bank, 2004). For the case of discouraged workers, the high female unemployment rate in the region (which will be discussed in coming sections), likely means that there are many women who are willing and able to work but have stopped looking for a job and are therefore counted as outside the labour force.

3. Scope of the literature and data

Because the low female labour force participation rate is a shared attribute among MENA countries, some studies on the topic tend to look for an explanation for this phenomenon based on commonalities across countries in the region, such as resource abundance, dual labour markets, or cultural attitudes. These studies tend to provide a more theoretical and conceptual understanding of the issue at hand, delving into shared economic, institutional and social factors that gave rise to the MENA gender paradox (which will be explained in the next section) and inhibited the growth of the female labour force.

More recent work, however, tends to take deep dives in one country or a handful of specific countries to disentangle patterns pertaining to the characteristics of working and non-working women and their experiences within the household and in the labour market. These include understanding the relationship between variables such as education, marriage, and geographic location on the one hand and female labour force participation on the other as well as analysing the experience of women in the labour market in terms of the wages they receive and the sectors and industries that they tend to occupy.

In terms of the scope of the literature, the subject is generally very well covered, especially in the cases of Egypt and Tunisia. This is because these two countries have analogous individual- and household-level datasets; the Egyptian Labour Market Panel Survey (ELMPS) and the Tunisian Labour Market Panel Survey (TLMPS), both collected by the same institution (the Economic Research Forum) and designed to be comparable, representative, and able to capture elusive properties, such as informal and subsistence work as well as discouraged workers (Assaad et al., 2016; Krafft et al., 2019). Morocco also has some individual- and household-level data that allows for a rich exploration but is not comparable and not as extensive as the aforementioned surveys. Finally, Algeria has very little data at the micro-level therefore most studies tend to be small scale, qualitative, and focus on a specific region or area of the country.

4. The MENA gender paradox

Female labour force participation rate in MENA is one of the lowest in the world, despite gains in educational parity between the genders and declining fertility rates, two measures that are strongly associated with higher economic activity among women (Assaad et al., 2018). As of 2019, only 19% of women in MENA participated in the labour force, compared to 25% in South Asia, 58% in Latin America, 65% in East Asia and Pacific, 63% in sub-Saharan Africa, and 59% in Europe and Central Asia (World Development Indicators, 2020). Unemployment among women (and men) in the MENA region is also the highest in the world; the female unemployment rate in 2019 was 20.1% in MENA compared to 5% in South Asia, 10% in Latin America, 4% in East Asia and Pacific, 7% in sub-Saharan Africa, and 7% in Europe and Central Asia (WDI, 2020).

Most of the countries studied in this report have higher-than-average female labour force participation in the region; it stands at 24% for Tunisia and 22% for Morocco and Egypt in 2019. Algeria stands out as it has lower-than-average participation among countries in the MENA region at 15% in 2019. The unemployment rate for women varies across these countries, at 23% in Tunisia, 22% in Egypt, 21% in Algeria, and only 10% in Morocco (WDI, 2020).

As mentioned, aggregate measures of female labour force participation fail to capture some types of 'hidden' work. For the case of Egypt and the three Maghreb countries, surveys that attempt to capture this hidden work find mixed results. For example, when an extended definition of employment is used (capturing subsistence especially in the agricultural sector), the employment rate of women in Tunisia nearly doubles (Hanmer et al., 2017). Similarly, using the extended definition takes the female labour force participation rate in Egypt from 23% to 34% (Hendy, 2015). Specific numbers for Morocco and Algeria are harder to come by because of data availability, but the literature indicates a similar picture (Bellache et al., 2020; Najjar et al., 2018); the concentration of women in the agricultural sector means that their participation is underestimated.

While female labour force participation does increase substantially when hidden work is accounted for, it is important to note that it is still low, especially when compared to regions at a similar level of economic development; the average female labour force participation rate in middle income countries stands at 49% (WDI, 2020). The reasons for this low participation despite gains in education for women and declining fertility rates will be discussed in the next section.

5. Women's labour force participation

The decision of an individual woman on whether to take part in economic activities is highly intertwined with her demographic characteristics. For example, women worldwide who are young and educated are more likely to take part in paid work. Married women with children, however, are less likely to engage in economic activities. The relationship also goes the other way; for example, women who are educated are more likely to work, marry late, and have fewer children. On the other hand, women who have less propensity to work may chose not to go into further education. Disentangling these relationships are useful because it facilitates the understanding of women's lifecycle behaviour and their experience in the labour market in Egypt and the three Maghreb countries.

Education

Education and participation in the labour force for women are generally positively linked. In mainstream economic theory, the reason behind that is that women with higher education can have access to higher wages in the labour market, which acts as a pull-factor towards participation. Another reason for this positive relationship is that women with higher education are more likely to have access to jobs with desirable working conditions which makes work easier to consolidate with their perceived role as homemaker and meet their reservation working conditions (Assaad & Krafft, 2016; Dougherty, 2014). Finally, education can also help women break through traditional gender roles and give them more autonomy and independence. Recently, however, more complex theories have emerged to better describe this link, especially in the case of developing countries. One of the most prevalent is the U-shaped relationship between women's education and participation; it postulates that women who are the least and the most educated participate in the labour force, the first group out of necessity and the second because of opportunity (Klasen & Pieters, 2012).

In the case of Egypt and the three Maghreb countries, the single most important determinant of participation among women is the level education, as long as the education is at the post-secondary level or higher. As Spierings et al (2008) show, there is a huge difference in the participation rates of women with secondary education and women with any type of tertiary education. The strength of this relationship is confirmed through several other studies on these four countries (Belkaid, 2019; Ben Mouelhi & Goaied, 2017; Hendy, 2015; Verme et al., 2016). Despite the fact that women with tertiary education remain a minority in the population, they constitute the majority of the labour force because of their high participation rates (Spierings et al., 2008)

Despite the strength of this relationship, rising educational attainment has not led to higher female labour force participation at the country level (Assaad et al., 2018). The reason behind this is the deteriorating job opportunities in the public sector in Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt without a compensatory, meaningful increase in private sector employment. Since women select themselves into public sector employment because of its shorter hours and generous maternity and family leave policies, the curtailment of government jobs has meant that more educated women are either dropping out of the labour force (in case of Algeria), becoming unemployed (in the case of Tunisia), or a combination of both (in the case of Egypt) (Assaad et al., 2018). There is no discussion in the literature on why women with secondary education or lower – who constitute the majority of inactive women – have such low labour force participation rates.

Marriage and children

Marriage and the presence of children are generally negatively correlated with female labour force participation. In the case of marriage, the negative relationship is due to the consolidation of the gender division of labour in the household as well as the 'income effect' that arises from having another source of income through a husband's wage. It can also be a result of so-called status ceiling, whereby women drop out of the labour force if they have higher potential earnings than their husbands in order to prevent status tension (Spierings et al., 2008). The presence of children has a negative effect on women's work because of care duties; this will vary across countries depending on laws and regulations around maternity and childcare.

Across all four countries, marriage is one of the most important deterrents to participation. In Egypt, only 18% of married women are employed, compared to 25% of their unmarried

counterparts (Nazier & Ramadan, 2016). The difference is even more extreme in Tunisia, whereby 18% of married women are employed compared to 34% of their unmarried counterparts (Ben Mouelhi & Goaied, 2017). For Morocco, single women aged 30-49 have a participation rate of around 45%, whereas the rate is 28% for their married counterparts. A similar pattern is observed for those aged 15-29 (but the reverse is true for those aged 50+) (Verme et al., 2016). Unsurprisingly, and similar to patterns observed worldwide, the presence of children in the household inhibits women from working across the four countries (Assaad, 2017; Belkaid, 2019; Spierings et al., 2008; Verme et al., 2016).

The effect of marriage and the presence of children not only affects the likelihood of work but also the type of jobs that women undertake. Additionally, as mentioned, both marriage and children are 'endogenous' to each other and to participation i.e. the decision on whether to marry and have children or not will also depend on women's labour market status. Accounting for that, Assaad et al (2017) find that women in Egypt and Tunisia who marry by the median age of marriage are less likely to take up waged work, mainly due to reduction in the probability of taking up private sector jobs. This means that, while curtailment in public sector hiring pushed men into the private informal sector, it mostly materialized as unemployment or inactivity for women, especially married ones. Assaad and Zouari (2003) also find that non-wage work and public sector work in Morocco are more compatible than the private sector with childcare responsibilities.

Interestingly, Assaad and Zouari (2003) also find that marriage on its own does not significantly decrease women's participation for the case of Morocco, but it is the presence of children that usually come with marriage that reduce women's economic activities. It is unclear whether that is also true for Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria. A counter example is the findings of Ilkkaracan (2012) on Turkey, which shows that the effect of marriage on participation is much more pronounced than the effect of children on participation, concluding that the 'institutionalized' gender roles play a more important role in women's decision to participate than the logistics of childcare.

Geographic location

There are substantial differences when it comes to women's labour market experience across geographic locations. In Egypt, women living in rural areas seem to have lower participation rates when looking at the market definition of participation. However, when the definition of participation is extended to include subsistence work, female labour force participation in rural areas shoots up to 39%, compared to 23% in urban areas (Hendy, 2015). This is not surprising, given the prevalence of subsistence agrarian activities in rural areas.

Tunisia shows a similar pattern, where using an extended definition of labour force participation pushes rural women's employment to a much higher rate, exceeding that of their urban counterparts (Hanmer et al., 2017). There is also extremely high unemployment rate among educated Tunisian women living in rural areas; this is attributed to smaller networks, limited opportunities, and lack of transport links to facilitate mobility to urban areas (Ben Mouelhi & Goaied, 2017).

For Morocco, Verme et al. (2016) find that, while both urban and rural female labour force participation have been declining over time, rural rates are consistently higher than urban rates. Interestingly, they also find that marriage only reduces the likelihood to work for women living in urban areas, but it has no effect on rural areas. This is likely the case because agrarian work is more compatible with childrearing and domestic responsibilities.

For Algeria, women are more likely to participate if they live in urban areas, in contrast with the other three countries (Belkaid, 2019; Lassassi & Tansel, 2020).

6. Women's labour market experiences

Type of work and gender occupational segregation

Access to different types of work, similar to participation, is also determined by educational attainment. According to Assaad et al. (2018), less educated women have limited access to wage work in general, and tend to be concentrated in unpaid work, subsistence work or self-employment. Educated women can access waged labour, gravitating towards the public sector especially if they are married. Single women engage in private sector wage work but tend to drop out upon marriage. Women's concentration in public sector work stems from its reconcilability with family responsibility, unlike private sector work, which is demanding and offers undesirable working conditions especially in the informal sector (Assaad et al., 2018; Hendy, 2015).

As a result, with the recent decline in the number of public sector opportunities in the region, women are finding themselves increasingly unable to find desirable working opportunities. This has translated to a higher unemployment rate that is especially prevalent among educated women, wavering around 30% for all four countries (WDI, 2020). According to Assaad (2017), this indicates that there is a desire among them to engage in work, as long as they find a suitable job that meets the working conditions that they find acceptable, which the private sector does not offer. There is not much discussion, however, on why less educated women do not engage in paid work, despite forming the 'backbone' of the female labour force in other developing countries (Chamlou et al., 2016; Klasen & Pieters, 2012).

Women occupy a limited number of fields that are traditionally female dominated including agricultural activities, education, human health, public administration and light manufacturing (especially textiles) (Ben Mouelhi & Goaied, 2017; Nazier & Ramadan, 2016; Verme et al., 2016). It is unclear to what extent this gender occupational segregation is due to discrimination, choice, or a combination of both. Generally, however, this may be another reason for high unemployment rates among women, as they crowd-out the few options that they have and limiting the number of working opportunities that they can undertake (Bergmann, 1971), potentially having a 'feedback loop' effect on their participation rates.

Gender wage gap and sexual harassment in the workplace

Women in these countries also earn less than their male counterparts, even after controlling for differences in characteristics. In Egypt, for example, Nazier (2017) finds that there is a large gender wage gap especially at the lower and upper end of the wage distribution, indicating a wage ceiling for women as well as a sticky floor. For Tunisia, Jeddi and Malouche (2015) estimates the gender wage gap to be about 19%, most of it is attributed to discrimination due to a lower return on experience for women when compared to men. A study conducted in Sais, Morocco (Najjar et al., 2018) on the agricultural sector shows a clear gender wage gap resulting from discrimination, with women getting paid less than men for the same tasks. Finally, in Algeria, a study conducted on the Kabylia region finds a gender wage gap (unadjusted for differences in characteristics) both in the formal and informal sector (Bellache et al., 2020). Because educated women in these countries participate in the labour market at a disproportionate rate whereas men of all educational backgrounds work, the female labour force

tends to be more educated than the male labour force. This means that a gender wage gap that is unadjusted for characteristics is likely 'hiding' higher wage discrimination.

Women face widespread sexual harassment at work across occupations. According to Hersch (2015), only Morocco and Algeria have laws against workplace sexual harassment, in contrast with the rest of the MENA countries. Despite that, there are still reports of concern surrounding incidences of sexual harassment in Morocco, namely in the agricultural sector; according to Najjar et al (2018), women have to restrict their work options to small, family-owned farms and prefer to work in women only groups to avoid being harassed by male co-workers and supervisors. Egyptian women in the nursing sector report a similar story; a study on female nurses reveals that more than half of them have faced some form of sexual harassment, that it decreases their job satisfaction, and makes them more likely to drop out of work (Maghraby et al., 2020).

7. Cultural, institutional, and structural factors

Islam and the MENA culture

While demographic characteristics and labour market experiences give insights on patterns and characteristics of female labour force participation in the North African countries of interest, they are unable to explain why participation is so low. One reason explored by the literature is cultural or social norms, derived from Islam or otherwise, that inhibit women from taking part in economic activities and stops them reaping the fruits of socioeconomic improvement. These studies tend to be pan-MENA and focus to varying degrees on the four countries of interest.

Caris and Hayo (2012) explore the role of Islam and cultural traditions in female labour force participation across various countries including Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco. They find that women with traditional values regarding women's role in the household are much less likely to take part in the labour force than their less traditional counterparts. Similarly, Chamlou et al (2016), looking at Cairo, find that women who live in households where traditional views on gender roles are held are less likely to participate in paid employment.

Bayanpourtehrani and Sylwester (2013) attempt to quantify the effect of a country's dominant religion on its female labour force participation rate. They deploy a cross-country analysis and find that the coefficient on the percentage of Muslims in a country significantly affects female labour force participation rates until the MENA region is accounted for, in which case the Muslim coefficient becomes similar to that of Catholicism and Hinduism. This implies that the MENA region is driving the negative results of the Muslim coefficient, meaning that non-MENA Muslim-majority countries (e.g. Indonesia) do not necessarily have lower female labour force participation rates than Catholic majority or Hindu majority countries. They conclude that there are some unique aspects to the MENA region – not Islam – that dampen participation. The paper does not elaborate further on where this uniqueness comes from, however.

These arguments do not explain why these cultural factors persist or why they remain 'affordable' in the MENA region, whereas they had to change elsewhere. For example, Western Europe witnessed transformation of the patriarchal family structure only post World War II for various demographic and structural reasons (Boustati, 2020; Karshenas, 1997). Therefore, other work in the literature introduces institutional and structural economic factors to explain the persistence of the patriarchal family and, consequently, the low female labour force participation.

Dual labour markets and the resource curse

Assaad (2014) explains the low female labour force participation through invoking the dual labour market divided into a bloated public sector and an anaemic private sector. The authoritarian bargaining social contract is characteristic of most MENA regimes whereby politically significant groups are provided with well-compensated jobs in the public sector in exchange for relinquishing their political rights. This puts pressure on fiscal budgets but is sustainable due to access to resource rents as well as foreign aid, but the result is the undermining of the labour markets' function of efficient allocation of human capital.

When oil prices fell, the regimes were able to maintain their power by protecting the gains of insiders and shifting the cost of adjustment to outsiders – in this case the younger generation and women. As rates of public employment declined, so did women's, leading to higher unemployment rates and then a decrease in the overall participation since the private sector was not a viable alternative. This is especially relevant for the case of Egypt, where such patterns are indeed observed.

Ross (2008), on the other hand, proposes that revenue from oil is the reason behind the low female labour force participation rate in the MENA region. It created a pattern of growth whereby job creation was concentrated in non-exporting sectors that are capital intensive and generally favour male labour. This came at the expense of growth in exporting sectors that are labour intensive and favour female labour, such as light manufacturing. This resulted in limited demand for female labour, inhibiting the growth in women's participation rate. While some MENA countries are not oil rich, their fates are to some degree still tied to oil prices because of their interconnectedness with oil rich states; this includes remittances from migrants living in Gulf countries as well as the substantial aid flows from resource rich countries to resource poor countries, This, in effect, created a similar pattern of capital intensive growth in some resource poor MENA countries. In the case of the four North Africa countries of interest, this may explain why Algeria has lower participation than Morocco and Tunisia.

Mogahdam (2005) explores the effect of structural policy on female labour force participation in MENA with a focus on social policy. The oil boom era between the 1960s and 1980s was characterised with investments in women's education as well as the establishment of labour laws and regulations, such as maternity leaves and workplace nurseries, to allow women to take part in the workforce. Despite that, the nature of state investments at the time and the types of industries in place meant limited demand for female labour.

With the oil price crash in the late 1980s and the consequent restructuring, many countries in the region failed to transition into export-led growth, a model of development that is characterised by labour-intensive industries that relies on female workers. Because it was a time of recession and high unemployment, some countries in the region followed implicit strategies (such as early retirement and bridal end-of-term bonuses) to exclude women from the work force and prioritise male employment (Moghadam, 1998). This inevitably resulted in perpetuating a cultural understanding of gender roles within a "patriarchal gender contract" (Moghadam, 2005) that sees the man as responsible for the economic well-being of the family.

Moghadam (2005) also compares Tunisia's structural and social policies to that of Jordan and Iran on the other. Tunisia was more successful than the other two countries in transitioning towards exporting, subsequently increasing female employment in the manufacturing sector. The Tunisian state also put in place proactive, progressive policies that allowed Tunisian women

rights that were far more advanced than in other MENA countries, including instating support for working women and divorced mothers, establishing research institutes that focus on gender issues, and amending the constitution to include non-discrimination principles. The combination of a successful transition towards exportation and a state that is willing to promote women's rights resulted in Tunisia being hailed as the exception, having higher female labour force participation rates and generally better outcomes for women than most other states in MENA.

Finally, Karshenas (1997) argues that revenue from natural resources (in terms of rents and remittances) in MENA allowed wages to remain when compared to other regions, especially in the manufacturing sector. This meant that having only one breadwinner in the family remained 'affordable', so there was no incentive for women to take up the position of secondary wage earners. As a result, the MENA region trapped itself into a particular family structure which does not correspond to their development stage or to their production capacity. Therefore, during important stages in their economic development trajectories, when gender roles could have been redefined, and culture could take a backseat to economic development, there was no incentive for women in MENA to join the labour force in large numbers.

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