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Economics: Labor Profiles: Arab States

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“Economics, Education, Mobility and Space”

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The term labor is often used by economists, statisticians, and policymakers to describe market oriented or subsistence production. As feminists have pointed out, such definitions tend to minimize the contributions of women. This is particularly true in Arab communities, where official estimates of women's labor force participation (the number of women in the labor force divided by the number of working age women) range from 11 percent in the Occupied Palestinian Territories to 35 percent in Morocco, with an average of 28 percent (World Bank 2004).

A number of problems exist with such statistics. Firstly, women's paid employment may be underestimated, for various reasons. Women's home production of food that is sold or traded may not be recognized by a respondent as a labor contribution. Some respondents may be ashamed to admit that the household relies on female labor contributions, and thus may neglect to reveal this to data collectors. What questions are asked, and of whom, thus matters (Anker and Anker 1995).

In recent years statistical agencies in various countries have increased the number of probes in questionnaires, to correct for these problems (CAWTAR 2001), but still of concern is the fact that the official definitions of labor continue to ignore the massive non-market reproductive labor contributions that women make. Studies have shown that measures of women's employment are highly sensitive to the definition of work. Anker and Anker (1995) found that by varying the definition of labor force participation, estimates of Egyptian women's participation ranged from 6.2 to 41.3 percent. Using an even more inclusive definition of work, they found that 91 percent of women were contributing to the economy.

A second problem with labor force participation data is that these are often assumed to be a proxy for women's empowerment. Because Arab women's rates are low, analysts have assumed that women are disempowered, without exploring more complex definitions of power, or the ways in which entry into paid employment may both empower or disempower women (Olmsted 2005).

Since women's contributions are often in the reproductive sphere, feminists have long been advocating that policymakers collect time use data. These data also can help address the question of whether women are increasingly suffering from a double burden, as they continue to contribute substantial amounts of non-market reproductive labor, while increasing their contributions to paid employment. The United Nations (2004) reports that time use surveys have now been conducted in three Arab communities: Morocco, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Oman, although published analyses of these data sets seem limited. A report by the Moroccan government (Maroc 1999) confirms that women's employment may be underestimated using standard instruments, and also that women's contributions to the non-market sphere are considerable. This report found that 71.4 percent of rural and 34.6 percent of urban women, for an overall average of 50.6 percent, were employed. The report concludes that official employment figures are underestimated by about 4.6 percent. Most of this difference is due to underestimating the participation of rural and/or illiterate women (Maroc 1999, 21). It is also noteworthy that in this report even the most conservative labor participation estimate (46 percent) is higher than the World Bank figure (35 percent).

The Moroccan data suggest that among femmes actives, rural women work more hours than those in urban areas. Rural femmes actives spend 3.25 hours on average on what the report identifies as temps professional, while their household contributions (temps domestique et ménager) account for about 4.2 hours, for an average total work day of about 7.5 hours. By contrast, among femmes inactives 4.5 (urban) to 5.5 (rural) hours of work are done daily, mostly under the category temps domestique et ménager (Maroc 1999, 36–7, tables 5 and 6), suggesting that the average working women does 2 hours more work daily. In terms of examining women's overall time use patterns, interestingly, the Morocco report does not compare women's time use to Moroccan men's, but rather to French women's; thus it is not

possible to determine the relative work loads of men and women in Morocco. These numbers only provide averages, and may still underestimate the amount of work women are doing, particularly in terms of their contributions to childcare. However, in general the data suggest that even “inactive” women make considerable economic contributions in Morocco, but that the average woman is not experiencing a severe time crunch (or double burden.)

Although considerably more research on the question of how Arab women (and men) spend their time is needed, in lieu of detailed time use analyses, certain other patterns also suggest that the double burden is not (yet) a serious problem for (most) Arab women. First, because many Arab women are not in paid employment, their work load is likely to be less heavy. Also, those who are in paid employment may be able to rely on other “non-working” female household or family members to assist them with their non-market duties.

Another factor that has probably lessened time pressure on working Arab women, especially those of the middle and upper middle classes, is the influx of female labor, particularly from Southeast and South Asia. This pattern of labor migration was first observed in the Gulf states, where large numbers of women migrated to take positions as domestic workers, providing childcare, cooking, and cleaning services in private homes. More recently this phenomenon has spread to Jordan and Lebanon. Ray Jureidini (2002) reports that by 1999, Lebanese government figures estimated that the number of Sri Lankan migrants in Lebanon was over 22,000 (with 95 percent or more being women), while the Sri Lankan embassy suggested that the number could be as high as 100,000. While immigrant women may be making it easier for some women to enter paid employment, local working-class women may find their employment options have shrunk as a result. Jureidini argues that historically, domestic service positions in Lebanon were filled by Lebanese and Palestinian women, but that these jobs are now going to more exploitable (both in terms of human rights and wages) imported laborers. In the case of Saudi Arabia, Doumato (1999) argues that despite a policy of “Saudiization,” the desire on the part of the state to continue maintaining the strictest sex segregation policies being practiced in the region, and perhaps the world, has limited women's entry into paid employment, with Saudi Arabia continuing to rely on foreign workers. The use of immigrant labor thus raises questions about class privilege both locally and globally, as well as about race, sex, and the politics of national identity in the context of increasing globalization.

Aside from the question of how they are coping with the reproductive labor responsibilities that are generally assigned to them by society, two more general questions concerning women's labor are why labor force participation rates of Arab women are so low, and how women who have entered paid employment are faring. The first question has been explored in more detail than the second.

Although it may be the case that women's participation in paid employment is underestimated, it is clear that rates in the Arab world are lower than in other regions. A number of explanations of this trend have been put forward. Factors that can explain differences in participation rates include individual characteristics such as education, marital status, number of children, age, and location (urban/rural), as well as societal and economic variables such as gender norms concerning work, macroeconomic conditions, and government policies. All of these factors may be relevant in understanding participation patterns in the region. Rising levels of education, for instance, appear to be affecting participation rates, particularly in the Gulf countries, where in most cases women's participation rates have doubled in the last 20 years. High fertility rates, which in recent years began declining (World Bank 2004), may also have kept women's unpaid work burden high, precluding their ability to participate in paid employment.

Some have focused on Islam as the main factor in explaining labor trends in the Arab world, while others, such as Papps (1993) and Olmsted (2002), have problematized this assertion. While there is some cross-country evidence that labor participation rates of women in predominantly Muslim countries are somewhat lower than in other parts of the world (Tzannatos 1999), given the variation in employment rates both within the Arab world, and across various Muslim communities more broadly, the explanatory power of religion is in fact limited.

Various studies focus on the role government policies play in shaping employment outcomes. Moghadam (1995) argues that because many Arab countries rejected export oriented strategies, women's employment options were more limited. The World Bank (2004) illustrates how various legal restrictions may limit or enhance women's access to certain jobs. For example, supportive maternity leave policies, at least on paper, may be seen as a positive step, while laws limiting the types of work women may perform have the opposite effect. Finally, particular political conditions, such as military occupation in the case of the Palestinians (Hammami 2001, Olmsted 2001), and extensive military conflict as in the case of Iraq (Al-Ali 2005) may also affect women's employment patterns.

Moghadam (2005) also points out that although women's participation rates in the Middle East remain relatively low, women are more likely to suffer from unemployment. It is also likely that unemployment rates of women are underestimated, since women may also be underemployed or become discouraged and leave the labor market, which means that they are not included in official unemployment statistics. Underemployment occurs when an individual is

unable to find work that uses his or her educational skills, or for as many hours as he or she desires. While unemployment tends to affect more educated Arab women, underemployment may affect women at all levels.

Cross-country comparisons, such as those done by Tzannatos and Moghadam, tend to focus on macroeconomic conditions and employment patterns, but a limited number of microeconomic studies are also available to examine how individual characteristics of women and households affect participation. Data from Palestine (Olmsted 2001), Jordan (Shakhatreh 1995), Egypt (Assaad and El-Hamidi 2001), and Iraq (United Nations 2005) suggest that Arab women's participation falls and then rises with increasing education, as those most likely to work include highly educated women, and illiterate women, who are often in subsistence agriculture. While married women are less likely to work than unmarried women, and Shakhatreh (1995) found that having children also decreased the likelihood of working, Olmsted (2001) and Assaad and El-Hamidi (2001) did not find that having more children necessarily decreased women's participation.

The issue of occupational segregation has also been addressed by some researchers. Anker (1998) concludes that occupational segregation is stronger in Arab countries than in other parts of the world, although more recent data reported by the World Bank (2004) suggest not only considerable variation (with Morocco being the least segregated, while Egypt is much more so), but also an overall rate of occupational segregation that is similar to other parts of the world. Tzannatos (1999) finds that segregation appears to be worsening in the Middle East and North Africa, a phenomenon he does not observe elsewhere. This trend is not entirely surprising, and may well be temporary, since the transition from lower to higher participation rates among women may initially lead to a higher concentration of women in traditionally female occupations.

While women in many countries are overrepresented in certain professional occupations, this is particularly the case in the Arab world (Anker 1998, Olmsted 2001, Nassar 2003). But whereas women in many parts of the world are often crowded into the sales sector, in the Arab world the opposite is true (Anker 1998). Within the Arab world, there is also considerable variation in employment patterns. Among Bethlehem area Palestinians for instance, women were as likely to work in sales as men, although most of these women were older and self-employed, running small shops (Olmsted 2001). And, as Moghadam (1995) points out, women's participation in manufacturing has historically been low in Arab countries, except in Morocco and Tunisia, where women are often employed in the textiles industry.

The particular ways in which occupational segregation patterns have emerged in the region can in part be explained by the relatively low labor force participation rates among less educated women, and may also be due to macroeconomic conditions. Moghadam (1995) argues that the fact that Morocco and Tunisia have historically followed more open trade policies can explain women's far higher participation in the manufacturing sector. Women's underrepresentation in sales, on the other hand, may be linked to gender norms that discourage women from having contact with strangers, as well as to policies that permit considerable in-migration.

Occupational segregation, as well as other types of discrimination, may lead to women earning lower wages than men. The World Bank (2004) reports that while the wage gap in the Middle East and North Africa is somewhat smaller than in other parts of the world, simply examining the ratio of men's to women's wages is deceptive, since working women on average have more education than working men and thus should earn more. The same study notes that women in a number of Arab countries (Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf) are overrepresented in the public sector, perhaps because women in public sector jobs are more likely to obtain benefits and less likely to face wage discrimination. Unfortunately, as structural adjustment policies are being put into place, which are reducing the size of the public sector, women in particular are being negatively affected.

Micro level studies that measure wage differences suggest class and education, as well as gender, play a role in determining the extent of the wage gap. Olmsted (2001) found that among Palestinian women in the West Bank the wage gap was considerably larger among less educated women, particularly those working in the textiles industry. CAWTAR (2001) reports similar findings from a study carried out in Jordan.

In conclusion, the available literature suggests that Arab women have lower labor force participation rates than women in other parts of the world, which analysts have often erroneously assumed suggests that Arab women are not contributing to the economy, or that they are disproportionately disempowered. Yet there is significant evidence that "non-working" Arab women do a considerable amount of unpaid labor and that women's employment is not always empowering. As in other parts of the world, when women enter the labor market they are likely to experience occupational segregation and lower wages. Women's work experiences vary, depending on their class, location, and other factors. Finally it should be noted that studies of Arab women's labor remain extremely limited, making most of these findings preliminary. Far more data and analysis are needed, to explore in more detail what Arab women's employment patterns and experiences are.

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