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Shut Out of Good Jobs: Contemporary Obstacles to Women's Employment in MENA

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Across the Middle East and North Africa, governments are trying to get more women to work. In Saudi Arabia, boosting female labor force participation (FLFP)—the proportion of working-age women who are seeking or currently have a job—is a major goal of the Vision 2030 economic reforms.¹ Some of the social reforms Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has advanced that create more freedom for women—such as the ability to drive cars—have been justified on the basis of the potential impact they will have on women's ability to hold jobs. In Morocco, a similar economic vision, called the New Development Model, was released in 2021 and lays out a doubling of women's employment as a key goal.² In Jordan, various government and NGO programs have sought to target women for employment in service and manufacturing jobs in order to try to boost the FLFP rate.³

Throughout the region, women are pursuing education, they are increasingly involved in formal political life, and they continue to be active participants in civil society and mass politics. But they remain marginalized when it comes to paid work: On average, countries in the MENA region have the lowest rates of female employment in the world. What explains the relative absence of women from the labor force? Many conclude that restrictive religious or patriarchal norms against female employment—or, alternatively, the structure of the region's economies, and especially the importance of oil production—

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account for this. This Brief argues that a better explanation lies in the combination of structural, historical, and cultural factors that have led citizens in the region to develop a strong preference for women to work in certain kinds of jobs: those that are either in the professional public sector or resemble those that are.

To support this claim, the Brief makes three related arguments regarding the history of women's employment in MENA countries. First, the structure of MENA economies—in particular, the low degree of labor-intensive manufacturing characterizing the region's industrialization—has limited women's employment opportunities. Second, and equally important, the type of jobs through which women have long joined the labor market—namely, those in the public sector—have become scarcer in most countries in recent years. Finally, the traditional concentration of women's employment in such public sector jobs has shaped strong preferences with respect to the kinds of paid work that women should ideally do—and these preferences limit the options regarded (by men and women alike) as more attractive than women staying out of the labor force entirely. It is not that most people believe that women should not hold jobs; rather, there are strong preferences for women to work in jobs considered respectable and “safe”—that are physically not too demanding, that are relatively secure in the face of potential sexual harassment or assault, and that enable them to continue fulfilling what is seen as a primary responsibility to home and family. Recent research also suggests that people in MENA countries overestimate *others'* opposition to women working, which itself limits women's pursuit of employment.

The path forward toward increasing women's labor force participation lies in policy interventions that either accommodate these public preferences or seek to alter ideas and perceptions about what constitutes appropriate women's work, rather than focusing solely on education, training, or the expansion of women's employment opportunities. Yet, accommodating restrictive ideas about work that is suitable for women may undermine the potential of employment to empower women more broadly.

Women's Work: Not Invisible, but a Paradox

Women have never been absent from the labor force or economic life in MENA countries. The Prophet Muhammad's wife Khadija was, famously, a successful merchant. Over the centuries, women have participated in trade, scholarship, small craft production, and—predominantly—agricultural labor. Women exercised their economic and property rights, and women's participation in wage labor was extensive.⁴ In the early 1980s, feminist Moroccan scholar Fatima Mernissi argued that the stereotype that women were invisible and absent from economic activity existed largely because male statisticians, economists, and other development professionals chose to see the world in a way that erased women's contributions.⁵

Yet the idea that women in the Middle East and North Africa remain secluded at home, sheltered from the outside world and absent from typically male domains, persists as a common stereotype. At first glance, statistics do not refute this stereotype. On average, countries in the MENA region have the lowest rates of FLFP in the world: Since 1990, FLFP in the region has averaged between 17 and 21 percent.⁶

Figure 1 shows the evolution of these rates in select MENA countries: In Jordan, FLFP climbed only as high as 17 percent before dropping to 15 percent in 2021. In Egypt, it rose to 23 percent in 2016 before beginning a precipitous decline that predates the pandemic; by 2021 it stood at a mere 15 percent. Saudi Arabia, by contrast, has seen an increase in FLFP from around 14 to 15 percent in the early 1990s to 28 percent in 2021.

The smaller gas- and oil-rich Gulf countries—Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE—boast the region’s highest FLFP rates, at 60 percent, 47 percent, and 53 percent respectively in 2021. To those who would argue that oil-dominated economies are inherently less friendly to women, the relative success of these hydrocarbon-rich states in increasing FLFP should give pause.

By comparison, Figure 2 shows that FLFP in the United States was 55.5 percent in 2020–2021, which was lower than in any other year since 1990. China’s FLFP has been on a steady decline but remains high at 61 percent, and the European Union average in 2021 was 51 percent.

Figure 1: Female Labor Force Participation in Select MENA Countries

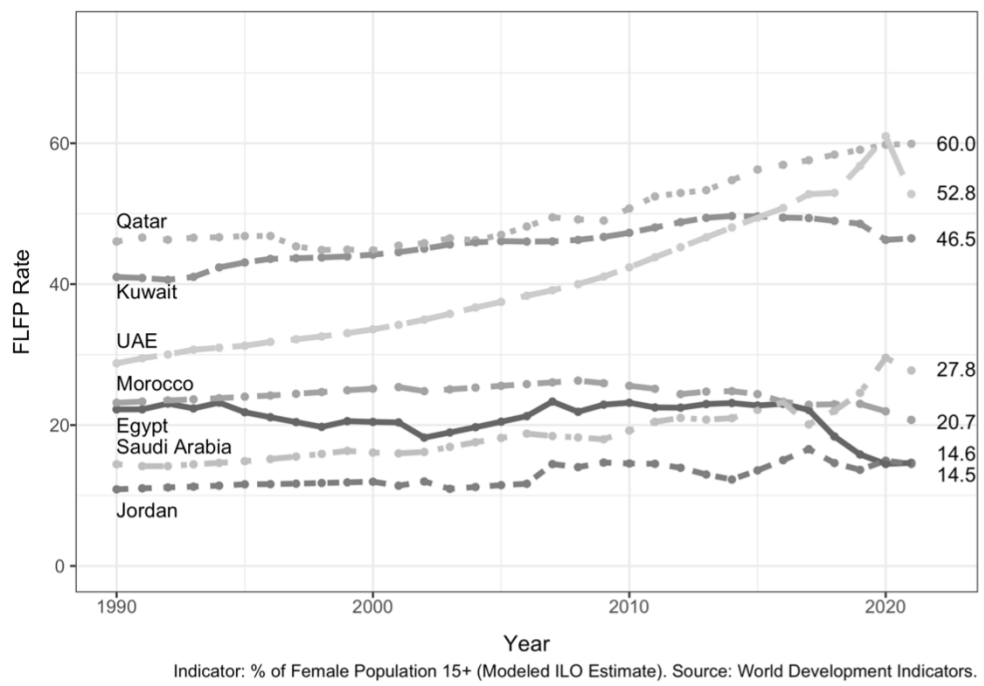
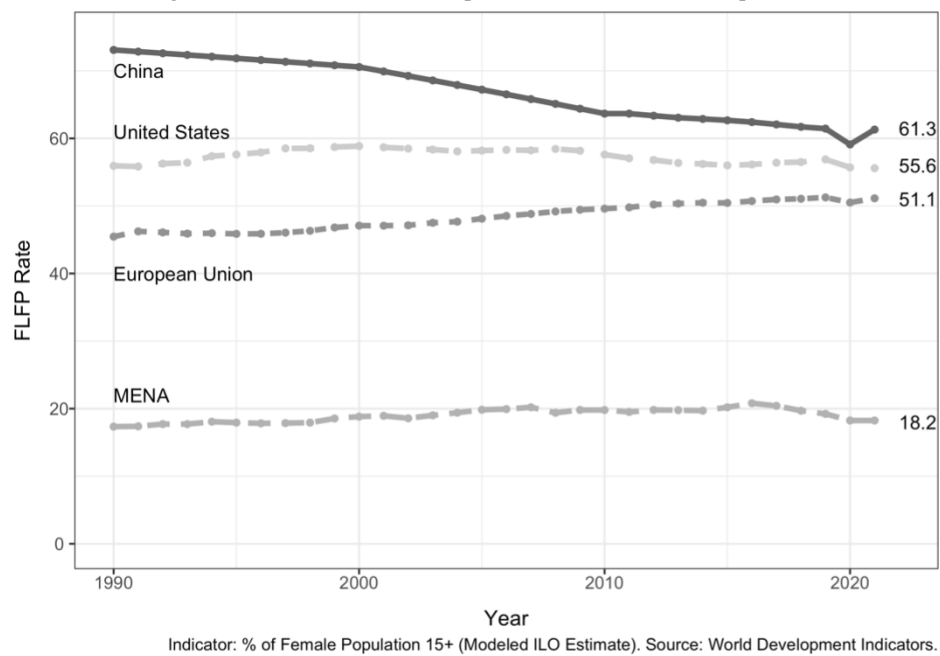


Figure 2: Female Labor Force Participation in MENA in Global Comparison



Women’s relative absence from the labor market represents a “gender paradox,” because women in the MENA region do not lag much behind men in educational attainment,⁷ and women and men across the region consistently express strong support for the equal importance of boys’ and girls’ education. Across all countries surveyed in Wave 7 of the Arab Barometer, in 2021–2022, between 67 percent (in Mauritania) and 92 percent (in Kuwait) of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that university education is more important for boys than for girls.⁸ Enrollment data bear this out: The adjusted net enrollment rate of girls in primary education in the region has exceeded 90 percent since 2007, and was 94 percent as of 2013.⁹ Girls do tend to drop out of secondary education at higher rates than boys; but many women do complete secondary schooling and attend university only to never enter the formal labor force, or else face high unemployment rates or exit the labor force as soon as they start families. Overall female unemployment in the region was nearly 20 percent in 2021, compared with 8.4 percent for men.¹⁰

When they do leave education, women are much more likely than men to become economically inactive: The proportion of women who are not in employment, education, or training (NEET) is high across the region. Table 1 shows the proportion of male versus female youth (ages 15–24) categorized as NEET in countries for which data are available. Women’s rate of being NEET ranges from one-third higher than that of men (in the West Bank and Gaza) to more than triple that of men (in Yemen).

Table 1: NEET Rates of Women and Men ages 15-24

Country	Women	Men
Algeria	31.7	10.9
Egypt	44.0	17.2
Iran	41.5	18.3
Iraq	52.7	22.1
Jordan	38.3	28.3
Saudi Arabia	23.9	15.0
Turkiye	32.4	17.5
United Arab Emirates	17.7	6.4
West Bank and Gaza	35.7	26.9
Yemen	69.7	22.1
European Union	11.1	11.0
United States	12.6	11.8

Note: Data are from World Development Indicators. All figures are from 2020 or 2021, except for data from Algeria (2017) and Yemen (2014).

More broadly, women are victims of the broader challenge that all young people in the MENA region face, which is the mismatch between the skills they gain through the region’s educational systems and those in

demand by private sector employers. This mismatch is one reason why unemployment across the region is higher for people with more education than for those who leave schooling earlier.¹¹ Highly educated women in the region have the highest unemployment rates of all. In Morocco, for example, the overall unemployment rate in 2021 was 10.9 percent among men and 16.8 percent among women; among those with higher education, it was 32.4 percent among men and 57 percent among women.¹² That is, nearly three out of every five women with higher education who are actively seeking employment report that they are unable to find it. How can we explain this paradox?

In Search of Disappearing Public Sector Jobs

A recent study by economists argues that the declining demand for workers in the public sector is the most important explanation for the continued underemployment of women, especially educated women, in MENA countries.¹³ This is because women, more than men, are concentrated in the public sector. To understand why requires looking back into the history of the region’s economies.

Women’s formal economic activity expanded substantially in the mid-twentieth century in countries pursuing state-led development. Efforts to promote industrialization and modernization of the region’s economies through the expansion of state-owned enterprises were often accompanied by explicit calls to train and recruit women into the labor force, both to maximize economic productivity and as a symbol of modernity, especially in countries like Egypt and Iraq.¹⁴ In other places, like Morocco and the Gulf, women’s integration into the formal labor market was not pursued as explicitly. Where women did become more integrated in the labor force, it was often through employment in state ministries and state-owned enterprises. That trend has continued: In the Gulf countries where FLFP rates are highest today, nearly all employed nationals work in the public sector.¹⁵

Women’s reliance on the public sector for jobs is the primary reason for large differences in FLFP across countries within the region. In the richest Gulf states, where (at least for now) there remains plenty of money for the state to hire both male and female nationals, female employment rates are strong and show no sign of abating. In less resource-abundant economies, by contrast, the public sector has been shrinking since structural adjustment programs were first undertaken

in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁶ The loss of public sector job opportunities has left fewer avenues for educated women to gain formal employment.

Ironically, the developmental successes of MENA countries due to investments made in the mid-twentieth century undermined prospects for women's substantial integration into formal employment. One sociologist argues that the nature of industrial development in the MENA region—driven either by capital-intensive oil and gas production or import-substitution industrialization policies that states adopted—has not been conducive to expanding female employment, because women were less likely to be recruited into these industrial or manufacturing operations.¹⁷ In regions where FLFP grew to much higher levels, such as East and Southeast Asia, states and entrepreneurs alike focused on expanding labor-intensive manufacturing and incorporated women extensively, for reasons ranging from the low wages they commanded to perceptions of them as more docile workers. Industrialization in MENA countries has been much less labor-intensive, and female workers have been less in demand. Some labor-intensive industries in MENA countries have been female-dominated, such as textiles, but because these industries make up a relatively small proportion of the region's economies, manufacturing has not been a boon to women's employment to the same extent as in other regions.

Women's employment has been concentrated instead in traditionally "female" sectors, like health, education, and other public sector (or government)-dominated areas. In some countries in the region, women and men have also achieved relative parity in such high-status fields as finance and banking, which are highly integrated into the global economy. In fact, multinational firms operating in the region often have a reputation as attractive employers for female professionals, because they tend to import the business and labor norms of their home countries, including decent salaries, benefits packages, and corporate codes of conduct that limit gender-based discrimination. In Morocco, for example, staff at the CGEM (General Confederation of Moroccan Enterprises) told me in 2019 that the majority of companies participating in an initiative to improve gender parity in the labor force were multinational firms for whom corporate social responsibility (CSR), including efforts to promote gender equality, is a priority. Such globally connected opportunities, however, remain the exception rather than the rule.

What impact have these structural realities had on how people in the MENA region think about women's participation in the labor market? What perceptions of

social norms, and preferences with respect to them, have they fostered?

Working under the Right Conditions

We must account not only for available employment opportunities, but for people's attitudes toward and perceptions of women's employment in the private sector when opportunities do exist. A range of recent scholarship shows that the way in which attitudes and preferences matter does not reflect the common stereotype. Rather than women's employment being hindered by opposition to the idea of women working per se, more salient obstacles are norms around the division of unpaid labor within the household, along with attitudes about what kind of work is appropriate and desirable for women.

Public sector jobs in the region are attractive to many—both men and women—because they are economically secure, often require relatively few hours in the office, and come with relatively generous benefits. Private sector jobs across the region, by contrast, vary significantly in their compatibility with domestic responsibilities. The division of labor within households in the MENA region remains highly unequal. According to a 2015 analysis of surveys from around the world that measure how people spend their time, gender gaps in time spent doing paid versus unpaid work were most pronounced in the MENA region.¹⁸ "[U]npaid work represents more than 75 percent of women's total work burden in all countries of the region (except Qatar at 62 percent)...For men..., unpaid work represents less than 25 percent of total work in all countries (except Oman and Qatar)," the author of that study writes.¹⁹ More recent studies suggest that the pandemic, while it may have led some men to increase their involvement in household activities, did not substantially alter this distribution of labor.²⁰ Although women in the region may have received support, their overall burden of unpaid labor nonetheless increased.

Given this imbalance, women who do work in MENA countries face a heavy "double burden" of having substantial responsibilities both within and outside the home. Lack of access to affordable and reliable childcare and insufficient paid parental leave exacerbate the issue. As a result, women often have what economists call a high wage premium: That is, taking on low-wage jobs outside the home may not be worth it to them unless their families are economically desperate. In combination with women's relatively strong educational attainment, the high wage premium limits the number of jobs that many women find attractive enough to seek in the first

place. Among women who do enter the paid labor force, the moment of family formation—getting married and, especially, having a child—tends to be when they remove themselves from the labor force.

Women and their families also prefer that women work in environments considered safe and respectable: insulated from potential physical risks and sexual harassment or violence, and also from any public judgment that the work might be physically or morally unsuitable. This is in part a consequence of the high proportion of women who work in public sector jobs if they work at all, which has set a standard for what a “respectable” job for women looks like. It also results from concerns over the potential for sexual harassment in the workplace, which is a risk many women face. Some recent reforms have tackled overt gender discrimination in the labor market in Morocco,²¹ the UAE, and elsewhere. Enforcement of anti-discrimination provisions in the law, however, remains weak.²²

Maintaining reputations also matters. Even if no harm comes to women who work, for example, late shifts or positions involving dealing with the public, they and their families may be concerned about what relatives, neighbors, and others in the community might say about the propriety of their taking such jobs. When I interviewed people involved in expanding technical and vocational training opportunities for women in Jordan, they emphasized that convincing families of the safety and propriety of the job opportunities they were promoting was critical to their success.²³ In another study, my co-authors and I found that women were much less interested in accepting a hypothetical job opportunity if it required working alongside men.²⁴ We argue that this could be for two reasons: Either women do not anticipate feeling empowered in workspaces where they will have to interact with men, or they are concerned about their safety and/or the effect on their reputation of working alongside men. In either case, the necessity of working in mixed spaces in most jobs (even those predominantly filled by members of one sex) means that this preference could be driving a significant lack of interest in women’s accepting many kinds of available jobs.

In sum, there appear to be strong preferences among women for jobs that are compatible with norms of female domesticity and afford protection from impropriety. Compounding these preferences is a continued strong interest in men fulfilling their own role: that of breadwinner. Rather than people thinking that women should necessarily be excluded from the labor market, data suggest rather that it is still a common belief that

working to be a family provider is so highly valued for men that in an environment where jobs are scarce and unemployment is high, many tolerate or even approve of systematic discrimination against female job candidates. Across multiple waves of the World Values Survey and Afrobarometer surveys conducted in MENA countries, typically around 75 percent or more of respondents agree or strongly agree that men should have preference in job opportunities when they are scarce.²⁵

Addressing the Challenge

Two recent trends in employment potentially offer solutions to a number of these challenges. The first is collaborations between governments and the private sector to generate new job opportunities specifically targeting women and designed to ensure the desirability of the working environment. The programs in Jordan mentioned above are one such initiative. A more high-profile example is the push in Saudi Arabia toward creating gender-segregated workspaces: for example, female-only call centers. But as I wrote with co-authors in 2020, whether or not segregated workspaces represent a real step forward for women’s employment and empowerment is unclear: Gaining employment may empower women in some respects, but the segregated environment places limits on how far women’s careers may advance, does not address the general challenge posed by men and women sorting into gender-coded fields, and fails both to address discrimination in *non*-segregated spaces and to broaden the types of jobs to which women have access.²⁶

Another employment trend is the rise of remote work in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote work is attractive for many because of the flexibility it can provide for managing both household and non-household labor, whether the former involves caring for children or other family members or simply managing the home. In MENA countries, the opportunity to work from home might be especially attractive to many women because that arrangement both addresses potential concerns about safety and propriety at work and renders access to secure and reliable transportation moot. Yet, just as with segregated in-person workspaces, this is unlikely to be a panacea. Not all sectors are amenable to remote work, so increased remote work options would increase formal employment opportunities only for those women who are both well educated in relevant fields and have stable internet access.

Beyond the question of whether such work would increase FLFP, it is also an open question whether

working primarily from home in the short term will set women up for long-term professional success. Moreover, employers in the region may not yet be interested in relying heavily on workers they cannot supervise in person. In short, it is too soon to say how the expansion of remote work possibilities will affect female employment in MENA countries. This is an area where research in the coming years will be especially enlightening regarding what the future may hold for women's employment in the region.

Finally, there is suggestive evidence that correcting public misperceptions, especially men's misperceptions, of others' views toward women's work might create new openings. A study conducted in Saudi Arabia found that men overestimated other men's opposition to women working outside the home, and that correcting this misperception both made them express greater openness to their wives working *and* led to measurable increases in those women's employment several months later (via the mechanism of a program encouraging women to seek jobs).²⁷ This study suggests, tantalizingly, that women's access to employment might be substantially expanded simply by providing information about public opinion in MENA countries and thereby undermining the stereotype that so many are opposed to women working outside the home. Women's experiences in the workplace matter too, however, and starting a job is not the same thing as staying in one. Women's sustained engagement in the formal labor market will require addressing the structural challenges in jobs that women have as well as their preferences for certain kinds of jobs—along with ensuring that when they do seek jobs, they do not face gender-based discrimination.

Employment or Empowerment?

Why do relatively few women work in the Middle East and North Africa? This Brief has argued that contrary to common stereotypes of women bound at home by cultural norms against their taking on paid work, the explanation lies in a combination of structural factors along with the cultural norms that have sustained them—and that in turn have been generated by women's predominant employment in the shrinking public sector. The unequal division of labor within the home, norms that continue to prioritize employment opportunities for men, and beliefs that people in the MENA region themselves hold regarding whether others around them support and approve of women's work also all limit women's pursuit of and success in gaining a wider range of employment opportunities. Post-COVID shifts in what working environments look like around the world,

including in MENA countries, offer some prospects for expanding opportunities for educated women, but likely not enough to substantially raise their labor force participation in the absence of broader structural and attitudinal shifts.

At stake is not merely women's participation in the labor market, but their access to the resources and opportunities that will enable them to lead the lives they wish to pursue. The findings presented in this Brief affect how policymakers who seek to expand female labor force participation should think about the obstacles to achieving that goal. Education, training, and even efforts to actively recruit women into new sectors may fall flat if they do not address the attitudes, preferences, and perceptions that have been generated by the nature of women's employment in the region to date. Advocates of greater gender equality in MENA countries who view women's employment as a vehicle of empowerment—as it has been for women around the world—must grapple with the reality that many women in the region are themselves opting out of the labor market because they hold preferences at odds with the types of employment they could realistically obtain. And short-term solutions, such as segregated work spaces and remote work, might better integrate women into the labor market without ultimately empowering them much. That women's employment per se may be at odds with women's empowerment is a dilemma with which policymakers and activists alike will have to contend.

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